A SHATTERED CROWN NOVEL



SHADOW AND SON

GRETCHEN POWELL FOX

SHADOW AND SON

SHATTERED CROWN

BOOK THREE

GRETCHEN POWELL FOX

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To my younger self:

wild and free,
sad and aimless,
worried she'd squandered
her chance to achieve her dreams...

My girl, you could not
have been more wrong.

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About the Author
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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Shadow and Son is the third and final book in the Shattered Crown trilogy and is an adult epic fantasy romance that contains language, violence, explicit content, and themes that are intended for mature readers.

CONTENT WARNINGS:

Strong language, descriptive violence, open door sex scenes, blood, gore, physical and emotional torture, suicidal ideation, attempted sexual assault, dark magic, blood sacrifice, character deaths, and prejudice/slurs against fictional races.

While these subjects are important to the story, if at any point you find the material distressing or triggering, you are encouraged to stop reading and return only if you feel ready. Your well-being and mental health matters.

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WELCOME BACK TO THE WORLD OF ARCANIS!

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PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Aerithia *(Air-ih-THEE-uh)*
Alouette *(Al-oo-ETT)*
Arcanian *(Ar-CANE-ee-uhn)*
Arcanis *(Ar-CAN-iss)*
Aurelia *(Oh-RELL-ee-uh)*
Cedric *(SED-rick)*
Coralith *(KORE-uh-lith)*
Daephinia *(Day-FIN-ee-uh)*
Dentarius *(Den-TARE-ee-us)*
Elyria *(Ell-EE-ree-uh)*
Evander *(Eh-VAN-der)*
Fjaethe *(Fuh-YAY-thuh)*
Gaia *(GUY-uh)*
Gaius *(GUY-us)*
Ignatius *(Ig-NAY-shus)*
Jocelyn *(JOSS-uh-lin)*
Jung *(Yung)*
Kingshelm *(KINGS-helm)*
Kinsgaith *(Kins-GUY-ith)*
Lachlandris *(Lock-LAN-driss)*
Laeliana *(Lay-lee-AH-nah)*
Leviathan *(Lev-EYE-uh-thin)*
Ludov *(LOO-dohv)*
Luminaria *(Loo-min-AH-ree-uh)*

Lunara *(Loo-NAH-ruh)*
Malakar *(MAL-uh-kar)*
Nocterrum *(Nock-TERR-uhm)*
Noctis *(NOCK-teese)*
Nyrundelle *(NEER-uhn-dell)*
Olyndor *(OH-lynn-dor)*
Paideus *(Pie-DAY-us)*
Pious *(PIE-us)*
Petra *(PET-rah)*
Polonius *(Pol-OH-nee-us)*
Portentia *(Por-TEN-shuh)*
Raefe *(Rayph)*
Regina Umbrae *(REH-ghee-nuh UM-bra)*
Sanguinagi *(Sang-gwee-NAH-ghee)*
Selenae *(Sell-in-NAY)*
Sephone *(SEPH-oh-nee)*
Solaris *(So-LAH-riss)*
Tartanis *(Tar-TAN-iss)*
Tenebris Nox *(TEN-ih-bris Nocks)*
Thraigg *(Thrayg)*
Tyrren *(TIER-ren)*
Varyth Malchior *(VAIR-ith MAL-kee-or)*
Verdentia *(Ver-DEN-shuh)*
Vespyr *(VES-pur)*
Volacarnii *(Voll-uh-CAR-nee)*
Zephyr *(ZEFF-ur)*

Full glossary & character guide can be found in the back of the book.

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THE PROPHECY



In the twilight of Arcanis's strife,
long past a luminous fall,
visions pierce the veil of time,
foretelling the stars' plan for all.

A shattered crown shall be united,
a sundered land restored.
A severed people shall be made whole
or fall to darkness once more.

From shadow and fire, champions rise,
forged in the Crucible of fate.
Strength, spirit, magic, and concord
test the trials beyond the Gate.

From bitterest rivals to heartbreaking ends,
two bloods shall find their way.
Through sacrifice, darkness, and friendship betrayed,
as dawn brings a new day.

So will they reclaim the One True Crown,
wielding its terrible might.
A choice will be offered, an offer then made:
Heal the realm or cast it into night.

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PROLOGUE

TENEBRIS NOX



Five days after the events at Seastone

King's Keep was still burning.

Not in the literal sense, of course. Any actual fires that the Cult of Malakar's attack might have left in its wake had been extinguished days ago. But the palace still smoldered in every other way.

Grief lingered in the hallways. It clung to stone, to banners, curling around those who had survived, hanging off them like smoke. The betrayal by their own—their brethren, their comrades—had cut the humans deep. The recovery from Lord Church's betrayal, from not only the unmasking of his true identity as Varyth Malchior but the depth of his infiltration, would be slow going.

Especially with the throne room standing empty, the human king still relegating himself to his chambers. King Callum barely spoke to a soul outside the sycophants that did his bidding—something that, granted, not all his loyal servants seemed too upset about. Tobin Barcroff, for one, had taken up the mantle of the king's new right hand with an inappropriate amount of delight.

Not my concern, thought Tenebris Nox. They stood in the east wing sitting room, looking out the shattered frame of a window that had been blown out during the attack. Below, Cedric Thorne was in the training yard, as he had been every day since their return, drilling through sword forms like his life depended on it.

Perhaps it did.

Perhaps *all* their lives did.

The knight needed somewhere to funnel his rage, after all. And he would need to find somewhere more practical to direct it soon. Without purpose and without Elyria's presence to ground him, the sunbringer posed a whole new kind of danger.

Which was, of course, something that Tenebris Nox found absolutely *fascinating.*

From an armchair in front of the nearby fireplace, Kit cleared her throat. "You're sure they're still all right in there?" she asked, one knee tucked against her chest, her arms draped loosely overtop.

Nox turned to look at her, smiling inwardly. It was only the twenty-seventh time or so that the fae had asked since returning from Seastone. They didn't begrudge her nervousness though. Kit had lost so much already in her short life. They supposed it was reasonable that she feared the loss of Elyria, too.

Feared losing her again.

"You need not be concerned," Nox said evenly. "The in-between is like a pocket in time. The Revenant's wings are safe in the shadows. They remain encased in your frost, a perfect preservation."

Kit exhaled, a sigh of relief, then leaned her head against the chairback and drew her lids shut over her blue and green eyes.

Nox rarely found themself taking much notice of physical features, but they had to admit, those eyes were . . . entrancing. More entrancing yet, though, was the resilience of her spirit, something that shone as bright as her moonlit hair, carving a path through the darkness constantly trying to stain her soul.

Nox knew that Kit was strong. Had known it from the moment she'd burst through that doorway in the Celestial Sanctum and beaten her fists on the walls in an attempt to unlock the Trial of Spirit. Knew it from the way she'd clawed herself back after Evander's betrayal during the Crucible, the way she'd withstood—*survived*—the years of loneliness that preceded it.

Tenebris Nox saw her strength, her fortitude, and they reveled in it.

At present, they also saw the steady rise and fall of her chest, the relaxing of her furrowed brow.

She was asleep, her worries temporarily assuaged by Nox's reassurance, and that made a fascinating feeling spark in the depths of their chest.

With a curious tilt of their head, Nox returned their gaze to the courtyard . . . but Cedric was not there anymore.

The sitting room door creaked open behind them. “I thought I might find you two in here,” Tenny said softly, brushing a lock of strawberry-blond hair out of her face as she waltzed across the room to stand beside Nox at the window.

The nocterrian raised a single finger to their lips, inclining their horned head at Kit.

Tenny’s gaze followed theirs from the resting fae back to the now-empty courtyard below. “I’m glad Ric’s taking a break,” she said, voice hushed. “He’s been at it since sunrise.”

“Today and every day,” Nox murmured. “Not very princely of him.”

“Don’t joke about that.” She swatted their arm. “We cannot blame him for not being ready to broach that particular subject yet.”

“Ready? Or willing?”

“Either.”

“Fair enough,” Nox said. “Speaking of royalty, have we received word from the Arcanian king yet?”

Tenny shook her head. “Nothing substantive. The latest missive from Kit’s mother implies that King Lachlandris had diverted *some* resources to finding information about what the Cult of Malakar is doing, but I wouldn’t hold your breath. They appear to have gone into hiding right along with their new—er, old—master.”

She bit her lip. Nox pursed their own. There was much the young human was burying under her gentle demeanor. It had only been a few days since her own life was upheaved. First, to deal with the revelation of her father’s identity, the terror he wrought? Then, to have barely had the chance to acknowledge his death and defeat before Malakar rose in his body?

The nocterrian wondered just how much pain a single human heart could take.

How much grief one could carry.

And then they wondered why they were wondering such things at all.

“That is unfortunate.” Nox blew out a slow breath. They never thought they would find themselves getting so . . . attached. Never thought that being told to watch after the Revenant would lead them here. To forming connections, to *feeling* things.

It had been a very long time since Tenebris Nox had felt much at all.

Their eyes flitted from Kit to Tenny to the window. “More waiting,” they said.

Tenny gave a sad nod, and the two of them lapsed into silence until a flutter of movement had both their heads turning.

Wisps of black smoke poured from a shadowed corner of the room. Dark fur sleek and emerald eyes gleaming, Sid padded softly across the chamber, brushing against Kit’s legs before taking a seat at her side. The shadowcat was still tall enough that her chin rested comfortably on the armrest, and she nudged her nose against Kit’s hand.

A living shadow. A living comfort.

“She’s still out there,” Kit murmured sleepily, her green eye cracking open before she ran her fingers over Sid’s head. “This one wouldn’t still be here if Ellie were . . . if she weren’t—” She cut herself off, swallowing hard, and Sid nuzzled her palm. “She’s still out there.”

Nox nodded once. “She is.” They decided not to mention how Sid seemed to have shrunk in size since the battle in the throne room. How her paws and ears seemed as though they were just slightly too big for her once more, as though she was aging in reverse. How there was no sign of those terrible and beautiful shadowy volacarnii wings.

Tenebris Nox banished the strange feeling tightening in their chest with a subtle shake of their head. Kit was right. That Sid still remained at all was a good sign. Even if her power was diminishing slightly, whether due to the distance or the surroundings in which Malakar was holding her, the Revenant was, at the very least, still alive.

It wasn’t just the shadowcat that would know. Wasn’t just the soul-bonded knight who had been running drills four floors down, either.

Nox would have sensed it. Elyria’s relationship with her shadows was about more than just magic—there was kinship there. And nocterrians always knew when their kin strayed too far from the dark.

Tenny bit her lip, toying with a loose curl that had fallen over her shoulder. “And Ric wouldn’t be either, right?” she asked, her voice wobbling. “Still here, I mean. Alive?” She swallowed. “He and Elle are soul-bonded, so if she . . . Then he would too, wouldn’t he?”

Nox placed their palm on her shoulder and gave what they hoped was a reassuring squeeze. “For better or for worse, it does not quite work like that.”

“What do you mean?”

“They’ve claimed each other, yes,” Kit offered, stifling a yawn, “but tying their lives together is a little bit more involved. Ric and Ellie are soul-bonded, but not life-bonded. There’s this whole ritual and”—she cleared her throat—“even if they *had* had the time for all that, it isn’t as though the instant one of them died, the other would snuff out of existence.”

“Precisely,” Nox agreed. “They would go mad first. Take what happened to Queen Daephinia when her bond was severed. The woman cleaved the entire continent in three.”

Kit cleared her throat. “That sounds a bit too close to judgment for my comfort, Tenebris. Do you think it was simply the severing of the bond that drove her to madness? Or was it perhaps the brutal murder of the man she loved? Don’t forget, she also thought she’d lost her child.”

There was a beat of heavy silence. “So, what is it like, then?” Tenny asked after a few moments. “The life-bonding ritual?” But when Kit and Nox exchanged an amused look, Tenny was quick to add, “Or rather, the effect of it? Is it like getting married?”

“I guess that might be the closest way to describe it in human terms. But in reality, it’s deeper than that. It’s becoming one. One blood, one path, one fate. At least, that’s how it is between Arcanians and why doing so is still a relative rarity.” Kit stretched her arms overhead, leaving Sid to grumble at the sudden lack of ear scratches. “If you had a fae lifespan, you, too, might be a bit reluctant to tie yourself so permanently to one singular person for the rest of your life.”

“I see,” said Tenny, head tilting to one side. “Then, for Ric and Elle . . .”

Nox drew a hand to the side of their head, tapping the pad of one long finger thoughtfully against their horn. “The ritual would extend the knightling’s life, to be sure,” they said. “Though, frankly, it is fascinating to consider how long he might naturally live. He is mixedborn. He could already have a lifespan well beyond that of typical humans.”

Tenny balked, placing a hand on the ledge of the window for support. “He ‘could’? It’s ‘fascinating to consider’? But nobody actually knows, is that right? Ric himself certainly doesn’t.”

Nox’s eyebrows drew together as they shook their head.

“And if the truth of Cedric’s parentage had not come out in Elderglade, he just, what, would *never* have known?” Tenny continued, her voice rising. “He would have simply watched Tristan and me and all the rest of his friends continue to grow older, not understanding why he wasn’t? Why we

were getting wrinkles and gray hairs while he remained as he always was? Would have watched Jack and Leia and the children of the Walk grow up, age past him, *die*?"

"Perhaps," said Nox simply, not entirely sure why the human seemed so suddenly on edge. "But it is far more likely that, given that he is only one-quarter fae, he would stray to the human side of the aging spectrum. The Lord Victor will probably simply make for a very handsome human elder."

Tenny leveled the nocterrian with a withering look. "The questions were rhetorical. I merely meant to point out the ridiculousness of it all. How there could be so much about my friend that he himself doesn't know. That *nobody* seems to know."

"Yes, well, it's not the fae's fault our understanding of the mixedborn is so limited, is it?" Kit said. "It wasn't as though there were scores and scores of them running about, even before the Shattering. Whatever celestial blessing was unlocked by the birth of Cedric's mother, well, Malakar certainly ensured it didn't last very long."

Tenny's expression softened. "Celestial blessing?"

"Mixedborn children did not exist before Selenae," said Kit, nodding solemnly. "But with her arrival, Queen Daephinia and King Juno heralded a whole new age—in all senses of the word. Arcanian-human pairings weren't exactly plentiful, but they did exist, and after the mixedborn princess's birth, they were rewarded with the occasional child too."

"Another attempt of Aurelia's at reinstating the balance she so desperately sought for the world?"

"Something like that," said Nox, sucking on a fang.

Kit arched a silver brow. "At any rate, *we* aren't the ones who made it our life's mission to eradicate their existence." Tenny's mouth popped open, and Kit was quick to add, "*Not* that I'm lumping you in with them. Nor even most humans. But the fact remains that there's a reason the Sanctuary in Elderglade exists in the first place. Malakar viewed mixedborn children as a perversion of nature. A celestial betrayal. He has clearly passed those views onto his followers and, well . . ."

"Such beliefs are not so easily corrected," finished Nox.

Tenny didn't seem to know how to respond to that, and the room lapsed into a less-than-comfortable silence, punctured only by Sid's irritated huffs as the shadowcat laid her head back down.

Eventually, Kit rose from her chair. She wandered toward Nox and Tenny at the window, the three of them looking to the horizon like it might hold some answers, keeping them just out of sight. “None of this matters anyway,” she said. “Nothing matters until we get her back. And I cannot believe we went through all this to just end up once more drifting around King’s Keep, waiting. We have to *do* something.”

Tenny took Kit’s hand and gave it a gentle pat. “We all want to do something. I know I feel damn useless. I can only imagine what this must be like for you.”

Kit opened her mouth, but whatever words she might have spoken were interrupted by the sound of shuffling footsteps echoing from the hall. The door creaked open a few moments later, and one by one, Jocelyn, Thraigg, Shep, Ollie, and Tristan filed into the room.

None of them exchanged words, only nods of acknowledgment—a silent greeting. There was little to say, aside from perhaps asking the question of what they were all doing here.

And, eventually, that was exactly what Kit did.

“What’s going on?” she asked, mismatched eyes flicking from person to person.

Tristan shrugged, rolling the sleeves of his tunic up to his elbows before raking his fingers through his wavy blond hair. “You got me. Ric said I needed to come find you”—he gestured at the three of them—“and he would tell us more soon.”

“Aye, he told me the same thing,” said Thraigg, barging over and flopping down in the chair Kit had recently vacated.

Ollie nodded. “We all ran into each other on the way up here, but—”

“It seems as though some of us had already *run into* one another,” said Jocelyn, an uncharacteristic smirk gracing the fae’s face as she looked from Ollie to Tristan.

“*But*,” Ollie repeated, his eyes narrowed into a silencing glare, “we have no idea as to the reasoning for Sir—”

Cedric strode through the door, chest heaving. “Good, you’re all here,” he said breathlessly. “The time has finally come. I have a lead on something that may help us, somewhere for us to go.”

Kit bolted forward. “What? Where?”

The tension that fell upon the room might as well have been a physical weight for how heavy it felt when Cedric stepped to the side, revealing a

tense, stone-faced Zephyr lingering in the doorway behind him.

“What in all four hells is she doing here?” Kit spat.

“She brings news from Elderglade,” Cedric said, one hand casually resting on Ashrender’s hilt at his waist, the other playing with the locket hanging from his neck.

Not just any locket, of course.

Nox was still the slightest bit raw over the fact that they hadn’t picked up on the celestial power simmering under the surface when they first saw it. They’d been just as surprised as the rest of the group to find out that the locket was, in fact, the missing half of the Crown of Concord.

Granted, it was power well hidden. The sylvan elder who had transfigured it clearly had great skill, great magic of her own.

Still, Nox had thought themself more attuned to such things.

Apparently not.

Cedric ran the locket along its chain, from one side of his neck to the other. Nox recalled how they’d offered to hide it in the shadows, to keep it safe alongside other precious things, but the knightling had politely refused. They supposed they understood why.

Zephyr shuffled a few paces into the room before lifting her doe-like eyes and meeting multiple glares with a roll of her shoulders. “Elder Larkess has agreed to undo the locket’s transfiguration. She knows how we can restore the crown.”

Kit scoffed. “So you can steal it again?”

Zephyr’s spine stiffened. “No, so Cedric can claim it in earnest. It’s his anyway.” Her voice was barely more than a whisper when she added, “It always was.”

The knightling cleared his throat. “Once the crown *is* claimed, Aurelia should be freed from the Sanctum. She can help us find Malakar. She will help us find *her*.”

“You make many assumptions about just how willing the celestials are to intervene in mortal affairs.” Nox stroked a finger down the side of one of their horns. It was not a terrible idea, as far as ideas went. Still, if anyone knew what the celestials were capable of, the depths of their spite and possessiveness . . .

Cedric inhaled sharply. “She owes us.”

Nox decided not to voice their doubt that the banished star god would see it that way. After all, who were they to know how Aurelia would or

wouldn’t react? She was not her siblings—that much was evident.

“So, back to Elderglade, then?” Jocelyn’s voice cut through the chatter that had started to rumble through the group.

Cedric looked at Zephyr, and they both nodded. “Some of us to Elderglade,” he said, voice strengthening. “Some of us will need to keep an eye on things here”—he looked at Tenny, who gave a tight nod, then at Ollie and Jocelyn—“while others chase down additional leads. I will not leave anything to chance, not when it comes to this.”

Not when it comes to her.

The words were unspoken, but they trailed through each member of the group like a bolstering wind.

“Whatever you need, Ric,” said Tristan.

The others nodded in agreement, and Nox tracked the color returning to the knightling’s cheeks—as though just having some semblance of a plan, this renewed purpose, was already bringing him back to himself.

And that was good, mused the nocterrian.

Because if anything was going to turn the tide in the battles sure to come, it would be him.

It would be them both.

The Phoenix and the Revenant, sun and shadow. Forged in fire and bound by something deeper than blood. But . . . perhaps bound by blood eventually too. As long as they could get her back.

Nox let their gaze drift once more around the room—to each face, shining with the barest hint of hope, then to the shadowcat prowling between legs, and finally out the broken window to the horizon that lay beyond the city. The echoes of the prophecy rang in their mind, a refrain that was equal parts hopeful and horrifying:

A shattered crown shall be united, a sundered land restored.
A severed people shall be made whole—or fall to darkness once more.

“Malakar will want to reignite his war,” Nox said. “The storm is coming.”

Cedric’s hand moved from the locket to a spot between his neck and shoulder, his palm lying over his collarbone. He held it there, the air pulsing with promise. “And so are we.”

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PART I

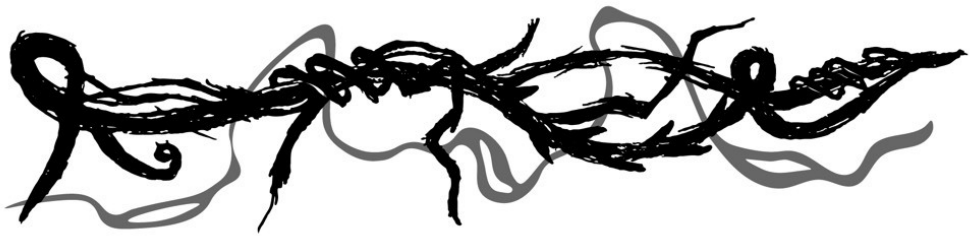
DARK

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1

THE VOID

ELYRIA



Six weeks after the events at Seastone

Cold. Numb. Nothing.

That was all Elyria Lightbreaker felt.

Absence.

Loss.

In the depths of her heart, cracked and raw and aching. In the hollow place within her chest, where her shadows were now silent. In the phantom pain that lanced through her back—where her wings should have been.

The skin there was already long healed, nothing remaining of the vicious wounds that had been carved into Elyria when Malakar ripped her wings from her back.

Nothing but two parallel silver scars engraved in her ivory skin.

The marks would fade in time, perhaps.

But underneath, the wound still festered. As it always would.

There was no healing from this.

There was no undoing what had been done to her.

"It is time to try again, my lady."

Elyria arched a brow at the uncharacteristically polite address of the *sanguinagi* cultist who came to fetch her from her bedroom—her gilded cell—but said nothing. Said nothing as the girl extended a hand to help Elyria

up from her chair. Said nothing as she took the simple cotton sheath the girl had brought with her.

And in return, the girl said nothing as Elyria shimmied out of her blouse and leather pants and into the dress, which fell, shapeless and billowing, past the scars that decorated her thighs.

Elyria was already striding toward the door, ready to get another day of this mad experiment over with, when the girl did, in fact, say something.

“Are you ready?” she asked, her voice surprisingly bright.

Elyria tilted her head. This was not an exchange she was used to having. All the other cultists who had been assigned to accompany her did so in silence. There was, perhaps, the occasional barked order, but the disdain scrawled across their faces was enough to explain away the lack of conversation.

And that was how she preferred it. Malakar’s torture itself was torture enough without having to make small talk.

“You must be new here,” Elyria said coldly. “Let’s just get this over with.”

Despite the neophyte leading her, what happened next was the same as it always was.

Elyria would pad across the ice-cold floors of the tower she was being kept in, without boots or slippers. Would follow her warden to Malakar’s . . . study? Laboratory? She didn’t know what to call it.

She would wait while the cultist knocked three times on the intricately inlaid darksteel door, until it swung open to reveal the sorcerer waiting within.

And they would begin.

The specifics, of course, did vary. Sometimes.

As the person assigned to escort her to and from this mad experiment changed from day to day, so did the frequency with which she was summoned. Sometimes it was daily. Other times she would be left to her own devices for days on end.

Then, when she was finally brought to the *sanguinagi* leader, sometimes she was with him for hours. Others, only minutes.

Sometimes he would sit her in a wrought-iron chair along one wall. At other times he would lay her on a wooden table in the center of the room, leaving her to stare up at the circular window cut into the ceiling above her.

The first few times, back when she still felt occasionally called to fight back, he chained her to the back of the door with darksteel shackles.

Malakar would then go on to whisper pretty words, or ugly words, or words of instruction. Sometimes he said no words at all, letting his magic or his instruments do the talking instead.

He tried it all—anything he thought might work, might get Elyria to finally relent. Might get her to release the pieces of his power that still, even after all these weeks, could not be retrieved from her.

But some things, it would appear, did remain the same.

Because each time, no matter how hard Elyria pushed or how deeply Malakar prodded, she could not relinquish her shadow.

It didn't matter how hard she pulled at it, nor how deeply she dug. It didn't matter how much blood was drawn from beneath her skin, nor how many tears ended up falling from her emerald eyes.

That fragment of Malakar's power was buried deep in her chest—deeper even than the rattling box of emotions that still lived somewhere down there.

Well, it wasn't so much rattling anymore.

It was screaming.

A tidal roar.

A tornado.

A burning wave.

It was the culmination of every thought she'd tried striking from her mind, every pulse of longing in her head.

Every ounce of pain and every fear that crawled through her mind when she shut her eyes at night.

All the things she never let herself dwell on when she was awake. And especially ones she would not dare think on while she was *here.*

With *him.*

So each and every time one of those pesky thoughts, one of those heartbreaking *feelings,* clawed its way up from the deepest pit of her soul, she tried her very best to smash it back down.

Granted, it didn't work most of the time, but she tried anyway.

Elyria didn't want to feel.

Most days, it was all she could do simply to not wish it would all end.

That internal war had raged since the moment Malakar had commandeered her shadows and sliced away her wings. Her weakest

moments had her longing, begging, fighting to give back his final kernel of power if only so he might finally let her go—one way or another.

But the cost . . .

What would happen to the world—what would happen to her friends—once his power was fully restored? What would she be unleashing?

It wasn't that long ago that she might have insisted she didn't care.

Wasn't that long ago that it might have been true.

But every time she thought maybe she could bury her feelings, could seal the lid on that box of emotion, that stubborn, immutable, undeniable spark of light buried right alongside it would flare. A visceral reminder of the fact that there just might be something worth trying to survive all this for after all.

It was ironic, really.

The very thing that reminded Elyria of why it was so important that she survive, that she continue to *live*, was also the reason she couldn't get away.

Because relinquishing Malakar's shadow—*her* shadow—simply was not possible when it was so thoroughly entwined with that spark, that speck, that kernel of sunfyre burning at her very center.

And so, despite everything, Elyria Lightbreaker could not help but cling to that spark. Could not help following it to the spot where she used to feel a golden thread curled around her ribs.

She couldn't sense it anymore—couldn't sense their bond, couldn't sense *him*. The *sanguinagi* blood runes and layers upon layers of spells pulsing from every inch of this place made sure of that.

But she remembered.

And the singular spark of Cedric's power that lived inside her—that, she could still sense.

Even if she sometimes wished she couldn't.

Even if she wished she could banish the thoughts of him entirely. They hurt more than any cut or slice or mark Malakar inflicted upon her here. Hurt more than the agony that had scored down her back when her wings were cut away.

Her solimaeus was out there somewhere—her very heart walking around outside her body.

The memory of all the things Elyria didn't say, all the things she failed to tell him in the end, haunted her.

Was he searching for her? Was he coming for her?

She hoped he wasn’t.

She knew better.

Knew he was probably out there at that very moment, searching. Trying to figure out which dark quarter of hell Malakar had dragged her off to. Trying to find his way home to her.

The thought should have brought Elyria comfort.

It brought only fear.

Because while the runes and *sanguinagi* spells kept her magic dampened to barely more than a whisper, and while it kept her shadows still and silent, it did no such thing to Malakar’s.

The dark sorcerer reincarnate was just as powerful in this life as he had been in the last, save perhaps for that last sliver of shadow still wrapped up in Elyria. But even without that, he was strong enough. That much had been made clear in Seastone, when he sucked her away. And Elyria didn’t care much when he directed that power at her. Didn’t care when he made her bleed. Made her cry out.

But under every cut, every slice, was the whispered promise and spoken threat that he would eventually turn his attention back toward *them*. The ones she had been willing to sacrifice everything to protect. The fear was paralyzing—the thought that he would find out exactly who they all were and, worse, who they were to *her*.

That he would make them pay for her failure.

Did he know already? Did he have people out there looking for them? Was that what his legions of cultists were up to outside the walls of this prison?

Every time the door to Malakar’s study swung open, Elyria held her breath, wondering if today would be the day when she would find someone she loved waiting inside.

And she wouldn’t be able to do a stars-damned thing about it.

She was disconnected from the wild magic that normally shook through her veins—utterly cut off from the threads of life that wove through the natural world as long as she remained locked up in this place. And as for her shadows . . . They were little more than a whisper now. She couldn’t conjure a single sparrow, couldn’t sense Sid. Her shadows were like an entity all their own in here—they still lived within Elyria but were beholden to Malakar’s whims over her own.

Occasionally, a few wisps of darkness would leak from her fingertips, winding around her wrists and up her arms like they were trying to apologize.

Like they were sorry Malakar kept them, at best, suppressed and, at worst, under his control.

Like they were sorry that they couldn't fight back.

But Elyria didn't care about fighting anymore.

With each day that passed in this gilded prison, she found she cared less and less about anything at all. She'd lie on her mattress and stare up at the canopy of her four-poster bed or sit in the chair by the blacked-out, barred-in window, eyes tracing the patterns on the tapestries that decorated the walls of her bedroom. She'd read and reread the paltry selection of books she had been provided—stupid human fairy tales and thoroughly biased historical accounts of the War of Two Realms—if for no other reason than to stave off the threatening madness she could feel creeping around the edges of her mind.

And she would wait to be called again.

Which was precisely how she found herself standing before a disapproving-looking Malakar once more.

His thin lips pressed together into an even thinner line as the cultist attendant ushered Elyria farther into the study. The same smooth gray stone lined the walls, the same flickering torches dotted them, casting an ominous glow over the long wooden table that stretched across the center of the room.

"Here she is, *mi sanguinexos*," said the girl.

Elyria did her best to suppress a snort at the designation. The blood king indeed.

Alas, she had not been particularly adept at hiding her reactions even before weeks of will-weakening experimentation, and she regretted that fact before the huff of breath had even left her nostrils.

Malakar's dark eyes narrowed. He snapped his fingers, and Elyria lurched forward as though he had grabbed the shadows in her chest by the fistful and *yanked*.

"Something you find amusing, *mi umbrae regina*?" Malakar's low voice curled like smoke into Elyria's pointed ears.

She shook her head, like doing so might also shake off the dread she felt every time the dark sorcerer addressed her as such. His queen of shadows.

She *hated* when he called her that. She was not a queen. And she was absolutely, definitely, categorically not *his*.

Elyria's hand twitched at her side as she resisted the urge to touch the faint crescent-shaped scars hidden under her hair at the side of her neck. "Of course not, *my liege*," she said, the sarcasm in her voice so thick, it made the girl, still lingering by the door, gasp. "And was that really necessary?" Elyria gave a mocking snap of her fingers before rubbing at her sternum. "You could have just asked nicely. Manners will get you everywhere, you know."

"I appreciate that after weeks of this, you have managed to keep that sharp tongue. Despite losing"—Malakar's gaze flicked to the blank space over Elyria's shoulders—"other things."

The spark of fight in Elyria snuffed out.

"Let's just get on with it, shall we?" she said, hopping up onto the table.

He arched an eyebrow, and not for the first time, Elyria balked at the familiarity and foreignness of the movement. Malakar looked just like Lord Church—like Varyth Malchior. And yet he also . . . did not.

He had the same face, the same dark hair streaked with shocks of gray around his temples. But there was something *more* about him. Something *other*. The pallor of his skin, a touch paler. The hook of his nose, a bit more severe. The rasp of his voice, just that much deeper.

And then there were his eyes.

Those formerly amber irises, the same color that shone from Tenny's face, had turned a cold, cruel black.

Well, mostly. Every now and again, Elyria thought she saw a glimpse of that amber, and—

"You are surprisingly cooperative today," Malakar said.

"I'm cooperative every day," she grumbled, leaning back until she was lying flat upon the table. Elyria didn't mind this part as much. Didn't mind getting the chance to look up through that window cut into the ceiling.

It was the only time she got to see the sky.

The only time she was served the visual reminder that the world out there still existed. That it kept turning. And some days, like today, when they brought her here right at midday, with the sun high, beaming through and warming the skin on her face, it was almost, almost, almost like she could feel *him*.

She should have buried the flood of emotion stirring in her gut. Should have slammed it back down into that box, like every other time. She should have put her emotionless mask back on, so she could get through what she knew was coming next.

She didn’t.

She languished in it instead.

Her hand twitched again, her palm longing to touch the soul-bonded mark lying under the loose periwinkle hair pooling on her shoulders. Fuzzy memories flew through her mind—a delightful pierce of pain, a glowing chest, a heated kiss. Moments stolen, too brief.

It was utterly unfair how few of them they’d had together.

“Mmm, lately that may be true,” said Malakar, snapping Elyria’s attention back like she had been doused in ice water. “Yet your cooperation does not appear to be getting us anywhere.”

“Not for lack of trying,” she muttered.

“So you claim. But if that is the case, why do you still hoard my power?”

“Don’t you think I would have returned it a hundred times over by now if I could? You think I *want* it?” Even as she said the words, though, Elyria couldn’t stop the guilt poking through her ribs at the lie. It wasn’t that she didn’t want it. It was her power as much as it was his. But still, if forced to make the choice . . .

“You think I *want* to keep doing this?” she continued. With a rough, jerky movement, she rolled up the long, cream-colored sleeves of her sheath, exposing the skin of both forearms.

Bare skin. Clean skin. Unmarred and unscarred.

Now.

But it had taken two full days after their last session together for her skin to heal. Two days of nonstop visits from a human saint to mend the wounds Malakar’s darksteel instruments had inflicted. And the healing process had been almost more painful than what the sorcerer had done to cause the wounds in the first place.

“Yes, well, how am I to truly know? I admit I find you rather . . . perplexing. Perhaps you are a masochist. Why else would you have been so willing to come with me in the first place?” He paused. Furrowed his brow. Pursed his lips. And when he started speaking again, Elyria was quite sure the words weren’t directed at her anymore.

“Why would a fairy whore sacrifice herself for a human? There is something in the back of my mind, like a voice, the softest whisper, telling me there is more to the picture than what I saw that day. Than what I see now.”

Panic gripped Elyria’s chest, and she had to dig her fingernails into her leg to keep herself from reaching for her mark. “Am I your shadow queen, or am I a fairy whore?” she said instead, her tone placid, like she was bored. “You should probably make up your mind.”

His dark eyes flashed. “You say manners will get you everywhere, but that smart mouth of yours will get you nowhere, *regina*.”

She sighed. “Story of my life.”

“Do you still require my assistance, my lord?” squeaked a bright voice from the corner. Elyria had nearly forgotten about the cultist girl entirely.

She hadn’t paid much attention in her bedroom or on their walk through the tower, but now Elyria let her head fall to one side so she could get a better look at the girl. She was petite, a peachy flush in her cheeks as she fiddled with straight white-blond hair that fell to her chin.

“Yes, thank you, Petra.” Malakar’s voice was shockingly gentle as he addressed the girl. “You may bring it now.”

Petra gave a quick nod and dashed over to the desk on the other side of the room, grabbing something from amid the jumble of scrolls and journals plastered across the tabletop.

“My patience is running thin, *regina*.” His voice was *un*shockingly much less gentle when he turned his attention back to Elyria. “Today we will try something new. It . . . will not be pleasant.”

Because the past few weeks have been? she wanted to say, but the words died in her throat when Petra handed something dark and shiny to the sorcerer.

The sunlight beaming in from overhead glinted off the smooth black surface of the obsidian fragment, almost the full length of Malakar’s hand, and it felt like mockery.

Elyria sucked in a breath as he flipped the sharp stone dagger in his palm, then ran the pad of one finger down the side.

He grinned when the jagged edge sliced easily through his skin, dark crimson blood beading at the tip. “I take it from your reaction that you know exactly what this is.”

She didn’t reply. She was trying too hard not to react further, even as the memories of what occurred the last time her shadow touched obsidian washed through her mind. She couldn’t help recalling the uncontrolled way her power had exploded, how it had nearly leveled a fyre wyrm.

“Good,” Malakar said darkly. “That will make things simpler, I think. You may take your leave now, Petra. Warn everyone to give the west tower a wide berth for the next few hours. Perhaps have them cast an additional layer of protection over the forges below as a precaution.”

Petra gave the sorcerer a quick nod and scurried out of the room, though not before glancing over her shoulder with wide eyes, taking in Elyria’s prone form on the table one last time.

“I had not particularly wanted to resort to this, *regina*,” said Malakar after the door clicked shut. “It is admittedly risky, even for me. Obsidian is so *volatile*. But I am beginning to run out of ideas for how to get my power back and, well . . .” He tilted his head, something flashing in the depths of his tar-black eyes, as though struck with sudden inspiration.

Elyria suppressed a shiver as those eyes then proceeded to rake up her body with unnecessary slowness.

Eventually, Malakar shook his head with a sigh. Evidently, whatever *idea* had just popped into his malevolent mind had been set aside for now, because he then flicked the drop of blood that had welled at his fingertip into the air with a whispered word of the Old Language.

“There,” he said with a dark chuckle. “That should help contain any potential fallout.”

Elyria steeled herself as his attention fell upon her once more, his gaze sharper than the obsidian dagger in his hand. Rather than lecherously roaming over her body, though, his focus narrowed to one of her arms. He gripped her wrist, exposing her forearm again, and she felt those weak wisps of shadow inside her shrink back, like they, too, were scared of what was about to happen.

She closed her eyes before the obsidian touched her skin. Tried to run into her mind, to dive inside her rattling box, to hide in the memories of warmth and sunshine and gold-ringed eyes.

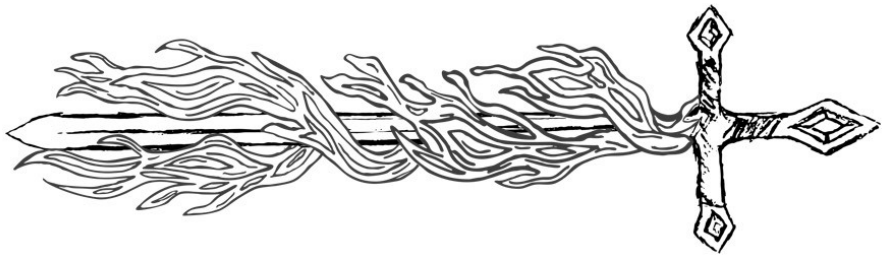
And she hated herself for how loudly she screamed.

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2

SEARING

CEDRIC



Crack.

The feel of the *sanguinagi's* nose breaking under Cedric's fist should have been satisfying.

The whimper the blow drew from the cultist bastard should have felt good.

The stifled laugh coming from behind Cedric should have been bolstering.

They were not.

Lately, Cedric Thorne barely felt anything at all, save for the unfettered embers of rage constantly smoldering in his chest—a furious fire that was getting harder to contain the longer this went on.

The longer it took to find her.

It was only the feel of the bond, the tether wrapped around his ribs, that maintained any semblance of his sanity. Even without being able to sense where that tether ended anymore.

Even without being able to feel her on the other end of it.

The fact that it was there at all was what Cedric clung to.

It was what drove his fist forward into the *sanguinagi's* face once more, the man's nose crunching like dry bark under Cedric's fist.

A small, shocked noise escaped the man, blood pouring from each nostril, a river of red filling the line between his lips, the gaps between his teeth.

“Think maybe he’s had enough, Ric?” Tristan’s voice was laced with humor as he came up behind Cedric, like the knight did not particularly want Cedric to stop, but common sense suggested it was time to do so anyway. “You might consider leaving him a few of his teeth, at least, just in case his conscience finally wakes up and he changes his mind about talking.”

“Consciences are rather hard to come by in the Cult of Malakar, I would imagine,” drawled Tenebris Nox from the wall to Cedric’s right, their crimson-black eyes still trained on the man’s wrists, bound to either side of the wooden chair he was sitting in. “Regardless,” they continued, “I do not believe this man is capable of revealing anything more than he already has.”

Cedric stilled, his fist halting in midair. “He has told us nothing.”

“Be-because I don’t know anything. Neither of us does,” groaned the man, spitting blood onto the hay-strewn floor of the abandoned storage hut they’d come across. A convenient interrogation chamber.

Red splattered across the boots of the cultist’s companion, unconscious beside him.

“How many times do I have to tell you that we aren’t part of the Cult? We have nothing to do with that!”

The room erupted with laughter.

“Sure ye don’t, laddie.” From Cedric’s other side, Thraigg Ironfist dragged a hand down his braided beard with a chuckle. “That certainly wasn’t a blood ritual we walked in on you two performing in the forest outside the village.”

“And you definitely didn’t try to run the instant we came upon you,” added Tristan. “You’re just a pair of utterly innocent humans who happened to wander all the way across both Chasms to set up shop here in Daeglen, is that right?”

“You’re one to talk, sir.” The man swiveled his head toward Tristan, his swollen eyes going from the knight’s skeptical expression to the rounded tips of his ears. “And anyway, humans aren’t illegal in Nyrundelle.”

“No, they certainly aren’t.” Kit launched herself off the wall she’d been leaning against and blew a lock of silver hair from her eyes. “Never have been. Humans are the ones who made the choice long ago to stay out of our lands—as well as to make Arcanians merely stepping foot in Havensreach a jailable offense.”

“Prior to the accords,” offered Tristan with a contrite shrug.

“Prior to the accords,” Kit repeated with a nod. “Still doesn’t mean we welcome blood mages here. Especially not ones who follow *him*.”

“But that does not describe you, correct?” With a feline tilt of their head, Nox took several graceful steps forward. The man sucked in a breath through his teeth when the nocterrian bent down, pulling at the sleeve of one of the man’s bound wrists to reveal row after row of thin, even scars peppering the skin of his forearm. “Clearly, we must have been mistaken.”

From the far corner of the room, Zephyr let out a quiet giggle, then quickly clapped a hand over her mouth like she couldn’t believe she’d made a sound. An amused yowl echoed from beside her when Sid lifted her small head to butt it against the sylvan’s knees before going back to playing with the laces of her boots.

Cedric shook off the dread lancing through his chest as he observed the playful shadowcat, her continued regression in size an alarming reminder that they were surely running out of time. His heart seized at the thought of waking up one day and Sid being gone entirely, the tether in Cedric’s chest having disappeared with her. Was he witnessing the erasure of his love—his entire life—in real time?

“I will give you one final chance to tell us where we can find your master.” The furnace inside Cedric was lit, rumbling. Steaming blood dripped from his split knuckles as he clenched and unclenched his fist. “Tell us where Malakar is.”

The man pressed his lips into a hard line. “As I’ve said, I cannot tell you what I do not know.”

Red edged in at the corners of Cedric’s vision. Heat flooded his veins. How many more lies was he to endure? How much more of this, the gaping hole in his heart caused by Elyria’s absence, by the thoughts of what could be happening to her *right now*, could he take before he combusted in earnest?

How long before he took down the entire realm with him?

After so many weeks on the road, so much fruitless searching, coming across these cultists brazenly performing blood magic had felt like a gift from the celestials themselves. There had been no coherent thoughts in Cedric’s head when he’d descended upon the fleeing pair, knocking the first one out with a single gauntlet-clad punch to the head.

That the storage hut had been nearby was another gift. Cedric hadn’t even bothered hiding his desperation at the chance to finally get some

answers, to finally face some of the miscreants who did Varyth Malchior's —and now Malakar's—bidding.

He was, after all, nothing *but* a man desperate now. Especially after the disappointments they'd faced upon their return visit to Elderglade.

Larkess's voice still rang in his ears, pounded against his thoughts, as though he was living through the day all over again.



"I AM SORRY, my boy. The locket will not revert," the sylvan elder had said.

Cedric had made no attempt to hide his shock, the red-hot anger pulsing under his skin. "What do you mean? You are the one who transfigured it. This is your magic."

"Something is blocking me, locking me out. I do not understand it, but I cannot access it."

The speed with which Polonius ran back out of Elderglade might have been something to admire about the horse under gentler circumstances. But in that moment, it was all Cedric could do to get out of there before he set the sacred village ablaze with the magnitude of his grief.

Tenebris Nox was waiting on the other side of the vine-woven gate, unwilling to provoke the magic that protected the mixedborn sanctuary from darker forces—like the nocterrian's shadowborn power.

"Elle was able to get through," Cedric had reminded them before venturing through the gate after the rest of their party. "Elderglade did accept her . . . eventually."

"I think I shall pass on being 'accepted' the same way the Revenant was," Nox had said drily, eliciting a somewhat flustered noise from Cedric.

"That's not what I—"

The nocterrian flashed a fang-laced grin. "Oh, do go on in. Best not to tempt fate, I think. Besides, I have this one to keep me company." They gestured at Sid before taking a seat on the forest floor, one long leg draped over the other, their back braced against the trunk of a familiar bowed tree.

To their credit, Nox truly hadn't seemed to mind waiting. When Cedric and Polonius cantered back through the gate, the nocterrian appeared perfectly content, drawing lines in the dirt with one of their fighting batons, Sid curled up at their side.

Content, if a bit surprised, perhaps, to see Cedric having returned so soon.

Swallowing a lump in his throat, Cedric dismounted and guided Polonius to rest under the bent branches of the tree—the makeshift canopy that Elyria had crafted upon his first visit to Elderglade. Sid lifted her head, cocking it as Cedric approached.

"That was fast." Nox's gaze darted between Cedric and the gate. "Where are the others?"

"Oh, I expect they'll join us shortly," Cedric said through gritted teeth, tugging up the collar of his doublet to guard against the frosty air. Winter wasn't far off now.

Cedric threw open the flap of his saddlebag, pulling out a small linen-wrapped bundle and tossing it to the nocterrian. "Here. Better tuck that away in your shadow fold again. Turns out we won't be needing it yet."

Nox caught the bundle deftly, their dark eyebrows shooting up their forehead. They unwrapped one end to reveal two shining golden spires and one jagged edge. "I do not understand," they said, frowning at the crown-half in their hands.

"You're in good company, in that case." Cedric drew his mother's locket from where it hung around his neck, feeling the weight of it against his palm. "Elder Larkess was unable to undo her transfiguration on the other half. It remains like this. And without reuniting the crown, we have no way of freeing Aurelia from the Sanctum, so"—his voice cracked—"we have officially lost our best hope for finding Elle."

Heat pulsed in his hands, the veins under the thin skin of his wrist illuminated with the sunfyre that now coursed freely through his blood. The locket glowed, intricate carvings appearing on its gilded surface at the brush of his power.

A moment later, all that heat dissipated, the violent energy that had been building in his chest fizzling out.

Cedric raked both his hands through his hair. "I don't know where to go from here. The trails Ollie and Jocelyn were tracking have run cold—the two of them are already en route back to Kingshelm. Tenny has had no luck getting any additional information out of King Callum or what's left of the council. Scouts through the Midlands are coming up empty. It's like the entire stars-damned Cult of Malakar has gone underground, and I—"

“You had hoped this would be the solution,” Nox offered, their voice soft.

Cedric blinked rapidly, trying his best to banish the wetness he could feel pooling against his lashes. “What a foolish thing it is, to hope.”

“That’s not true, Ric.” Kit’s voice was simultaneously balm and torture as she flitted through the gate, her horse’s reins in one hand, a basket piled high with baked goods dangling from the other. “Tristan and Thraigg are coming. The sylvans wouldn’t let us leave without provisions,” she said with a shrug, then added, “And you aren’t foolish. None of us are. We know Ellie’s out there. We just need a way to get to her.”

At that, Sid leapt to her feet, making a sharp sort of yowling sound as she stopped in front of Cedric and butted her head against his shin.

Kit tilted her head. “Is she . . . scolding you?”

Despite himself, despite everything, Cedric felt the edge of his lips quirk. “She has a tendency to do that.”

“It would seem she does not agree with your inclination to lose hope, knightling,” said Nox.

Cedric blew out a breath, crouching to run his hand through Sid’s strange, shadowy fur. “What exactly is it that you are proposing here, then? Without Aurelia’s help, is there even any chance of finding her? I don’t even know where we would—”

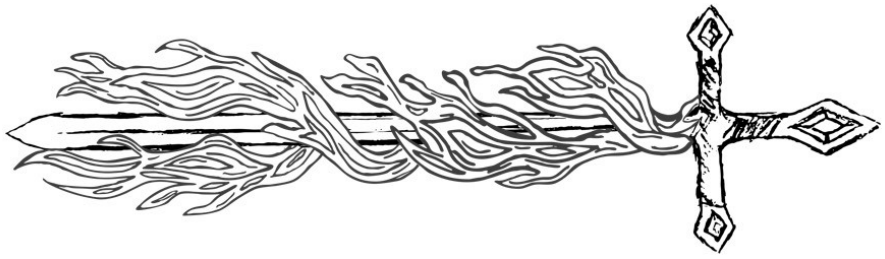
“Aurelia is not the only celestial who may be able to lend guidance,” said Nox, running the pad of their finger along one of their horns the way they often did when deep in thought. They pursed their lips, as though contemplating whether or not to say what they did next. “And I may just know where we can go.”

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3

SCORCHED

CEDRIC



KIT'S SIGH PULLED CEDRIC BACK TO THE PRESENT. "I'VE HAD ENOUGH OF this," she said. "If you won't—"

"Can't," hissed the cultist, still bound to the wooden chair.

"—tell us where the blood king is hiding, then at least tell us what you're doing out here. Daeglen is little more than a rest stop between Aerithia, Coralith, and the Sacred Mountain. What do *sanguinagi* cultists want with this tiny wayward village? Why are you here?"

The man spat another mouthful of blood onto the floor, glaring at Cedric. "Maybe if your guard dog hadn't been so quick to pummel Tyrren into unconsciousness, he could have explained."

"Guard dog?" Thraigg laughed as he spoke, but there was something surprisingly biting underneath the words. "Who exactly is it ye think ye've been talkin' to all this time?"

"Thraigg," Cedric said, voice low.

His warning did not deter the dwarf. "The Lord Victor deserves some respect—ye best show it to him."

The man's eyes widened, his gaze flicking between Cedric, Thraigg, Nox, Tristan, Kit, Zephyr, and even Sid, comprehension dawning on his face. "Y-you—"

"Yes, yes, I am, in fact, the extremely handsome best friend of the Victor of Havensreach." Tristan looped an arm around Cedric's shoulders. "Aren't you just the luckiest to have met me?"

Cedric ducked out of Tristan's hold with a roll of his eyes, but he couldn't deny that the conversational detour had helped clear some of the gloom from his head. "You said Tyrren"—he gestured loosely at the man's unconscious companion beside him—"could tell us what you're doing out here, but it is you who has been granted the opportunity to explain."

Tristan let out a chortle. Thraigg grunted in agreement. The cultist man simply sat there, grinding his teeth.

"Your last chance," Cedric said icily.

"It's not so simple." Bloodshot eyes darted between the entire group, before falling once more on Tyrren. "It's also not what you think."

"Tell that to the blood runes we caught you carving into the forest floor," Kit said with a snort, but Cedric could not ignore the sudden earnestness in the man's voice, the softening of his expression. It had something that felt uncomfortably close to guilt flaring between the waves of rage roiling in Cedric's chest.

"We won't get anywhere with him, Ric. It's just a deflection." Kit stretched her arms over her head, stifling a yawn. "He clearly won't tell us anything, and we're just wasting time at this point. We still need to go over our rendezvous plans for after we part ways tomorrow." Frost formed at the tips of her tawny fingers. "Shall we finish this?"

"W-wait," said the man, squirming against his bindings. "Please, you must understand, when I say that I can't, I—"

"What is your name?" Cedric asked.

Kit's mouth popped open—the picture of surprise. Tristan crossed his arms over his chest, questions written across his face as he caught Cedric's eye.

The man hesitated. "Ignatius," he finally said.

"Why should we believe you, Ignatius?" asked Cedric.

Several moments of tense silence ticked by. "I lied before," said Ignatius, blowing out a long, slow breath. "When I said we don't have anything to do with the Cult of Malakar."

"Great Gaia's tits!" exclaimed Thraigg. "Ye don't say!"

Zephyr clapped her hand over her mouth once more in a failed attempt to prevent a laugh. Tristan and Nox both let out low chuckles.

"Tell us something we don't already know," said Kit, rolling her blue and green eyes.

“Neither of us ever wanted any trouble. We thought that volunteering to come here would be the easiest way to guarantee we stayed out of it, in fact.” Ignatius bit his bottom lip. “Sounded like a pretty plum gig, really. Getting to travel the continent with my brother . . .” He tilted his head at Tyrren. “I should’ve known if things sounded too good to be true, they probably were.”

“What was it, exactly, that you volunteered to do?” asked Cedric.

“It was just supposed to be reconnaissance.” Ignatius’s brow furrowed, and sweat began beading at his temples, as though saying the words was taking great effort. “Keep an eye on the mana spring, report back regularly. Outside of that, we were free to do as we pleased.”

Nox lifted a hand to one of the horns curving out from their forehead. “The nearest spring on this side of the Chasm is the one that runs beneath the Sacred Mountain.”

“Yes,” said Ignatius. “We didn’t know that doing so meant we’d have to channel. That the runes were needed in order to make those reports, to keep tabs on the strength of the spring. Neither of us had used blood magic before, other than to make our oaths.”

Kit snorted again. “Yet you swore one to him all the same.”

Ignatius’s head snapped to her. “We hail from a tiny village on the northern edge of the Chasm, so small and so precariously positioned that having swaths of our land crumble into the great abyss is a regular occurrence. If someone came around promising your family a better life in exchange for your loyalty, would you not do the same?”

“The Chasm is expanding?” said Zephyr with a panicked gasp.

“Why wouldn’t you just leave?” asked Kit at the same time.

Cedric swallowed his own horror. He’d never heard of such things, and having grown up on the very edge of the Chasm himself, surely he would have known if the abyss was growing, if it still posed the same danger it had when it first ripped through the continent—swallowing villages, tearing families apart.

Wouldn’t he?

He shook his head. With Lord Church’s secret identity as Varyth Malchior and all those *sanguinagi* powers at work, there was no telling how many lies Cedric had been fed, how much he had missed.

“Like it’s so *easy* to up and leave,” Ignatius hissed, his eyes narrowing on the silver-and-gold wings peeking over Kit’s shoulders. “Perhaps it is—

as long as you've those things to carry you away. Or if you've got gold lining your pockets. Not all of us are so lucky. Some of us have others to think about. Families." He swallowed. "Children."

Some unnamed emotion flashed across Kit's face.

"So, yes, when Varyth Malchior swept through years ago, offering mana and riches and a chance to provide a better life for our loved ones, we were hardly in a position to say no," Ignatius continued. "And when he finally returned and revealed himself to be none other than Malakar in the flesh, when he demanded we reaffirm our oaths, there was little choice but to do so."

"Go back," Cedric said guardedly, trying to ignore the clenching of his heart. This story was starting to feel too familiar. It was so close to what the boy from Dawnspire, Avery, had said of the village's involvement in the attack there. "What does Malakar care about a single mana spring on the other side of the continent?"

Ignatius's jaw worked. The muscles in his neck went taut, his face reddening. "It's—it's because . . ." He coughed, spat more blood, then tried again. "Malakar—he—he wants—"

Cedric stilled, narrowing his eyes.

A strangled sound tore free from Ignatius. "I can't."

The words seemed to snag in his throat like they were caught on a hook.

Nox gave a curious tilt of their head. "He is blood-bound."

"We knew that already, didn't we?" said Thraigg. "All *sanguinagi* bastards swear an oath to the blood king, the loons."

"And that was before they even knew he was coming back," added Kit under her breath.

Cedric looked to Nox. "What do you mean?"

"There is clearly some sort of binding built into his oath. It prevents him from speaking on Malakar's goals or whereabouts." They shrugged. "I said as much before."

"I do not believe this man is capable of revealing anything more than he already has." Nox's earlier words took on new meaning in Cedric's mind, and he released a long breath.

"Ye might've been a wee bit clearer on that, Noxie." Thraigg gave an exasperated shake of his head, the beads in his braid jingling. "Before Ric went and bloodied up those pretty knuckles of his."

Nox shrugged. “The Lord Victor’s *efforts* were already well underway by the time I realized. And it isn’t as though I would have come to that realization without a few bruised knuckles. Besides, who am I to thwart a prince’s vengeance?”

Shaking out his fist, Cedric sighed. The furnace in his chest rolled back to a dull simmer. “It’s fine. If he physically can’t tell us anything else, there’s no point in continuing this. Untie him.”

Tristan moved toward Ignatius, but a disapproving huff from Kit had the knight’s steps faltering.

“You aren’t serious?” she said, voice rising in pitch. “You’re just going to let them go?”

Tristan’s eyes darted between Cedric and Kit, like he wasn’t sure whose instruction he was supposed to follow.

Cedric gave his friend a pat on the shoulder before stepping forward himself. “What would you have me do?” he asked. “I won’t break a man—”

Thraigg coughed, covering a laugh.

“I won’t break a man *further* for being beholden to an order he can’t disobey.”

Ignatius’s lips parted with the sharp intake of breath as Cedric drew a dagger from his thigh. But Cedric only swung around and knelt beside the man to slice through the rope binding him to his chair.

Sagging in his seat, Ignatius rubbed his wrists, astonishment naked on his battered face. “You . . . you would truly let us go?”

“I’m not in the business of adding more orphans to the world.” Cedric swallowed, tasting ash on his tongue. “But if what you say is true, if you never wanted a part of the Cult’s madness, you should take this for what it is—a sign, a chance. Take your brother, return to your children. And run.”

Ignatius’s face fell. “Our oaths would never allow it. He will find us.”

“Spells can be broken,” Nox said with a hum. “Even blood-made ones.”

Cedric gave a curt nod, sheathing the dagger before rising. “Varyth Malchior took everything from me. That’s what he does—did. What Malakar continues to do. He takes, and he takes, and he takes. But he also gives—purpose, a common goal, a common enemy. His promises may be empty and his platitudes false, but I understand why it was so easy to fall under his spell. It was not so long ago that I might have ended up the same as you.”

Zephyr stepped forward, the corners of her mouth turned down. “It is never too late to reverse course,” she said, hands glowing with warm green light. “To make up for the choices we may have made in the past.” She reached toward a stiffened Ignatius, cupping his chin, waving a hand over his face. The blood staining his skin disappeared. There was another *crack*, soft and muffled this time, and Ignatius shuddered as she set his broken nose.

“Th-thank you.” With a trembling hand, he touched the bridge of his nose, but the sylvan had already moved on to his brother, kneeling beside Tyrren and undoing the bindings keeping him tied to his chair.

Thraigg was there in an instant, catching the man before he slumped on top of her. Her palms still glowed green as her magic sank into him, and within moments his lashes were fluttering.

Thraigg ushered Zephyr back toward the wall, hands wrapped protectively around her shoulders, while Sid slunk up beside them both, tail swishing.

“Easy,” Tristan murmured, his sword drawn but pointed toward the floor as Tyrren blinked himself awake.

Tyrren’s head whipped toward Ignatius, who already had his hands raised placatingly,

“It’s all right, brother . . . I think.”

The two men exchanged bewildered looks, taking in the ring of faces surrounding them—fae and dwarf and nocterrian and human. Tyrren groaned, bending over with his head in his hands.

“Take a minute, get your bearings,” said Cedric, flexing his hand again. His knuckles were a mess of split skin and clotting blood. “Then get the fuck out of here.”

Tyrren lifted his head. His voice was hoarse when he said, “I don’t know what just happened, and I certainly don’t understand why you are helping”—he threw a questioning look to his brother, who shrugged—“us, but I feel as though I owe you my thanks.”

“If you really wanted to thank us,” said Kit, finally uncrossing her arms and coming forward, “then you can try again. Tell us *something* that can help us find him. Or, four hells, just help us find *her*. Surely there must be some loophole, some side view we aren’t seeing. You don’t need to reveal anything about his plans or his location, only about where he might be holding the Revenant. Please.”

Tyrren’s mouth opened and closed several times, giving him the impression of a gasping fish, but no words came out. Ignatius slapped his brother on the back, the expression on his face saying the words he didn’t actually voice: *I told you so.*

Thraigg huffed a breathy chuckle. “Not exactly how I would’ve thought a fae princess like yerself goes about rendering men speechless, but good on ye anyway, Kit.”

She rolled her mismatched blue and green eyes at the dwarf. “*Not* a princess.”

“It was worth a try—a valiant effort,” said Nox, approval resonating from their soft voice. Kit’s spine straightened, her shoulders rolling back in a way that looked suspiciously like preening, and Cedric found himself smothering the inclination to grin.

“Oh, fine then. I suppose they really are harmless enough.” Kit waved a dismissive hand at the two brothers, each checking the other over for any remaining sign of injury. “Even if this *has* been a massive waste of our time.”

A few silent seconds ticked by. Cedric pursed his lips. The pain in his knuckles was a tiny, stupid thing compared to the unyielding ache behind his ribs, but watching Zephyr work her healing touch on the two men had him wondering . . .

“Do you think I could mend these?” he asked, holding up his bloodied hand and shuffling over to the wall where Zephyr, Thraigg, and Sid still stood.

Zephyr blinked at him. “Y-you’re asking me?”

“He ain’t askin’ *me*, lass,” said Thraigg with a chortle.

“I would think so,” said the sylvan, her words slow, thoughtful. “It’s in your blood, after all.”

“Haven’t you ever tried healing before?” Kit sidled up to Cedric, her mismatched eyes narrowing on Zephyr for a split second. “Tenny’s quite adept at it, from what I understand.”

“She is. When Tris and I call her a saint, we aren’t just being generous with our praise. She wields healing mana skillfully. But I’m afraid I never was particularly gifted at channeling magic in that precise way. Lord Ch—” Cedric cleared his throat. “In all my time training to take on the Crucible, I was really never able to get the hang of it. I figured it was like it is for those

who have the ability to become seers—mindwielders, to you all. Some people can, and some people can't. But now I am curious . . ."

"If you were just trying to do the wrong sort of healing?" Zephyr asked, her lilting voice soft. Cedric nodded. "I think you could do it, for what it's worth. You already have everything you need."

"I wouldn't know where to begin. How do I—"

"The same way you call on it to do anything else." Kit clapped a hand on Cedric's shoulder. "Only, you know, different."

He arched his brow. "Very helpful, thank you."

"Oh, give it a try, knightling. It's only skin."

He swallowed, a sort of nervous energy settling over the entire space. Zephyr glanced up, curious. Thraigg folded his arms over his burly chest. Tristan smirked from across the room. Nox turned toward Cedric and the group, their head cocked with interest, before returning their gaze to watch Ignatius and Tyrren as they spoke in low tones, slowly rising from their chairs. Their emotional recovery from Cedric's interrogation seemed to have caught up to their physical recovery at last.

Sid hopped up onto a stack of crates just behind Cedric, as though the shadowcat was setting up a better view.

"I wasn't looking for an audience," he grumbled, but he lifted his hands, nonetheless, holding one over the other, palm to bloodied knuckles. Digging into his furnace of magic, he focused not on the flame, the part that could scorch and burn and hurt, but on light. He thought of sunbeams streaming through rainbow-colored leaves, of the scent of cherries and almonds, of rain-soaked clothing and slivered bars of soap. He thought about periwinkle waves splayed across his pillow, about soft skin and softer words whispered in the dead of night.

Warmth spread through him like honey, his sunfyre illuminating his veins, making them glow beneath his skin. And then his hand was glowing too, golden light spilling from his palm. Cedric's inhale was sharp and sudden as his split skin pulled tight, knitting together in an instant.

Beneath his armor, the locket was hot against his chest.

"You did it." Zephyr's words were little more than a whisper, and for a few heartbeats, there was awe and joy and pride sweeping through the group.

Then it changed.

Tristan's shout of alarm came first.

Then, Sid’s unmistakable hiss.

There was the clashing sound of weapons—loud, sudden. It took Cedric another few moments to realize that Ignatius and Tyrren were no longer huddled together across the room. To recognize the swords of red crystal swinging from their hands.

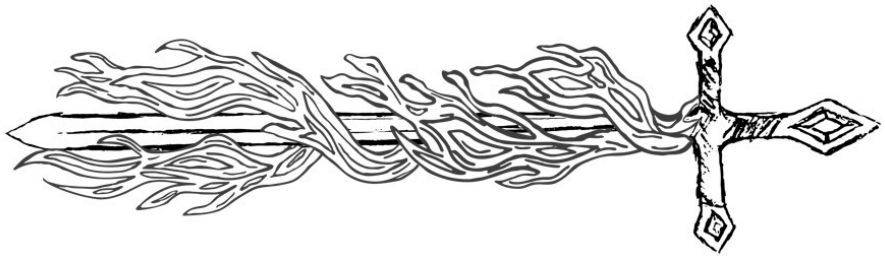
And the *sanguinagi* attacked.

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4

STRUGGLE

CEDRIC



TRISTAN PUSHED TYRREN BACK WITH A GRUNT, HIS METAL SWORD SCRAPING against the man's blood-summoned blade. "What in the ever-living fuck is wrong with you? You were free to go!"

Ignatius's weapon dropped to the floor with a clatter as the man groaned, hands gripping both sides of his head. His mouth was open, his lips moving as though he was trying to speak, but no intelligible words came out. Only a strangled series of snarls and sounds that could barely be classified as human.

Barely human, too, were both men's eyes as veins crept through the whites, drowning their formerly brown irises in red.

"Get back!" Nox yanked their batons from their back and held them at the suddenly rabid men.

Were they even men anymore?

Along with their bloodred eyes and the animalistic sounds they made, the hands that Cedric had just cut free from their bindings had transformed into black-tipped claws. Tyrren's *sanguinagi* weapon joined his brother's on the floor as the sounds of snapping bones and yowling filled the hut.

They came.

Cedric barely had time to free Ashrender from the sheath at his hip before Ignatius was on top of him, lashing out with a mouth full of sharp, jagged fangs. Cedric pushed Ignatius back before twisting the blade and slicing across his chest. In an instant, Thraigg was there, launching his body

onto the cultist-turned-monster with abandon, his arms wrapped around his neck.

Ignatius released a pained shout that caught the attention of his brother, who had lunged for Kit. The momentary distraction allowed Nox to shoulder between them, meeting the blow meant for the fae with their own body.

The nocterrian hissed, the fabric of their black coat torn at the shoulder, wet at the edges, and dark purpose came over Kit's face. Icy mist gathered around Tyrren's ankles—his legs bent at painful-looking angles, like his shins had lengthened, his silhouette more beast than man. A bestial yelp cut through when the mist suddenly rose, coating Tyrren's skin, painting him in frost.

Kit snapped her fingers, and the mist consolidated, sheathing him in ice, freezing him in place—a monstrous statue.

With a flash of white fang against dark blue lips, Nox swung a baton with their uninjured arm, and Tyrren *shattered*.

"Well, shit," said Tristan, running up beside the pair. Zephyr was already there too, pale green light flowing from her hands as she held them over Nox's shoulder. Tristan made a face at the frozen, fractured pieces of Tyrren strewn across the floor before him, crystallized black blood trickling off each one. "I don't know whether to be impressed or disgusted."

If he said anything else, Cedric could not hear it. Not over the howls now coming from Ignatius as whatever bit of man was left inside the beast realized what had happened to his brother. He flailed, throwing Thraigg from his back. The dwarf collided with a stack of crates, releasing a string of curses. And then the *sanguinagi* fell to his knees.

For a fleeting, flittering moment, the vicious, bloody haze in his eyes seemed to clear. "Please," he croaked, his voice mangled, rasping. "End it."

Cedric hesitated.

Ignatius shuddered, his whole body convulsing, as though this terrible spell, this cursed oath was taking hold once more. His eyes were pinned to Cedric, roaming wildly from his neck to his wrists to his hands, locked on all the places sunfyre was searing beneath his skin.

"Please!" he rasped again.

"You can grant him the peace he desires," called Nox from where they stood with the others.

Cedric’s skin was streaked with the golden light coursing through his veins when he gave a resigned dip of his chin. Heat flared under his palms —no longer healing, not now. Sunfyre wound up Ashrender, encircling the blade like a snake.

“I’m sorry,” he said, before piercing Ignatius’s bucking chest with steel and flame.

Ignatius blinked, the red veins in his eyes receding, relief twisting with the obvious pain in his visage. “Kinsgaith,” he said, the words wet. “My village. My family. My daugh—”

The flame snuffed out. “We will tell them. We will help them.” Cedric mustered as much resolve as he could into the words. He meant it. These were not men made monsters by choice.

“Mira.” Ignatius coughed, black blood dribbling from the side of his mouth. “That’s her name.”

“Mira,” Cedric repeated, turning it into a vow. He looked up, caught Tristan’s eye.

Tristan nodded.

“May Noctis guide you through the Hereafter,” said Cedric, before pulling Ashrender free—clean, fast, merciful.

Ignatius sagged to the floor.

No one spoke.

No one moved, really, until Sid leapt deftly from the spot where she had remained perched during the entirety of the scuffle. She felt like little more than a gentle breeze as she landed on Cedric’s shoulder, making a throne of his pauldron. Pressing her shadowy cheek to his jaw, she let out a low, rumbling purr, and Cedric blinked into motion.

He sheathed Ashrender at his hip, then grabbed a nearby tarp and covered Ignatius and what was left of Tyrren.

“Why do they always think they can take on all of us?” Tristan said, shaking his head.

“Normally, I’d agree with ye, laddie,” huffed Thraigg, back on his feet by the splintered pile of crates that broke his earlier fall. “But I think we all know this weren’t an act of their own making.”

“Precisely,” agreed Nox, thumbing the tear in their coat. “The blood oath they swore to Malakar has clearly been twisted to proportions even I could not have predicted. This was something . . . new.”

“Something awful,” Kit said at nearly the same time. “What was that? That transformation? I’ve never even heard of anything like that before.”

“I’ve heard of it,” Zephyr said meekly, “but never in a thousand lifetimes could I have dreamed of witnessing it. This type of magic, this *perversion*, has not been seen in Arcanis since . . .”

“Since Malakar last roamed this world,” Cedric finished for her.

She nodded. “He wove something dark and horrible into the oaths they swore. There is no telling what his followers might do, what they may be capable of, once called.”

“This was my doing.” Cedric swallowed, his jaw tight, and Sid nuzzled against his face once more, like she could sense his distress. “It’s like they were reacting . . . awakened . . . by my power.”

“It is nobody’s doing but Malakar’s—and Varyth Malchior’s before him,” said Kit.

Nox nodded thoughtfully. “The evil in that lineage has always sought to extinguish your light. Malakar has clearly made some *adjustments* to ensure he does not fall to it again.”

Images flashed across Cedric’s mind, as clear as if they came from his own memory. A glowing, luminous arrow soaring through a storm-soaked sky. A desperate cry as it struck a golden crown. A burst of life-giving light—first rushing from him in a great wave, then slamming back into him.

He shook his head. Not him. *Her*. The Shattering is what pulled Daephinia and Malakar both from the world, scattering their souls to the wind.

Or so he thought.

“He lost to my grandmother once,” Cedric said, his voice like stone. “He will not risk it happening again.” He fished the locket out from beneath his armor, still faintly warm as he clutched it between his fingers. “But we will ensure it does.”



THE STORAGE HUT was a beacon as it burned, cleansing Ignatius’s and Tyrren’s bodies, as well as the dark magic that had corrupted them. The group had pulled what few salvageable supplies had still been inside, just in case the hut was less abandoned than they’d initially suspected. They also

left evidence of the men's presence in the form of their cloaks, dropped on the ground outside, should anyone from Daeglen wonder what happened to the two humans.

"Is there a way?" Cedric asked, eyes pinned on the flames that licked the wooden walls, smoke careening into the air. "To break the oaths once sworn? To undo Malakar's influence before this happens to the rest of them?"

"Yes," answered both Nox and Zephyr at the same time.

Nox inclined their head at the sylvan.

"There are ways to unweave the binds that have been woven," she continued. "With blood made, with blood undone. It would take a strong magic wielder or one with a connection to the Verdant Veil to do so, but it can be done."

"It may be easier with some than with others," Nox added. "Those who committed their servitude under duress, for example, are likely able to be swayed. If we'd understood the true nature of the oaths those two"—they gestured toward the burning building—"made, I might have suggested they try."

"On the other hand," said Kit, coming to stand at Nox's side, "you have Malakar's disciples. Of which there are many, if the attack on the palace was any indication."

Zephyr nodded sadly. "Yes. Even if they were willing to break their oath—"

"Unlikely," said Nox.

"—it would be near impossible to achieve."

Cedric's brow creased. Sid made a mewling sort of sound from where she was draped around the back of his neck, like a shadowcub-shaped scarf.

"I see what's tickin' inside that skull of yers, Ric," said Thraigg, bracing himself against the handle of his giant hammer as it rested in the dirt. "Ye won't be able to save everyone."

Kit crossed her arms over her chest. "Most of them deserve their fate."

Cedric sighed. "All this time, I've been wondering where the Cult of Malakar has been hiding. Why they'd disappeared, how we would ever find one of his agents to divulge his plans." He released a bitter laugh, and Sid bristled. "As it turns out, they're likely everywhere and may not even realize what kinds of agents they are. How many more cultists have carved out places for themselves across Nyrundelle—sitting, watching, waiting?

How many of them don’t even know the terrible purpose they’ve been given?”

“And even if they do, evidently they won’t be able to tell us about it,” Kit griped. “How are we supposed to find out anything—what those plans are, where he’s holding Ellie—with all these odds stacked against us?”

“This is why we are headed to the mountain,” said Nox solemnly, and silence settled over the group, as though nobody quite knew what to say after that.

It was Tristan who eventually broke through the quiet. “All right. Well, we know where we were heading before this. What do you want to do about —ah!”

The knight stepped back, an alarmed noise slipping from his lips as a slice appeared in the very air before him. A wisp of darkness leaked from it, shadows coalescing into a small roll of dark parchment before the air was still once more, as though it had never been disturbed in the first place.

“Every day I grow more and more grateful that your power makes this possible, Tenebris Nox,” Tristan said with a low whistle.

Nox arched a single eyebrow as they retrieved the shadowscript paper. “I am so glad I could be of use.”

“It is certainly of great comfort knowing that we aren’t completely cut off from our friends back home,” said Zephyr.

“Know a lot about friendship, do you?” said Kit icily, and Zephyr shrank back.

Cedric pursed his lips. While he didn’t necessarily disagree with the sentiment—he was not entirely sure he had forgiven Zephyr for her betrayal at the end of the Crucible yet either—it wasn’t particularly helpful for Kit to continue alienating her. Not when she was here of her own volition, trying to make amends.

Not when they all had far bigger things to worry about.

“News from Kingshelm?” he asked.

Nox looked down at the shadowy parchment in their hands, then handed it off to Tristan, who unrolled it swiftly.

“It’s from Ollie.” The light from the blazing hut only served to highlight the grin on his face, and Cedric was somewhat dumbstruck to realize his mouth had *almost* tipped into a smile.

“And? What does he *say?*” Kit’s voice was rife with irritation.

“More of the same, looks like. No new leads from their time spent scouring the Midlands. He and Jocelyn have returned to King’s Keep. They’re there with Tenny,” said Tristan. “King Callum and the council have finally started to enact a semblance of order throughout the castle. It is trickling out to the people, though there is still much unrest. With mana stores depleted throughout the city, recovery is slow.”

Nox nodded. “Accessing the mana springs of the Midlands remains difficult in light of Lord Church’s manipulations, I’d imagine.”

“Perhaps if the wee king hadn’t been hiding out, nursing his wounds, they’d all be much farther along on the road to recovery, eh?” said Thraigg with a huff.

“You may be right. But even if King Callum had not been so affected by the attack and Church’s betrayal, I don’t think anyone could have anticipated just how comprehensive Malchior’s infiltration was. How deep it would cut.”

“Jus’ saying. Dentarius didn’t give his life so the man could rule his kingdom with cowardice.” Thraigg paused, an uncharacteristically contemplative expression flashing across his typically good-humored face. With a jingle of those beaded braids in his beard, his gaze shifted not-so-surreptitiously to Cedric. “A ruler shows up for his people, *leads* them. They should be able to rely on him, not the other way ’round.”

Cedric swallowed at the implication in the dwarf’s words. If ever there was a conversation better suited for another time, it was that one. Cedric’s own recently revealed royal lineage was not a topic he would even entertain the *possibility* of discussing until Elyria was back at his side.

“We can argue about the betterment of kings once we get past the part where Malakar is making monsters of men against their will,” said Cedric. Then, eyes still on the burning hut, a thought occurred. “Were a *sanguinagi* to unbind their oath, would they be able to speak freely?”

Nox gave a loose shrug of their shoulders. “Presumably. But this is rather uncharted territory, knightling. How many cultists do you think are running around, looking to betray their master? If anything, the fervency to follow the blood king only seems to be growing.”

“It doesn’t mean we don’t try,” said Tristan. “We have somewhere to start, at least. I will go to Kinsgaith to make good on our promise to help their family. From what Ignatius said, it sounds like there are others who might be willing to hear us out, at the very least.”

“Especially once they find out what happened here,” Zephyr added quietly. “I will go with you. Should we find someone willing to unwind their oath, I can help.”

“Not lookin’ like that, ye can’t.” Thraigg released a gruff laugh. “Ye expect a village of known *sanguinagi*—or, at the very least, cultist sympathizers—to welcome a sylvan with open arms? Yer dreamin’, Zeph.”

Zephyr gave the dwarf a pointed look, and with a flare of viridescent light, her small form began to shimmer. Her short, forest-green hair rapidly grew past her shoulders, turning a rich shade of mahogany. Her form lengthened, limbs stretching, until she was the same height as Kit and of a similar build. Her skin shifted from a soft shade of sage to a light honeyed brown.

Thraigg made a sort of choking sound. “Point made.”

“Thank you,” said Zephyr, and Cedric blinked at the strangeness of hearing her lilting sylvan accent coming from this brand-new form. He didn’t think he would ever get used to sylvan magic—the way verdancy seemed to stretch, even defy, the rules of magic he had come to know. Then again, what *did* he really know?

“So, we are to split up further, then?” Nox asked, the question free of judgment or accusation, as always. It was logistical—a confirmation of fact. “Tristan and Zephyr will change course and head back to Havensreach. Kit will head to Aerithia to confer with the king, as planned. And the three of us”—they gestured to Thraigg, Cedric, and themself—“continue on to the Sacred Mountain.”

From Cedric’s shoulder, Sid meowed.

“Apologies,” said Nox wryly. “I meant the four of us, of course.”

“Aye, it’s a good plan,” said Thraigg. “More avenues to follow. More potential to finally find a lead on our main lass.”

Cedric nodded, his throat feeling tight. For the first time in a long time, something that felt alarmingly close to hope was sparking in his chest. They still had nothing to go on, really, no actual new information. He was technically no closer to finding Elyria than he had been an hour ago.

But there was something comforting about having a plan of action. Something so necessary. The promise of possibility, of knowing that, at the very least, they now had three avenues of potentially finding her.

“Then we move,” Cedric said, already turning in the direction of where they’d leashed the horses upon discovering Ignatius and Tyrren in the

woods. “And we move fast. We’ve all still so much ground to cover, and every day that passes—”

“Is one more day without her,” Kit finished for him, her silver-and-gold wings flaring. “We know, Ric. I *will* convince my uncle to help.”

Tristan nodded eagerly. “I’ll find you a miracle in Kinsgaith, Ric. Easy.”

Zephyr’s voice—still unsettling coming from this stranger’s face—was steady when she vowed, “*We* will.”

Thraigg set his hammer to his shoulder. “And we’ve got a mountain to climb, eh?”

Sid’s gentle butting of her head against Cedric’s jaw felt like an approval.

“Let’s get some rest tonight,” he said, striding away from the still-smoldering hut. “We split at dawn.”

Above the black ribs of the burned-out roof, a thin layer of stars winked through the smoke. Cedric fixed his gaze on the dark beyond them, digging down inside himself to tug on that golden cord still tied behind his ribs.

Hold on, Elle, he thought. *I’m coming.*

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5

TOKEN OF THE PAST

ELYRIA



ELYRIA COLLAPSED ONTO HER MATTRESS, BURYING HER HEAD IN HER PILLOW and releasing a long, muffled scream.

How much more of this could she possibly be expected to take?

"Are you all right, my lady?"

Elyria peeled her face out of the plush pillow to look at Petra, still standing in the doorway after playing the role of escort once more. "Is that a serious question?"

"I just mean . . ." Petra played with her hair between her fingers. "Is there anything else you need?"

"There is much that I need," Elyria said drily, "and not a single thing you can provide. You can go."

The girl hesitated, and for a moment Elyria wondered if there was something else she wanted to say.

Then she remembered that whatever it was, she didn't want to hear it.

"I said, you may fuck off now, Petra."

With a squeak of surprise, the girl scurried out of the room, closing the door behind her. It wasn't until Elyria heard the telltale sound of a key being turned in the lock that she let her face fall back into her pillow again.

Odd.

The other cultists assigned to Elyria's watch barely spoke to her, save for the errant "Move it, pixie" and other such pleasantries. This girl must've been new.

Several minutes passed, Elyria's muscles aching from how tensely she'd coiled herself during Malakar's experimentation. Her blood pulsed painfully under her bandage-wrapped forearms, and though she knew that were she to peel away said bandages, the wounds would already be partially healed, the torment of their infliction would last a long, long time.

The obsidian had not done what Malakar had hoped.

Or perhaps it had accomplished something, if said hope was to create a whole new kind of torture for Elyria.

The sting of darksteel drawing blood was a featherlight kiss in comparison to that obsidian shard splitting her skin. The remnants of shadow still left inside her had run screaming, like it was trying to claw even deeper into her, as if it might escape through her other side.

It was not a pleasant feeling.

With a groan, Elyria rolled onto her back, trying not to think about how quickly she'd already adapted to the feeling of nothing behind her. No longer was there the subtle flexing of muscles or the lingering presence of magic she'd always felt there, even when she kept her wings masked.

Now there was simply absence.

And it went so much farther than her back or her shoulders—it sliced down into her soul. Malakar had taken more than her wings from her, and the dark bastard knew it.

She wondered if he knew just how close she was to giving up on it all entirely. How many nights she had spent like this, staring up at the canopy of her bed, wondering whether she had it in her to end it?

Wondering if it was worth holding out just a little bit longer . . . for *him*.

Because that was the crux of it, really. She was too selfish to leave this world without seeing Cedric again, even if, in her darkest, loneliest moments, she wasn't sure whether Arcanis wouldn't be better off.

She'd almost tried it once, after all. After Evander failed to come back from the Sanctum, and she'd been so deep in the depths of her despair that she couldn't fathom ever clawing herself back out. So she stopped trying to, for a little while. She stopped making an effort to live. She didn't end up actively trying to *die*, though.

That particular thought path, it would seem, was reserved for this place.

At first Elyria had fought. She had tried. Tried to give back Malakar's power. Tried to unburden herself from its lingering pull, however faint. But when, eventually, time and time again, she would fail, it stopped seeming

worth the battle. And every so often, for a few moments, she thought about how if she were to simply stop breathing, stop existing, maybe Malakar would get what he wanted.

Maybe they both would.

Because Elyria didn't want to do this anymore.

But neither did she want him to win.

And there was much she didn't know about what would happen should she leave this mortal coil. Would she take his power with her? Or would that be what finally allowed him to reclaim it? She knew that uncertainty was likely the singular reason he hadn't killed her yet.

And she also knew that if it was the latter, if she passed but his power stayed behind, there would truly be nothing to stop him from going after the only things left in Arcanis that were good and right and real.

And so, Elyria stayed.

For better or worse, she was still here.

And she hoped that would eventually count for something.

Blowing out a breath, Elyria rolled over onto her side, reaching up toward the corner of her bed to pull at the bedsheets, exposing the corner of her soft, feathery mattress and, more important, the tiny hole embedded there. With deft fingers, she reached inside, an audible sigh of relief leaving her lips as soon as the pads of her fingers brushed against the cool, smooth stone lying within. After wrapping the chain around her wrist—once, twice—Elyria coiled her fingers around Cedric's token and drew her hands to her chest.

There was no mana left inside, not a thrum, not an inkling. But still, it felt like him.

Elyria placed her fist against her sternum and sucked in breath after breath, trying to steady the racing beat of her heart.

"Where are you?" She could feel the inner corners of her eyes burning, a tightness in the back of her throat as she whispered the words into the blank expanse of her mind. She knew she would receive no answer. Knew that if he hadn't heard her after all these weeks, he wouldn't hear her now.

It didn't stop her from trying every now and again.

From daring to hope.

He *was* coming for her. She knew it on a soul-deep level. Because if their situation had been reversed, if it were him wasting away in some cold stone tower, being tortured by day and slowly going mad by night, there

wasn’t a stars-damned thing in existence that would keep her from finding him. Not a single soul in all Arcanis would be safe until he was home with her.

And so, Elyria hoped. Despite knowing at some higher level that he shouldn’t bother. That there was a bigger threat at hand and that by looking for her, he might just be putting himself right in the path of the ultimate danger.

If Malakar knew who Cedric really was, if he figured out that Elyria was not only soul-bonded, but that her *solimaeus* was the grandson of the very fae who had struck him from this world, who had banished his power and caused his pain, what would the dark sorcerer do?

What was he doing now?

When he wasn’t treating Elyria like his own personal scientific experiment, wasn’t trying to claw his power back from her with blade and bone, what was Malakar up to? There were times when Elyria was set upon that table in his study to wait for him for hours. Times when he seemed more distracted than not, his head and his heart barely invested in his experiment with her at all.

Honestly, it was just rude. If he was going to insist on going through the process of torturing her over and over again, the least he could do was give her his undivided attention.

Masochist, he called her. Maybe she was. Because it was at those times that Elyria didn’t seem to be able to stop herself from goading him, despite knowing the literal pain it would bring her.

“Heart’s not in it today, my liege?” she would taunt. And he would sneer and cut her deeper or cast some new kind of spell that would tear the air from her lungs, or he would let red ribbons of blood magic dive down her throat like they were searching for that bead of magic. And it was only after she ended up on her knees, retching and vomiting up what little food she had consumed—it all tasted like ash anyway—that he would rub his temples and sigh, as though chastising her for making him lose his temper.

Like this was all her fault.

Wasn’t it, though?

A gentle knock at the door roused Elyria from her thoughts. She blinked. Blinked again. Her eyes were dry, her eyelids heavy. How much time had passed while she stewed in her pitiful reverie? Perhaps she had actually dozed off while lying there.

What is time anyway? she thought, sitting up in bed. Nothing meant anything anymore. She rubbed at her eyes, and it wasn't until she did so that she realized she still had Cedric's token clenched in her fist.

The sound of a key turning in the lock sent Elyria into a spiraling panic. They could not be allowed to take this from her too. She lurched up toward the corner of the bed to hastily stuff the token back into the hiding place she'd carved for it, rolling the bedsheet and a pillow over the spot just before the door cracked open and Petra's dainty features poked around the corner.

"Um, my lady, sorry for disturbing you, but I've been sent back with your supper," she said quietly.

Elyria waved her hand, beckoning Petra into the room. She hoped the gesture was casual enough to hide the rapid rise and fall of her chest. If Petra had fae senses, Elyria was certain she would have heard the walloping of her heart against her ribs.

"Shall I place it over there?" Petra asked, pointing her chin at the table by the window, a large silver tray laden with various pots and bowls in her arms. "Or is there another place where you prefer to take your meals?"

"To take my meals?" Elyria cocked her head to the side. This one was unusually chatty *and* unusually polite. "Wherever," she muttered. "The others usually just kick it into the room before locking the door again. The nicer ones slide it in—though I suspect it's more to prevent themselves from having to clean up a worse mess." She pointed to a darkened spot on the carpet, the evidence of too many mealtime casualties to count at this point.

Petra looked aghast as she set down the tray on the table in front of the window. "I'm so sorry to hear you've experienced such rudeness."

"Why are you sorry?" Elyria pushed herself up from the bed and strode over to flop into the chair at the table.

Petra scowled, her lips pursing to one side. "I wouldn't think *mi sanguinexos* would approve of you being treated with such poor manners."

At that, Elyria couldn't help laughing. "We *are* talking about the same man who just spent an hour carving runes into my forearms with a slab of obsidian, are we not? Somehow, I don't particularly think he cares." She removed the lid from one of the ceramic pots and took a sniff. Her stomach rumbled as the scent of beef stew hit her nostrils, though an acidic taste on the back of her tongue still had her appetite souring.

Petra's throat bobbed. "That's—that's not true. He was very clear with his instructions that we are to treat the *regina umbrae* with respect and to—"

"I am not his shadow queen," Elyria said darkly, slamming the lid back on the pot with so much force that it cracked down the center.

Petra looked like she was about to pass out where she stood.

"And I don't give a gryphon-soaring fuck how *respectfully* he commanded you all to treat me." Elyria waved at the appointments of her room. "A prisoner is a prisoner, no matter how nicely decorated her cell."

Wringing her hands and then smoothing the front of her frock, Petra didn't seem to know how to respond. Elyria took that as an opportunity.

"Why are you here? Why work for him? Why worship him?"

Petra's mouth popped open, the question clearly taking her by surprise. "I—I am here simply to serve, my lady. My family has been loyal to the Dark Lord Malakar since before the Shattering. They have long awaited his return."

Elyria considered that. "'They,' but not 'we'?"

The girl balked. "We, of course. *We* have long awaited his return. It is a privilege and an honor to be here. Truth be told, I did not know if I would have the opportunity. My parents did not feel I was"—the sides of her mouth turned down—"up to the task. And I'll be the first to admit that the learning curve has been rather steep." She released a breathy laugh, babbling now. "But my lord has been nothing if not gracious. Kind. Nothing at all like my family would've had me believe."

"Oh?"

"They think me naive." She sighed. "They did not—do not believe my disposition to be well matched to serve my lord's glorious purpose."

The cogs in Elyria's brain, still admittedly somewhat rusted from lack of use these past weeks, began to grind against one another. She gestured to the chair opposite her at the table. "You may as well sit if you're going to stay." Then, at the girl's hesitation, she added, "I would appreciate the company."

Petra instantly brightened. "As you wish," she said, sliding into her seat.

"As you were saying," Elyria said, carefully setting aside the broken pot lid and giving the stew inside a slow stir. "His glorious purpose," she repeated confidently, nodding as though she were already more than well aware of what said purpose was.

“Indeed,” chirped Petra. “My family does not believe I have the stomach to tolerate pain and discomfort. Even just witnessing it.” Her eyes flicked to Elyria’s forearms. “But I am not so ignorant as to be unable to recognize the necessity of small pains for the greater good.”

Elyria swallowed the words that wanted to dive off her tongue at that remark. *Small pains, were they?*

“And I just hope that by being here, I am also helping to lessen those pains somewhat,” she continued, lifting her eyes to Elyria’s face expectantly, like she was looking for confirmation. Like she wanted to be told she was doing a good job.

Elyria nearly choked from the effort of not rolling her eyes. Was this girl really looking for *approval* from the very captive she was here to contain? *You catch more sundryflies with honey than with vinegar,* she thought bitterly, swallowing down a spoonful of stew. “That you are,” she said with forced lightness.

Petra looked positively giddy.

“It isn’t as though I am unwilling to sacrifice for the greater good,” Elyria said. “I want to help too. I’ve told”—she braced herself against the bile threatening to spill up her throat—“*mi sanguinexos* as much. But I cannot help with what I do not know. And he keeps wasting time on these experiments with me when it would be so much easier if he would just tell me what he needed. If he allowed me to work *for* him, rather than against him.”

Petra’s eyes were as large as saucers. “Oh, you do understand,” she breathed. “I just knew you would. I knew my lord would not be doing all of this for nothing. I was thinking the same thing earlier as I passed by the lower forge.”

Elyria tried to squash the excitement brewing in her gut at the information spewing from Petra’s lips, shoveling another spoonful of food into her mouth while she nodded like she knew exactly what the girl was talking about.

“I mean, we have a *fae* here, for goodness’ sake. And not just any fae, but the Revenant. Surely with your power, your strength, we could be making progress twice as fast. Everyone’s been tiring so quickly, from all the digging. Arya fainted yesterday during her shift.” Petra frowned. “Perhaps you might try raising the idea with him again, my lady?”

Elyria pasted a warm smile on her face. “No need to bother with ‘my lady.’ We’re well past that, I’d say.”

The girl’s cheeks pinkened. “Ah, of—of course. What shall I call you, then?”

Elyria swallowed. “My friends call me Elle.”



THE NEXT FEW days bled into one another, time remaining measurable only by the regularity with which Petra kept returning to visit. The girl seemed to have taken their conversation to heart. She was quick to stop trembling when she knocked, to stop hovering in the doorway like a wraith. And she seemed, well, happy to see Elyria.

Elyria herself couldn’t really complain, either. Trust was still out of the question, of course, but she would take Petra’s sunny disposition over the handful of sour-faced cultists who had come before. And Elyria certainly was not going to object to the sudden improvements to her meals.

At breakfast, there was a freshly baked cindercake sitting next to the typical bowl of gruel she’d come to expect each day. At lunch, a jar of tart pickled pears. At dinner, a small vial of what smelled like mulled wine—though, despite Elyria’s desperate desire for even the smallest bit of alcohol, she couldn’t quite justify consuming the drink. It was far too easy to smuggle all sorts of potions under the guise of cinnamon-spiced wine, and she might have been worn down and exhausted and, fine, *occasionally* suicidal, but Elyria Lightbreaker wasn’t stupid. So, with great difficulty, she’d left it on the tray and sullenly sipped her water instead.

Petra, of course, was part of the package when it came to these new dining improvements, and Elyria was somewhat surprised to realize she didn’t mind it. She told herself she tolerated the girl’s presence because she was bored and Petra was useful. That part was true. It turned out that once her initial apprehension had been broached, Petra was quite the chatterbox—full of all kinds of handy tidbits. Elyria had learned more about the layout of her prison and those who worked within its walls in the past two days than she had in the many weeks that preceded them.

She’d learned a lot of other things too. Not enough to have the complete picture of Malakar’s plans, but enough to realize that mana was at the center

of it—harvesting it, manipulating it? It wasn't clear.

What was clear was that the dark sorcerer had recently hit some sort of logistical hiccup, which was the reason for his absence—and Elyria's current reprieve. And she had Petra to thank for learning all of that.

So, yes, the girl was useful. But also . . .

Elyria would be lying if she said there wasn't a quality about Petra that nudged at something deeper too. Her ridiculous earnestness; the way she twisted her hair between her fingers when she was nervous; the fact that she was always apologizing—for herself, for Elyria's circumstances, for every stars-damned crime the blood king had ever committed.

Elyria despised the fact that someone who seemed so inherently *good* was here at all. Hated how easily she could imagine Malakar snuffing out her light, wondered how long it would be before he'd force her to do more than simply bear witness to those "small pains," as she put it.

Wondered if it was already happening.

Because when Petra left on the evening of the fourth night after Elyria's last experimentation session with Malakar, she did so reluctantly. She paused in the doorway, Elyria's dinner tray balanced on one hand, and looked back. "Good night, Elle," she said softly.

Elyria waved her off, though her own voice held more fondness than she'd actually intended. "Good night, Petra."

"Thank you for . . ." Petra paused, shifting her weight, like she was dithering over how to continue. But ultimately, all she ended up saying was a repeated "Good night." And she closed the door behind her.

It took Elyria several long seconds to catalog the silence that followed the closing of that door.

Another moment to recognize the conspicuous absence of a key turning in a lock.

And another minute still, filled with heavy, uneven breaths, before Elyria dared to cross her bedroom and test the handle.

It turned.

And the door opened.

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6

THE SACRED MOUNTAIN

TENEBRIS NOX



THE GREAT MOUNTAIN WAS JUST AS TENEBRIS NOX REMEMBERED IT—majestic, towering, imperious. They don't know why they had expected otherwise. It wasn't as though it had been *that* long since they were here last. Even across centuries, mountains do not change. There was the same snow-capped tip, barely visible through the misty cloud layer. There was the same wide, curving path that wound up from its base. And there would be the same guardian waiting to greet them once they got to their destination.

Nox thought it best not to mention that part to the knightling and the dwarf just yet. It didn't seem . . . helpful.

They also didn't think it worth mentioning that something felt just the slightest bit off about returning to this place now. It was something that had the base of Nox's horns tingling. They didn't have much time to contemplate why that was, however, when any thoughts they might have formed were rudely interrupted by a long, shuddering groan that rumbled the ground beneath the trio's feet.

"For the love of Mother Gaia, please tell me that's just the weather," Thraigg said from atop his horse, who whinnied as if the beautiful creature were laughing at a hilarious joke. "Oh, calm yerself, ye great donkey."

"It is not weather," said Nox, and the sable-coated gelding they were perched upon pawed at the ground as if in confirmation. "Easy, Vespyr."

“You’re sure this path is safe to traverse?” asked Cedric, pulling his own steed forward. Polonius nickered nervously.

Nox simply nudged Vespyr forward in answer, moving onto the path ahead. They would all see soon enough.

The air as they climbed was brisk—sharp and thin, each breath tinged with the slightest tang of old magic. Riding next to Nox, Cedric pulled his cloak tighter around his face, his breath clouding with every exhale. Nox considered it lucky that winter had nearly arrived. Fewer folks on the trail. Fewer eyes. Not that many people appeared to make the trek up the Sacred Mountain at all these days, judging by the dwindling number of offerings lining the path—tributes left from pilgrimages past. And not that any of said people would make it to where the three of them were heading, even if there were.

“We couldn’t have waited to climb this bloomin’ mountain till the spring, eh?” Thraigg grumbled from Nox’s other side.

“I thought dwarves ran hot-blooded,” Nox replied. “Should the knightling provide a spot of sunfyre to keep you warm?”

Thraigg offered the nocterrian a rude gesture. “Bah. How is it yer not freezing yer horns off there, Noxie?”

“I do not feel the cold,” they said simply.

Cedric blinked at them. “Not at all?”

“Do shadows freeze? Do they overheat?” Nox gestured at Sid, curled in Cedric’s lap, napping contentedly despite the wind ripping down the trail. “I do not feel the cold,” they repeated with a shrug. Another thing that did not seem like it would be all that helpful to explain was how they felt very little at all.

At least, not until recently.

And that alone was something Nox found themself dwelling on more and more, with their final conversation with Kit before she had split from the group still lingering in their ears.



“YOU WILL TAKE care on your way to Aerithia.” It was not a question.

“Don’t you get your horns in a twist over me, Tenebris Nox,” Kit replied, a sparkle in her blue and green eyes. “I’m a big girl, you know. Put

on my breeches all by myself this morning and everything."

"Color me impressed. And yet . . ."

Kit tilted her head to one side, the early-morning light catching on her moonbeam hair as she tightened the strap of the travel pack looped across her shoulder. "And yet . . . ?"

"I am unenthusiastic about this part of the plan."

"The plan that has been in place since before we even left Kingshelm? Really?" She pursed her lips. "Granted, enthusiasm is not exactly something I'd expect from you in any circumstance, but I'll bite. What's changed? What's giving you pause now?"

"Nothing has changed. It is just that I've realized this is the first occurrence in quite some time that you and I will be venturing down separate paths." They hesitated. "I have become accustomed to your presence."

She laughed lightly. "Such praise. I'll miss you too, Tenebris."

"It is not just that."

A furrow of her brow. Another tilt of her head. But she didn't speak.

"I find myself feeling . . . protective . . . over you. I like knowing where you are. I like being there too."

The words slipped out, falling off Nox's tongue as if they were hardly in control of it.

And Tenebris Nox was not used to feeling out of control.

Kit didn't, at first. React, that was. At least, not in any discernible way. No, she looked at Nox with an unreadable expression that had another rarely experienced feeling stirring in the nocterrian's gut: frustration.

They realized in that moment how much they relished the ease with which the fae typically displayed her feelings. Realized the comfort they had come to take in being able to read her so well. And thus, not being able to immediately tell what she was thinking was indeed frustrating.

Nox thought perhaps she might respond with a joke. Might play off the words with a self-deprecating remark. But after a miniature eternity, she simply smiled and said, "Well, I suppose I'll just have to do my best to hurry back, then." And with a flap of her silver-and-gold wings, Kit took to the sky, her rain-soaked rosemary scent trailing in her wake.



THRAIGG'S gruff voice dragged Nox back to the present. "The cold's addled my brain. Remind me what we're to do once we get to the top of this bleedin' mountain?"

"We aren't headed to the top, actually. But once we get to where we are going, we shall request an audience," Nox replied evenly, not quite sure if they appreciated the interruption to their thoughts. On the one hand, they should be preparing for the task ahead. Steeling themself to speak to Lord Noctis again, should he deign to answer their call. Readying their case—or Cedric's case, at least—in asking the celestial for help.

On the other hand, the distraction that came with this strange new fixation, these otherwise foreign *feelings*, was rather nice. It was easier to replay that exchange with Kit, to dissect the inflection of words spoken, to pry meaning from the arch of her brow and the widening of her eyes. It helped keep the fear at bay.

Fear that, sadly, was indeed still something Nox was more than capable of feeling.

Cedric's gaze ran ahead, up the narrowing path before them. "You truly believe Noctis will help us? Even if doing so means ending his sister's banishment?"

Thraigg released a confused-sounding grunt. "How's that now?"

"As soon as we get Elle back, we can refocus on reuniting the crown, and once we have, Aurelia will be freed from the Sanctum."

Nox lifted a hand to one of their horns, running a long finger down the side. "We shall have to see, won't we?"

Cedric frowned. "That's not particularly reassuring. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea. We are hinging Elle's freedom on begging a celestial for help, when they are sworn not to interfere with mortal affairs. It is the very reason for Aurelia's banishment in the first place."

Thraigg huffed a low laugh. "All we've been through already, and ye really still think there's not celestial interference happening left and right, boyo?"

Nox continued stroking their horn contemplatively. "Things change over the course of decades, centuries, millennia. I cannot predict how Lord Noctis will react—what he will or will not say, what he may do or fail to do. All we can do is call and hope he will answer. All we can do is speak and hope he will listen."

“That’s somehow even less reassuring,” muttered Cedric, his fists flexing around the reins in his hands. Curled up in his lap, Sid bristled—the personification of the knight’s irritation.

“Perhaps celestials are more fallible than we have all been taught to believe,” Nox said. “Perhaps after hundreds of years, boredom and restlessness might move one to interfere. To send someone to keep an eye on things.”

“Perhaps . . . ?” Cedric echoed, an unspoken question lingering in the silence that followed.

“Perhaps.”

“An eye on things?” Thraigg’s bushy eyebrows had shot halfway up his forehead. “Or an eye on someone in particular?”

The path continued to narrow, to the point that the horses could no longer traverse side by side. Nox snapped Vespyr’s reins, urging her forward. “Are the two things mutually exclusive?” they called over their shoulder.

“Quartered hell, Nox. Will you speak plainly, *please*?” Cedric sucked in, then blew out, a sharp breath. “I am generally accepting of the fact that you seem to want to maintain your mystique and thus prefer speaking in riddles and non-answers. Except I’m about sixteen seconds away from losing every ounce of my remaining sanity, something that has been in short supply since—”

He cut himself off so quickly, Nox wondered if saying the words aloud caused the knight physical pain. They heard what was left unspoken anyway. *Since I lost her. Since she was taken. Since half my heart was severed from my body, and I was left to slowly bleed out a little more with each passing day.*

The quiet meow Sid released sounded a lot like confirmation.

Cedric continued a moment later, his voice rising. “And since I also accept that you somehow seem to know the inner workings of the entire stars-damned world, can we just skip ahead to the part where you educate us properly?”

“Fair point, knightling. Well made.” He’d been through enough, hadn’t he? Nox would take pity on the man.

Besides, they were almost there.

Nox placed a hand on the back of Vespyr’s saddle, shifting their weight so they could turn to address Cedric and Thraigg behind them.

“A very long time ago, I struck an agreement with the Warden of Shadows.” They tried to speak lightly, to keep the words casual, but there was no masking the darkness that seeped into their voice. “A thousand years of servitude.”

Thraigg’s mouth gaped. “A *thousand* years, Noxie?”

Cedric blinked, shock cutting across the planes of his face. “In exchange for what? What could possibly be worth making that trade?”

Nox shook their head. “That is irrelevant. The point is, I have served Lord Noctis in many ways, over many, many, *many* years. Emissary. Envoy. Procurator. Proxy. Agent.” They paused. “Assassin.”

Cedric and Thraigg exchanged a look but said nothing.

“When the Dark Warden calls, I answer. Whatever the Lord Noctis needs, I provide. Most recently, that meant embarking on a rather long journey to a seaside city in Nyrundelle . . . in order to keep a watchful eye on the Revenant.”

The knight’s brow furrowed. “That’s why you were in Coralith. How you ended up sharing a cell with Elyria before the Crucible.”

“We hardly shared a cell,” said Nox impatiently. “But yes. Lord Noctis had long kept an interested eye on her. Since the Shattering pulled her from his grasp, kept her from passing into the Hereafter. That made her . . . fascinating . . . to him.”

Cedric’s nostrils flared.

“What piqued his interest further were the flares of dark power he sensed from her every so often. He didn’t think much of it at first. And then, for whatever reason, one day he did. Right around when the signs of the Arcane Crucible’s approach started to appear. And so . . .” Nox made a loose gesture at themself.

“He sent you into the Sanctum,” said Cedric.

“Not explicitly. But I was to watch Elyria. So, when she went to Luminaria, I followed. If she was going through the Gate, so would I.”

“But she was *not* planning to go through the Gate.” Cedric’s brow furrowed. “Elyria was not at Castle Lumin as a champion. She was there for Kit. You pledged yourself to the Crucible before Elyria did.”

“Call it intuition.”

“Nox.” The knight’s voice was stern.

“Fine, fine. It was Aurelia. When she emerged from the Gate as the Arbiter, I recognized her for what she was immediately. And having the

opportunity to speak to another celestial that was *not* Lord Noctis . . .” Nox exhaled. “It was too great a temptation. So I entered anyway. What good fortune that Elyria ended up doing the same shortly thereafter.”

Cedric snorted.

“The rest, well, you already know,” they finished.

Thraigg gave a low whistle. “Well, I’ll be damned, Noxie. Knew ye were keepin’ secrets, but didn’t think ye were takin’ orders from the star gods themselves.”

Cedric’s expression was uncharacteristically dark. “Allow me to make sure I’ve got this all straight. You’re an emissary of the Dark Warden. You’ve been spying on Elyria for him for fuck knows how long. And we’re about to walk into your master’s stars-damned foyer and beg him to help us?”

“That feels rather reductive, all things considered, but I suppose I cannot deem any of it a lie.”

“Quartered hell, Nox.” Cedric raked a hand down his face. “I will have to set aside my personal feelings over the fact that yet *another* one of my friends has been keeping colossal stars-damned fucking secrets.” He tilted his head to look at Thraigg, one eyebrow arched with suspicion. “There isn’t anything else you’re planning on confessing, is there?”

“Don’t give me that look, boyo. My confessions came out in Elderglade. Aside from being in the Sanctum at Lark’s behest—”

“To watch me. Protect me.”

The dwarf nodded. “To keep an eye on ye, yeah. But ain’t a thing I’m hidin’ now.”

Cedric exhaled, his gaze returning to Nox. “Does—stars above, I can’t believe I’m even saying this. Does Noctis know we are coming, then? Why have we traversed all the way across Arcanis to this mountain if you are already in contact with the dark star god?”

Nox choked back a growl. “He does not. I am not . . . in contact with him, not exactly. When he calls, I must answer, but there is no calling back, and thus . . .”

“And thus, we must go to him,” Cedric finished, and Nox nodded.

“Yer powers, then, Noxie? The new ways ye’ve been wielding yer shadows since the Crucible. Is that him?” asked Thraigg.

Cedric gave an eager nod. “Yes, the shadow missives, crafting your new illusions. That is part of his gift?”

“Something like that.” *Though a gift would have been freely given,* they added silently.

Both the knight and the dwarf looked as though they had a thousand more questions waiting just inside the slightly ajar set of their mouths, but they didn’t get the chance to ask them. The trio had just reached a widening of the path—a smooth plateau, before the trail took a sharp turn around the side of the mountain—when the ground began to quake.

Nox swung their body to face forward just as Vespyr stopped short, her breath misting from her nostrils when she snorted, nickered.

“Whoa, whoa,” said Thraigg in an attempt to calm his own horse. “Take ’er easy there, Hops.”

Hops the horse did not, in fact, take it easy. She retreated several steps with a nervous whinny, tucking herself behind Polonius. Fog drifted down the path ahead, spiraling out from around the corner of the trail like low-rolling clouds, and as though their hooves had iced over, all three horses suddenly refused to move.

Nox loosed a resigned sigh as they slid from Vespyr’s back. “Come along, then.”

“What’s going on?” Cedric asked, tucking a drowsy Sid into one of his saddlebags before dismounting from Polonius. He went to help Thraigg down from Hops, then added, “What are we doing?”

“Progressing.”

Unbuckling his hammer from where it was strapped to his horse’s flank, Thraigg added, “We can’t just leave them here.”

“We won’t,” replied Nox. “But neither is there any point in ushering them farther. Not until we deal with that.”

Cedric and Thraigg exchanged a look before following the line of Nox’s finger, now pointing toward the fog. Fog that appeared to have gotten denser, though it had slowed its approach, lingering in a tangible cloud right over the path where it curved out of sight.

“And what exactly is ‘that,’ yer emissary-ness?” asked the dwarf, his blue eyes narrowed.

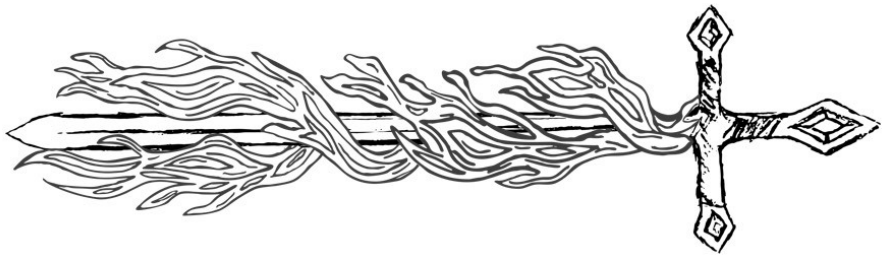
“Follow and you will see.” And though Nox did not bother to wait for the two of them to follow, they did so anyway in short order—the three of them side by side as they strode into the mist.

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7

LYRICA

CEDRIC



THE FOG ENVELOPED THE TRIO INSTANTLY, AS THOUGH IT HAD BEEN WAITING for their entrance. It was like the air around him was suddenly frosted—damp and misty, clouding his vision, clinging to his skin in a way that actually made him feel cold.

Not cold as in the temperature. No, ever since his power had unlocked during the Crucible, he was sure he ran several degrees hotter than he had before. He recognized the bite of the icy wind that had followed them up the mountain thus far, but while he could feel the sting of it against his skin, it didn't chill him. Not like this. No, this was the kind of chill that ran into his bones. Something very close to, if not outright like, fear.

They rounded the corner of the path, and Cedric shuddered. The ground shook once more, this time accompanied by a deep, resonant growl—like the earth itself was groaning. Some of the fog cleared. And no more than a dozen feet ahead, two eyes made from molten gold opened.

"Gaia's fucking tits." Thraigg stumbled over his feet, staggering into Cedric.

Cedric's hand flew instantly to Ashrender's hilt. "By the stars, I—" On his other side, indigo fingers closed around his fist, stopping him from withdrawing the weapon.

Nox's voice was low when they said, "I wouldn't."

"You're sure about that?" Cedric whispered, blood draining from his face as he watched those gold-burst eyes lift into the air, a mass of that

strangely solid fog rising with it.

Not fog, you idiot. He would flagellate himself for not realizing sooner. Realizing that it hadn't been mist they were surrounded by but steam. Steaming *breath*. And what had previously looked like more dense fog—rounded clouds of white—was moving now, seemingly shimmering in the light still beaming down from overhead.

Cedric could do nothing but stare and stare and stare at the sight taking shape before him—the uncurling of a long, smooth tail; the rise of a broad, terrifying chest; the flaring of thick, membranous wings.

"Not another fucking dragon," muttered Thraigg, his hands fisted at his sides as though he was restraining himself from reaching for the hammer strapped across his back or the hatchet belted at his hip.

It was so, so similar to the mighty creature Cedric and Thraigg had fought off—barely—during the first trial. Perhaps slightly smaller but certainly just as terrifying. The starkest difference was that though Cedric's memory recalled the oil-slick black scales of the Crucible's dragon, this one was pure white, bright as fresh snow.

The club at the end of the great beast's tail struck the ground as it rose to full height, sending another shudder through the earth. The dragon gave a feline tilt of its head, steam curling from each one of its slitted nostrils as it regarded Nox, Cedric, and Thraigg.

"Nice knowing ye lads," said Thraigg under his breath.

"Such a defeatist," replied Nox. And maybe Cedric might have gaped at the hint of amusement he detected in the nocterrian's tone, if his eyes weren't still pinned to the titan before him.

As it was, he could only stare. Stare at the dragon's heaving chest, the way it flattened those vein-streaked wings to its back, the sunlight glinting off its scales in a way that made them look iridescent. The gleaming white reflected in waves of purple and green, a miniature aurora reflected on each one. They looked almost exactly like . . .

The dragon lowered its head, and Cedric braced himself for a roar, to feel heat sizzling in the air, to be consumed by destruction. But the great beast simply exhaled, a gust of wind so powerful it made Cedric stagger back a step, and then proceeded to inhale—sniffing, assessing.

It passed over Nox without much incident, the nocterrian dipping their chin with a respectful acknowledgment that had Cedric's eyes nearly bulging from his head.

“Nox . . . ,” he whispered—a plea, a warning.

“It will be all right, knightling. Just stay calm.” Nox’s voice was still low, hushed, but there was no fear, no alarm to be found within their words. “She is inspecting.”

As if on cue, the dragon turned its attention to Cedric, who held his breath while reptilian pupils narrowed on him. It felt like time slowed, the space between Cedric’s heartbeats stretching, as the dragon lowered its massive head until one golden eye was level with him. Cedric felt something pulse in his chest—the wisp of Elyria’s shadow that was nestled behind his ribs, a spark of familiarity.

Another pregnant moment dragged out, until, with a huff that blew his hair back from his face, the dragon moved on.

Thraigg was nearly vibrating with nervous energy, his fingers twitching, grazing the top of his hatchet, when the dragon’s snout came within a few inches of his beard.

A low growl rumbled up her throat, and Cedric felt the bump of an arm on his back as Nox reached behind him to clamp their hand on Thraigg’s shoulder.

“Do not do anything rash,” warned Nox, their voice a gentle murmur.

“Ye’re bloody fucking mad,” replied the dwarf, his rasped whisper the opposite of gentle, but he relaxed his hand.

“She is almost done,” Nox continued, not releasing their grip. The dragon’s gaze darted from Thraigg’s face to the nocterrian’s indigo hand, then up to their horned head. Several words in an unfamiliar tongue fell from Nox’s mouth. The dragon’s lips peeled back, maw opening, revealing row after row of fearsome teeth lining the inside of its—her?—mouth.

It took an inordinate amount of willpower for Cedric to fight the instinct to run, to resist leaning into the thought that this was it, this was the end. That Nox had led the three of them to their doom and Cedric would never again experience the peace of staring endlessly into emerald-green eyes. Would never again know the ecstasy of teeth on skin or hear her melodic voice in his head.

But something deep inside him told him that despite all appearances to the contrary, running would be a bad, bad move. And so there he stood, muscles locked, eyes unblinking, at the total mercy of a dragon that looked half a second away from swallowing all three of them whole.

Only, she didn’t.

Instead, she yawned.

Jaw hinged open, there was a soft blow of sulfurous breath that had Cedric's stomach churning, and then . . . nothing else. The great creature stepped back, then to the side, pacing in a wide circle before curling her body and laying her head down. The path she had been previously barring appeared—unobstructed, awaiting. Not that Cedric had even been able to see it through the thick mist, which was now dissipating. The trail wound past the dragon's resting form, then curved into the side of the mountain, where an opening lay. An entrance, beckoning him.

Nox looked entirely too smug as they turned around, strolling back down the path from whence they came.

"Where are ye going now, ye crazy blue bastard?" Thraigg said, one eye still pinned on the now-resting dragon.

Cedric nodded vehemently, his heart struggling to beat evenly.

Nox *tsk*ed before looking back over one shoulder. "To retrieve the horses, of course. Lord Noctis awaits."



"WHAT WAS THAT?" Cedric's question bounced off stone as he, Nox, and Thraigg walked down the wide, arching tunnel through the mountain. Sid wove between their legs, bounding ahead and then darting back to the group with playful grace, each brush of her shadowy body against Cedric's boots a reassurance.

This place was equal parts foreign and familiar—at odds. Shimmering stone surrounded them, luminescent, just as the labyrinth walls inside the Celestial Sanctum had been. There was a sort of recognition fluttering within him, something that had him feeling out of sorts from the instant he'd crossed through the mountain entrance.

There was powerful magic here; that much was clear.

This entire place was magic.

"Lyrica is the guardian of the Sacred Mountain," Nox replied, sounding bored. "She was simply doing her job."

"Talking about a fucking dragon like she's a bloomin' barmaid," Thraigg muttered from Cedric's other side, arms crossed over his broad chest. That the dwarf was still displeased with the encounter outside was

very clear. “And what kind of job are we talking about, ye lanky arsehole? Checking to make sure we didn’t smell too offensive for celestial senses, is it? Ye could’ve at least given us a hint. The stars-damned horses gave us more of a warning than ye did.”

Nox chuckled.

Cedric tilted his head. “I’m still surprised the horses allowed us to leash them outside with Lyrica so close by. They seemed petrified by her presence earlier.”

“That was before her acceptance was given,” said Nox, as though they were explaining something very simple to someone very young.

“So her job is to, what, pass muster on those who come to call on the Warden of Shadows?”

“I thought I already explained. There is no such thing as calling on him, not really. But yes. She guards the entrance, which only those deemed . . . suitable . . . may pass through.”

“Suitable?”

“Shadow-touched. The mountain is where the curtain between Arcanis and the Hereafter is thinnest. The celestials would be fools if they let just anybody roam about.” There was a flash of white fang as Nox’s lip lifted in a half-cocked grin. “I convinced her to make an exception.”

They gestured at Thraigg, who rolled his eyes and muttered something about “being more than willing to show the celestials what’s ‘suitable.’ ”

“An exception?” Cedric asked, his brow furrowing. “For him, but not for . . . ? Oh.” He placed his palm over his collarbone, over the bondmark that lay underneath the layers of armor and doublet and tunic—his most sacred scar. The kernel of shadow behind his ribs pulsed in time with the beat of his heart.

“Yes,” said Nox. *“Oh.”*

Cedric bit the inside of his cheek. “Has a human ever walked this cavern before?”

“No. And still, they have not. Lest you forget, knightling, you—”

“—are not human.” He swallowed. “I remember. I suppose that few Arcanians ever have either, if nightwielding is a prerequisite for entrance.”

“Precisely. Admittedly, this is a rather unprecedented thing we are attempting here. I cannot predict whether Lord Noctis will answer, nor what he will do if he does. What sort of cost his assistance might bear.”

“It’s worth the risk.” It was the truth. There was no price he would not pay if it meant getting her back.

The trio walked in silence for several more minutes, with nothing but the thudding of boots on stone as accompaniment, along with the eventual meow that came when Sid was apparently tired of walking and demanded to be hoisted onto Cedric’s shoulders. She curled around the back of his neck, her shadows a soothing mist where they touched his skin. She felt just the barest bit like Elyria, and Cedric tried to take comfort in that.

It was all the comfort he would get. Because as they ventured deeper into the mountain, those contradictory feelings of strange newness and recognition only grew, like Cedric’s very insides were warring. The cavern, too, seemed in contrast with itself. Shadows thickened along the edges of the luminescent stone walls, but light seemed to grow too. Silvery veins spread from the ground, spidering through the walls. Flecks of white crystal appeared embedded in the rock, all of it glowing dimly, emitting a soft light.

Cedric was very much on edge when the trio got to a bend in the path and rounded a corner to see . . .

The gasp he drew was so sharp that Sid startled on Cedric’s shoulders, sliding from her resting position and disappearing into the ether. He barely even noticed. Not when his eyes were roaming across the impossible sight before him.

In each corner of the massive cavern, spiraling pillars of white crystal wound up from the stone floor, stretching so high that Cedric wondered if the entire mountain had been carved hollow. He had to squint to make out the ceiling, but just like the walls and floor, just like the tunnel they’d emerged from, the luminous stone was covered with more of those white flecks. Each one flickered and winked like it was made of light. It gave the illusion that the entire cavern was constructed from stardust.

The glowing silver veins from the tunnel were more plentiful here too, interweaving with the floor, the walls, the crystal spires, like bursts of lightning that had been frozen in ice. They all flowed toward the very center of the room, where a pool of black liquid sat, so smooth, so undisturbed, so shiny, it looked like it was glass.

It was all so, so beautiful.

Thraigg’s former surliness was a distant memory when he released an awestruck breath and said, “Well, I’ll be damned.”

“Hopefully not,” said Nox, their voice soft.

Cedric blinked back the burning sensation prickling the inner corners of his eyes. “What do we—” He cleared his throat. “What do we do now?”

Nox didn’t answer the question. Instead, they rolled their shoulders back, then took several tentative steps toward the black glass pool in the center of the room. Thraigg and Cedric shuffled close behind them, watching with wide eyes as Nox bent on one knee and bowed their horned head before the pool.

It was like the very air around them changed as ancient words rumbled from the nocterrian’s lips, their palms splayed on the ground. There was a change in the pressure around them, the weight of reality shifting. Shadows crept from the corners of the room, the base of the spires, deepening, darkening. Simultaneously, the stars in the cavern’s ceiling flared brighter, glowing.

Light above.

Dark below.

And then, without a ripple or a splash or any other such indication that the black pool in the center of the room was indeed made of liquid at all, something rose from it.

Shadows coalesced in the shape of legs, a torso, arms, a head—all black as the void, even as they took the shape of a man. And then the darkness peeled back, forming a long, flowing cape, revealing skin like the night sky—star-speckled and majestic.

“My lord Noctis,” said Nox, keeping their head bowed, their eyes down. Idly, Cedric thought perhaps he should be averting his gaze as well, prostrating himself in reverence to the star god before him. This was the Warden of Shadows, the Master of the Hereafter. But Cedric’s eyes were pinned to the galaxies comprising the celestial’s skin, the midnight void of his hair, the stars bursting in his eyes.

Eyes that met Cedric’s own with such divine power, he didn’t know whether he would be able to break away if he wanted to. And so there his gaze stayed, even when Noctis opened his mouth and out came layers of voice, a multitudinous chorus that sent a shiver down Cedric’s spine.

“My child. You have brought the sun into my sanctum.”

Cedric’s vision clouded for the briefest of moments, the image of a different sky-skinned celestial standing before him overtaking the reality of what he was seeing. But Noctis was not Aurelia. And this was not the same

Celestial Sanctum where Cedric had sacrificed his life—and been brought back—during the Crucible.

Nox's voice was steady, if quiet, when they said, "Yes, my lord. I have with me the son of prophecy. And he needs your help."

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8

THE PRIORITIES OF KINGS

KIT



THE SKIES OVER AERITHIA WERE ALMOST AS RESTLESS AS KIT. GRAY clouds rolled over the city, the air charged, weighty. They cast a muted haze over the domed rooftops, something ominous wrapping itself around Kit standing on the balcony outside the royal council chamber. Like it was the very winds of change currently blowing through her hair as she waited.

Kit narrowed her blue and green eyes on the silhouettes of her uncle and mother, the latter of whom was gesticulating with fervor on the other side of the glass. The long, bell-shaped sleeves of her orchid-colored gown slipped up her tawny forearms the longer she spoke.

The king's attention was on his sister, his shoulders sagging, like they were weighed down. Every so often, his gaze would shift surreptitiously, flicking toward Kit. It was subtle, the movement of his head not even enough to disturb the tight white braids cascading from beneath his crown. But it didn't matter. It also didn't matter that there was a silencing ward cast on the room. Kit didn't need to be able to hear to know *exactly* what they were talking about.

She sighed, twisting to lean over the balcony railing. She fiddled with the laces of the leather bracers wrapped around each wrist. This was taking too long. They were wasting *time.* She needed to get back. *Wanted* to get back.

"I like knowing where you are. I like being there too."

“Katerina.” Duchess Laeliana Ravenswing’s gentle, firm voice filtered through Kit’s ears, pulling her from her thoughts. In a blur of silver hair and purple fabric, Laeliana swept across the balcony, drawing her daughter into her arms for a brief, though surprisingly strong-armed, hug. Then she peeled back and held Kit at arm’s length, one hand lying on each of her shoulders. “You look tired, darling.”

Kit’s eyes vibrated with the desire to roll into the back of her head as she stepped back, letting Laeliana’s hands fall to her sides. “Lovely to see you too, Mother.”

“It’s not an insult. Simply a fact. How long did you fly to get back here alone?” The last word was rife with emotion, and Kit’s icy defensiveness melted a little.

“I traveled by horseback as far as Daeglen and rested there last night. I’m fine. I wanted to get back as soon as possible. There’s so much we have to—”

“I know. Your uncle knows too. He is ready to speak with you.”

Kit immediately spun on her heel, moving to head inside, but a gentle hand snagged her by the wrist and drew her back.

“What happened in Kingshelm,” Laeliana said quietly, her golden eyes downcast, “has changed much for the king, I fear. Please tread carefully with him. Dentarius was . . .” She swallowed. “We are all still grieving, and I know what you want to ask of your uncle. Please don’t be too disheartened if he does not give the answer you are hoping for.”

Kit bristled. “I—”

“I know.” Her mother’s voice was soft, soothing. “I miss her too. Fear for her too. I just want you to be prepared.”

“You don’t know what I came here to ask, not exactly. Neither of you could possibly know. I could only fit so much in a letter, and even just in the time since I last wrote you, *a lot* has happened. So, Uncle Lach may think he knows all the facts, but I can absolutely, definitively, without a doubt say he does not.”

Laeliana huffed a sigh, the sound of parental exasperation that Kit was entirely too familiar with. “Katerina, he is the *king*.”

“Which means nothing. King Callum didn’t have a clue that his closest advisor was Varyth fucking Malchior the entire time. Didn’t know he had planted the seeds of treason and insurrection right under his nose. Didn’t know he was siphoning away mana and manipulating his forces. Just like

my uncle most likely does not know that some of those seeds have been planted on this side of the Chasm too."

"What does that mean?" Laeliana's eyes were wide, her golden irises glossy.

"It means I need to speak with our king."



"THEY KILLED the accords the instant they killed Dentarius!" shouted Lachlandris, rising to his feet. The air around him refracted, heat shimmering off him in waves as the king of Nyrundelle attempted to rein in his flamecalling magic.

Taking a deep breath, he settled back on his throne atop the dais at the back of the throne room, sunlight reflecting off the silver points of his crown. He already looked older than Kit remembered, like he had aged in the months since she saw him last. His deep brown skin, nearly luminous in its smooth beauty, was lined around his mouth, creased across his forehead. His grass-green eyes, the exact same shade as one of Kit's, simultaneously looked more exhausted and sharper than she'd ever seen them. *Was he sleeping?* she wondered. *Eating?* She didn't think the ultimate mother hen, Laeliana Ravenswing, would allow her big brother to stop taking care of himself—or letting other people take care of him, as was more likely for the king of the fae—but Kit could also recognize there was something unhinged about the version of her uncle that stood before her, still screaming about all the ways the humans had broken faith with the rest of Arcanis.

"Uncle, the attack on King's Keep, all the uncovered subterfuge, was the work of one man and his followers, not the entirety of Havensreach." Kit's voice was even, placating.

"Then they are the ones you should be asking for help," he said bitterly.

"Unc—Your Majesty, surely you know that we have—we are. But Varyth Malchior's attack on King's Keep destabilized the humans. Kingshelm is still recovering, and so much time has already passed. The longer we go without finding Elyria, without recovering the crown, the greater the odds Malakar will find a way to do so instead."

It wasn't a lie. Not really. It just wasn't the entire truth. And Kit couldn't quite put her finger on why, but something told her that explaining the full

story behind the crown, and the locket, and the prophesied heir who already had both halves in his possession, would not be the right way to convince her uncle to help.

The king threw his hands in the air. “Malakar,” he hissed, jaw clenched. “See, this is the problem, Katerina. You come here to ask for *my* resources, for *my* soldiers to help scour the Midlands for *sanguinagi* scum, for *me* to find your friend.”

Kit held her breath.

“Yet in the same breath you inform me that the dark sorcerer has returned? And you want me to dilute our strength? I was there, niece. I was on the battlefield with your father and your mother and your brother two hundred years ago. With the Revenant. And long before I witnessed the Shattering light up the sky, I saw what Malakar’s blood warriors did to our people. What they would try to do again now, if given the chance.”

“Uncle—”

“If Malakar has truly returned, do you not think his eyes will be on Aerithia next? Do you not think he is picking up the pieces of his former plans, rabid in his desire to tame us wild Arcanians and cement his seat of power over us all? You ask me to risk our own people in order to find your friend, and that is not a trade a king can make.”

Kit shook her head. “It is not a matter of trading one for the other, Your Majesty. Finding Malakar’s stronghold, flushing out his cultists, these are acts of protection for all Nyrundelle. I’ve told you what just occurred outside Daeglen. He could have planted followers of his all across the continent. Ones who may not even know what they—”

“Then the hunt should begin in our own lands, looking for humans where there ought to be none.” The king’s eyes were cold, unyielding, and a sudden burst of fear licked down Kit’s spine.

“That’s not what I—humans as a whole are not the issue. Malakar is. The entirety of humanity should not be punished for one man’s evil.”

“Long have they jailed us, maimed us, and killed us for much less.”

Kit shook her head. “You yourself have said many times how we are not them. How we could help them, even, to be better. If they would allow it. And then, finally, they did. When you signed the accords—”

“And so we come full circle. Why should I care about the accords anymore? Why should I care about protecting a people who did nothing to

protect my—” He sucked in a breath through his teeth. “They did not protect Dentarius.”

“But Dentarius did protect them, Uncle. He protected *her*.” Kit’s voice was barely more than a whisper, though she knew the king could hear her perfectly clearly. Her gaze went to her hands, and she tried not to think about how they had looked, covered in Dentarius’s blood after he took the lethal blow that had been meant for Elyria. After already having spent his power saving the human king’s life on the night of the attack. “If we do not find Elyria, his death will have been for nothing. Is that what you want?”

Lachlandris inhaled through his nose, pausing for a moment . . . then collapsed back onto his throne as though the effort of remaining upright was simply too great. With a low grunt, he gestured for Kit to continue—a sign of begrudging acceptance that had hope sparking in her chest. He may have been angry, may have been grieving, but he was not so far gone as to completely refuse logic, and Kit was grateful for that.

“And because my uncle is not a stupid king, despite what you might wish to believe about him,” Kit had said to Elyria that morning, so many months ago now, as the two of them had griped about waiting for their diplomatic delegation to finally be dispatched to Havensreach.

“Not stupid, maybe. But not the smartest either,” Elyria had replied, and Kit didn’t know if she wanted to laugh or cry at the memory. Maybe both.

Kit’s breath hitched, the reminder of Elyria’s melodic voice hitting her like a bolt to the chest. She choked back the sound that threatened to burst from her, steadying herself as she addressed King Lachlandris once more.

“Will you lend your support, Your Majesty? Will you help me fight Malakar’s darkness for *all* Arcanis?”

The king sat up. Brushed his thick twisted braids back from his shoulders. Picked at the embroidered cuff of his sleeve. “I will take it under consideration,” he said dismissively, and Kit’s heart plummeted into her stomach.

Several moments of tense silence followed. Well, for Kit, they were tense. For her uncle, who had apparently given up any interest in the conversation, they were simply silent. And Kit realized that his earlier gesture, which she had interpreted as a sort of acceptance of her plea, had instead been the moment he shut her out.

Kit’s hands trembled. She didn’t trust herself to speak again—or at least, didn’t trust herself not to push past the bounds of whatever small

protections being the king’s niece provided—so she turned on her heel and stormed out of the throne room, the echo of her boots timed perfectly with the thudding beat of her heart.

She didn’t get far though. No, the instant she rounded the corner at the end of the hall, she skidded to a stop. And all her righteous anger at her uncle’s inaction, at his foolish, misplaced rage, dissipated.

Because there, leaning against a tall marble pillar, the portrait of indifference, was . . .

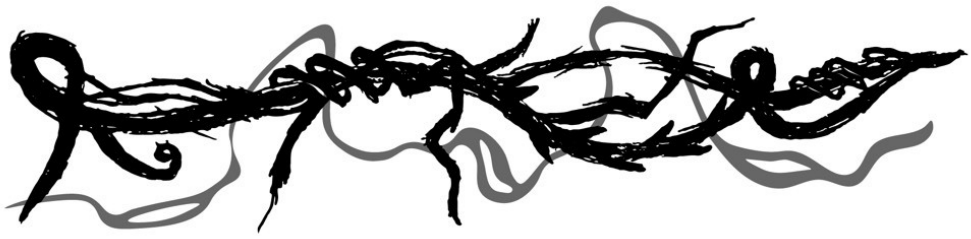
“*Finally*,” said Sephone, stretching both arms over her half-shaven, lightning-tattooed head. “It’s about stars-damned time.”

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9

LIFELINE

ELYRIA



SHE SHOULD HAVE GONE.

Should have immediately run.

Should have taken that unlocked door, whether purposefully left as such or simply the result of Petra's carelessness, as a sign.

But Elyria Lightbreaker, as it turned out, *was* at least a little bit stupid now.

Because when she found herself staring down a long, dark, empty corridor, she did none of those things.

She wasn't entirely sure if it was the sheer surprise that had her hesitating. Perhaps it was the fact that she lacked any sort of plan—and any sort of power—that had her quietly shutting the door almost as quickly as she'd opened it.

It certainly couldn't have been fear.

Fear that it was a trap, specifically designed to see what she would do.

Fear that she would only make it six steps outside her door before some other *sanguinagi* guard caught and punished her.

Fear that it was indeed an honest mistake, and silly, sweet, fragile, *human* Petra would actually be the one punished for making it.

No, no. Elyria didn't care about that.

She couldn't care about that.

Except, stars damn it all, she did.

Elyria pressed her back against the closed door and slid down until she was sitting on the floor, knees drawn to her chest. “Noble coward,” she muttered to herself. “You don’t owe her anything.” But even as she said it, she brushed the backs of her fingers down the length of her forearm, against the smooth skin there that Petra had just recently finished treating. It turned out the girl had some talent as a saint, actually. So much so that Elyria was left wondering why she hadn’t been the one treating her wounds from the very beginning.

You don’t owe her anything, she repeated in her mind. *She’s still one of them. Worships him. Adores him. Is only doing all of this for him.*

The silence that answered had her jaw clenching.

Elyria turned her chin, staring at the crack beneath the door, the thin strip of light flickering underneath. She doubted very much that venturing out into that hallway would lead to her freedom. On her leisurely prisoner-walks between her bedroom and Malakar’s study, she’d had the keen pleasure of observing the many cultists who seemed stationed in this place. They were plentiful, and without wings or weapons, with her strength and speed limited by blood runes and spells, even the infamous Revenant would surely find herself quickly overwhelmed.

On the other hand, she did only seem to see the majority of them when crossing over from the wing she was kept in to the one where Malakar worked. As if they didn’t want to spend more time than was absolutely necessary in her dreadful Arcanian presence. So the odds were, perhaps, relatively good that she could do a *little* bit of snooping without getting caught, right?

Elyria pursed her lips. This was, she admitted, probably not the most sound plan she’d ever made. Of course, she had never been particularly adept at making plans in the first place—let alone sticking to them. But what she did know was that she could *really* do with a change in scenery. And consequences or not, would she really be able to live with herself if she squandered this opportunity?

This might be her only chance to obtain even a modicum of the information she desperately wanted—needed. If she was quiet and she was quick, maybe she could at least learn a little bit more about the layout of this place, could glean something about what Malakar was truly doing here. Could arm herself with a different kind of weapon.

“Everyone’s been tiring so quickly,” Petra had said, *“from all the digging.”* Elyria had yet to get the girl to divulge more than that, to elucidate the “lower forge” she had mentioned in passing.

Elyria needed to know.

She lifted her gaze, eyes flitting to her bed on the other side of the room. In an instant, she was on her feet, darting across the floor, practicing being as light-footed and silent as possible. She withdrew Cedric’s token from its hiding spot, quickly fastening it around her neck and tucking it into her tunic. Already, just the feel of the stone against the bare skin over her clavicle made her feel stronger, surer.

Elyria inhaled, then exhaled. Hiked up the waistband of her leather breeches. Braided her hair into a tight plait that fell against the side of her neck, perfectly concealing her bondmark. “All right,” she said to the empty room. “Let’s go for a stroll.”



THE STONE under her bare feet was cool as Elyria tiptoed down the corridor. She’d been right. Aside from the lanterns dotting the walls in sparse intervals, the hall was empty. As was the stairwell she descended in a rapid flutter of quiet footsteps, and the new hallway she turned down after that.

Elyria’s magic was a low, skulking presence in her veins—dampened, muted. But, miraculously, still there. It answered only faintly when she reached for it, like she was calling across a great distance. But it did answer, dark smoke shrouding her feet, misting across her skin. Barely enough to wield. Certainly not enough to fight with. But enough, perhaps, to blur the edge of her presence, to help her meld the slightest bit more into the surrounding shadows.

Her hand skimmed along the walls, alternating between lightly brushing embroidered tapestries and running along smooth stone. It was more for balance than anything else, to ground herself in the present. Without her wings, Elyria was off-kilter, like a table with one leg shorter than the others. She might have kept them masked with magic more often than not, but that didn’t mean they weren’t still there. That she didn’t feel them everywhere.

Now, all she felt was the lack of them, and the sad realization that this imbalance was her new reality had her chest suddenly feeling tight. Made

the air difficult to suck into her lungs.

Not the time, she scolded herself. *Be sad later.*

She rounded one corner. Then another. Twice she had to flatten herself into a narrow alcove when she heard footsteps approaching, pressing herself into the darkness until the cultists passed, red robes trailing on the ground after them.

She'd thought herself caught the second time, when two patrolling *sanguinagi* stopped only a few feet from where she hid. But all the two men did was turn to each other with mildly irritated expressions and begin speaking in hushed tones.

"Has he given any further indication as to how much longer this will go on? How much farther we need to dig?" said one, several inches shorter than the other, with hair shaved all the way down to his scalp.

The other one, a tall, thin man with swooping blond hair that fell over one eye, frowned. "No. And I told Darren and Sylvia to let us relieve them, to come back up and let us take a shift in the tunnel, but they refused. Sometimes I think all that mana must be addling their brains."

"Careful, Cornelius," said the short man. "They are simply . . . invested . . . in fulfilling our glorious purpose."

There was a beat of silence.

"As are we all, of course," he added quickly, head swiveling over his shoulder, making Elyria hold her breath as his gaze swept right over her hiding spot. But it was more like he was simply checking to make sure nobody else was around.

"Of course, you're right," agreed Cornelius, one palm going to his chest, to the wolven medallion centered there. "*Pro voluntae regos.*"

Elyria braced herself, remembering the way the cultists at Seastone had used their medallions to slice open their own hands and call their blood magic to the surface. But the man only gave the pewter wolf's face a reverent pat before he began walking away, gesturing for his companion to follow.

Not risking a breath until the men had fully disappeared around the bend, Elyria slipped from her hiding spot and ventured in the direction they'd come from. She quietly picked her way through the maze of corridors, down another set of stairs, then another, keeping careful mental track of every turn, every floor she descended.

Just a little farther, she told herself each time. *Just a little longer*. She knew she did not have unlimited time to explore this place, which was far, far bigger than she had thought. She'd figured she was being held in some small citadel—a set of twin towers, perhaps, with a connecting keep between them. But this, she realized, was beyond that.

This was a whole fucking fortress, evidently.

Her mind raced with the possibilities of what that meant—of where she was. Was this the infamous Ironridge prison? But no, from everything she'd heard of the horrible human fortress, the dungeon in which the humans had thrown any and all Arcanians found on Havensreach land, it was a dank prison, a rotten place.

Then again, before everything went to shit, Kit had told Elyria that the prisoner exchanges between Havensreach and Nyrundelle were complete. Perhaps Ironridge was abandoned afterward, repurposed by Varyth Malchior and his cultists. Goodness knew that with the resources of *Lord Paramount Leviathan Church*, they'd have been able to make it livable easily enough.

Malakar had chosen the perfect vessel to inhabit, Elyria thought bitterly. There was no lost time, no need to go to ground, to wait and watch and build up his armies. No, they were already built. Already waiting for their blood king's return. Even if they didn't realize it at the time.

Unwilling to venture into any of the closed doors that lined each corridor, for fear of walking right into Malakar's stars-forsaken bedroom or some other horrendous outcome, Elyria could not see much outside the fortress. All the hallway windows were either razor-thin or too high on the walls—often both—which made it difficult to see anything more than vague silhouettes against the night sky, the barest glimpses of the outside world.

None of what she did see looked familiar enough to place. There were no distinctive spires, no banners rustling in the wind. She couldn't tell if there was ocean to the east or mountains to the west. Malakar could have dragged her across the entirety of Arcanis and she'd be none the wiser.

Elyria hopped out of a dark stairwell onto what she assumed was finally the first floor of this massive place, dithering about what to do with the final minutes of her precarious freedom. There was still no sign of this "lower forge," of the place where all this supposed digging was occurring. It had to be underground, she concluded, and she thought maybe she should try to

uncover a door to the basement, to look for some indication of where to find the lower levels in this maze.

Or she could try to find the entrance to this place, get a glimpse of somewhere she might be able to slip out. Even if she wouldn't go tonight. Not when Petra was still at risk, should Elyria's escape be discovered.

Soft, soft, soft, soft, she chided herself. How had she actually come to care for this silly, brainwashed fool? Quartered hell, was Elyria seriously considering trying to convince the poor girl into running with her?

Away from Malakar's duplicitous tongue and a family who clearly didn't give two shits about her, perhaps Petra could start to unravel the years of conditioning she'd undergone. Elyria couldn't help but imagine what a young, impressionable girl like that might be like, the heights she could achieve, under the tutelage of Kit or Tenny or, hells, even Tenebris Nox.

Regardless, Elyria was committed to heading back just as soon as she figured out her final task tonight. She was, in fact, still trying to decide on what to do when she turned yet another corner . . . and stopped dead in her tracks.

A sudden wrongness thrummed at the edges of her senses, making her teeth ache. Elyria's shadows peeled back of their own volition, diving under her skin, the loss of control over them so abrupt that shock drove her backward, pushing her into the corner of the long entrance hall she found herself in.

One that she might have thought looked oddly familiar, had she been able to pay better attention.

Had her eyes not immediately gone instead to the two figures in the middle of the hall, standing before two enormous studded metal doors off to one side. Closed, of course. Sealed shut. Sealed tight.

The entrance.

The exit.

But Elyria couldn't relish in the knowledge that she'd found it. She couldn't do anything at all, in fact, other than stare, because it was as though there was once again a fist gripping the remaining scraps of shadow in her chest, keeping her still, holding tight. *Squeezing*.

"There you are, *mi regina umbrae.*" Malakar's voice was smooth, with just the touch of amusement as he arched an eyebrow at Elyria, still plastered to the wall in the corner of the room.

Next to him, Petra let out a soft whimper, and it was only then that Elyria saw the dark, shadowy leash wrapped around her neck and the bloodred ribbons of *sanguinagi* magic binding her wrists.

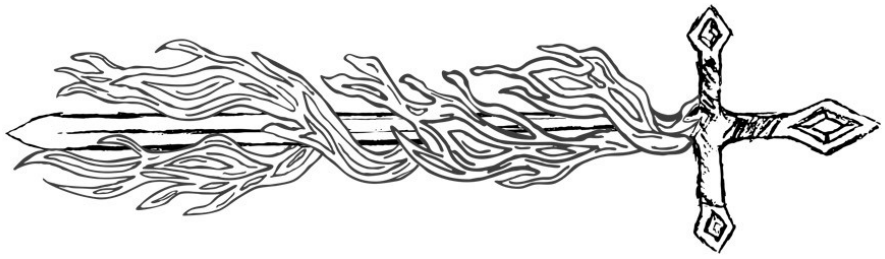
“I was wondering when you would be joining us.”

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10

DEATH-TOUCHED

CEDRIC



THE WARDEN OF SHADOWS WAS TERRIFYING.

Onyx-colored eyes, nebulas forming and coalescing within them. Skin like the night sky, starlit and stitched with constellations, visible on his face and neck, the rest of it hidden beneath robes darker than the void. He loomed at least half a foot taller than even Nox, horns and all. And when he spoke, Cedric could hear the layered harmony of his voice reverberating in his very bones.

"What help would you seek from me, Sunbringer?" said Noctis, the barest hint of amusement lacing the words. He drifted closer, the luminous walls of the cavern shimmering, pulsing in time with each celestial step, the black pool from which he rose rippling.

Cedric cast a sideways look at Nox, who nodded their encouragement. "My—" He cleared his throat, instantly aware of how even that small sound echoed oddly in the cavern. "The dark sorcerer Malakar has returned, and he has taken the Revenant. I beg your assistance in getting her back."

A flicker of something—recognition? Disdain?—passed across the celestial's star-peppered face. "I am aware," he said, lacing his fingers together and steepling them under his chin. "I felt it when his soul crossed back over and have sensed only the dark flares of his power since. Never hers."

Cedric thought his heart might have stopped beating. "Then you know where she is? Where he took her? Is keeping her?"

Noctis tilted his head. “Why would I know such a thing?”

Cedric sucked in a breath, and it wasn’t until Nox reached over and laid a gentle hand on his forearm that he realized he had started to move closer to the star god.

“You mortals make such assumptions. I have kept an eye on the Revenant over the years, in some manner or another”—his eyes flicked to Nox, whose head was still bowed in reverence—“but I am not omniscient, nor omnipresent.”

“Aye, Aurelia said nearly the same during the Crucible.”

Noctis’s gaze snapped to Thraigg. “Ah, of course. I confess I do not know whether to be surprised by this or not. I imagine after these centuries trapped in the Sanctum, she may be rather desperate for conversation partners. Still, one would think she would have learned from past mistakes.”

“You speak of Malakar,” Cedric said, and the celestial dipped his chin in confirmation.

“My sister has a history of saying too much to mortals. Bestowing the gift of mana upon humans was not enough, it seemed. She had to go and reveal things that no mortal should know. And it was because of her foolishness that Malakar learned how to twist her blessings, to corrupt the magic, to wield blood and death.”

“And now he is back, and we ask for your help in stopping him once more,” said Cedric.

“But that is not, in fact, what you asked for. You asked for my help in finding *her*. These are two different tasks. They have two different costs.”

Nox, who had been silent since they first addressed the Dark Warden, stiffened.

“To me, they are one and the same. Because as soon as I have her back, I will bleed him for every wrong he has ever committed, for every cruelty, every ounce of pain.” Cedric rolled his shoulders back. “And there is no cost I am not willing to pay.”

Cedric thought he might have seen Nox flinch from the corner of his eye as he spoke those final words, but he didn’t have time to ponder their reaction. He forced himself to remain steady. “So, will you help me?”

The starlit specks in Noctis’s dark eyes seemed to glow as his gaze dragged down Cedric’s face and neck. They stopped when they got to his chest, and though Cedric knew that his doublet and cloak covered the

bondmark above his collarbone, he was suddenly very certain that the celestial could see it anyway.

"You are her bonded," said Noctis. "Why do you need my help? Surely you feel her presence with you always." The celestial sounded almost wistful.

Cedric swallowed. "I haven't been able to feel her since Malakar took her. Our bond is blocked. Cut off."

"You are confident the Revenant is still alive though?" The words were free of judgment or expectation. It was simply a question, and Cedric suddenly felt he understood the absolute enigma that was Tenebris Nox so much better.

Thraigg huffed. "Wouldn't ye be the one to know if she weren't?" He paused, tilting his chin to look up at Nox, then swung his gaze back to the ground at the celestial's feet and added, "And I mean that with, uh, the utmost respect, o' course."

Right on cue, Sid hopped out from a slice in the air. Soft shadows spilled off her back as she darted over to Cedric and rubbed her face against the side of his boot. Then, just as quickly, she wandered over to the Warden of Shadows and did the same thing before sitting back on her haunches and peering up at the celestial with a curious tilt of her feline head.

Noctis released a low chuckle, the sound leaving him in slightly off-beat layers, as though many people were laughing along. And then he did something Cedric could never have possibly expected: The star god *squatted* in the middle of his luminescent cavern and ran a starry hand down Sid's back.

A fucking celestial was *petting his cat.*

"So she lives, and your bond remains, but her location is unknown," said Noctis as he scratched a purring Sid behind her ear. "You wish for clarity. You require direction."

Cedric's brow creased.

Noctis stood. "Very well."

And Cedric barely had time to inhale before darkness consumed him.



THE CAVERN HAD VANISHED.

Nox and Thraigg and Sid and Noctis himself, all gone.

There was nothing. No towering spires or star-specked ceiling or ground beneath Cedric's feet. Like the very world had fallen away, and Cedric was falling too.

No, not falling.

Drifting.

Weightless.

Nothing but consciousness suspended in this great blank expanse.

"There is nothing to fear." Noctis's multilayered voice was a gentle murmur in Cedric's mind, outside of it—everywhere and nowhere all at once.

"Where am I?" Cedric asked, his own voice an eerie echo of itself.

"Your body? Exactly where you left it. Your mind though?"

Noctis didn't expand further, and just as Cedric was about to press the celestial on exactly what was happening, a thin line of molten gold streaked across the surrounding expanse of black—a thread weaving through the night.

"Is that—"

Cedric looked down and realized he was not nothing anymore. It was also not dark any longer. He was a sort of man-shaped beacon, legs and arms and a torso, all made of light. And right in the center of his glowing chest, he saw that golden thread. Saw that it was coming from him.

"The bond," he whispered.

"Your bond," confirmed Noctis. "Thin. New. Weakened by distance and interference. And yet . . ."

"It's still here." Cedric had known it would be. He felt it always, clung to it, relished the knowledge that it was still wrapped around his bones, tied to his heart. He just couldn't feel *her* on the other side of it.

"Yes," said the detached, ethereal choir that was Noctis's voice. "And so, you must follow it."

"I can't. I don't know how."

"Try."

Cedric lifted a luminous hand and ran the pad of a single finger along the bond, instantly shivering. It felt like he was prodding his very soul. But if Elyria was still tied somewhere at the other end of it, then—

He wrapped one fist around the thread. Then the other. And hand over hand, with a firm grip that had his spirit shuddering, Cedric pulled himself

along its shimmering length as it twisted through the infinite dark.

As he moved, the expanse around him shifted. Changed. The shadows his own light created bled into shapes, scenes, settings. He caught fractured glimpses: stone walls, lit sconces, an arched window. Snatches of sound echoed in his ears: the scrape of metal; a distant cry; a low, muffled sob.

And then—there—he caught the briefest flash of periwinkle.

"Elle," Cedric breathed.

He released the thread to reach for her, but the instant he let go, the vision blurred, faded. It fell away, collapsing upon itself, the sky shattering.

And when Cedric opened his eyes, he was back in the cavern, Thraigg and Nox flanking him on either side with concern scrawled across both their brows. Sid was perched on Nox's shoulder, peering at Cedric with a far *less* concerned look on her feline face.

"Easy there, knightling," said Nox quietly, bracing a hand on Cedric's upper arm.

"Are ye back with us, boyo?" Thraigg asked, the worry on his face making Cedric question how long he had been . . . in his own mind? He still wasn't entirely sure what that was.

Noctis was still standing in front of him, wearing an expression that could only be described as *curious*.

"You are death-touched," said Noctis. A statement of fact.

Cedric nodded. "Yes. During the Crucible, I . . . The final trial demanded a sacrifice in order to retrieve the crown. But after, Elyria, she . . ." He swallowed. "I came back."

"I thought there was something I recognized about you, Sunbringer."

"What does—what does that mean?"

"It means you have already paid a price. And when the crown brought you back, it did not merely restore your life. It rewove you. Tethered you inextricably to her. It is why your bond is so strong, even as it remains incomplete. Why you were able to follow it so easily."

As if trying to confirm the celestial's words, the thread in Cedric's chest gave a sharp tug—a bright, aching pang that propelled him forward several steps. She had seemed so real. She had been so close.

Cedric's heartbeat was wild, racing. He felt unmoored. "What did you do to me?" He pressed a shaking hand to his chest. "How do I get back? How do I get to her?"

“You already have everything you need, Sunbringer. Hook yourself on to that thread. Follow the bond.”

“You must—I can’t—” He looked pleadingly at Noctis. “You have to send me.” He whipped his head toward Nox. “Or take me. I don’t know how to do it on my own.”

Nox was already shaking their head. “This goes far beyond stepping through the shadows. This is something only you can do.”

“But I can’t,” Cedric protested. “I’ve never—”

But he had.

In King’s Keep, when Elyria was being pursued by that bolt of deadly blood magic, when his mind had been filled with nothing but the all-consuming need to get to her, to be with her, to save her . . . Cedric had hooked himself on to their bond and gone right to her, hadn’t he?

They’d thought he had shadowstepped, but maybe that wasn’t exactly right.

The bond surged in Cedric’s chest—bright, agonizing, alive. Light was streaking through his veins, illuminating them.

“On with ye, lad.” Thraigg’s voice already sounded far away. “Go get our girl.”

“We will meet you in Elderglade,” said Nox, their voice little more than a whisper through the rush of cold suddenly sweeping around Cedric. It curled under his skin, threaded through his ribs, circled the furnace of sunfyre kindling at his core.

Cedric clapped a hand to the side of his neck, just over his collarbone.

The world folded in on itself.

And he was gone.

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11

THICKER THAN WATER

KIT



“IT’S ABOUT STARS-DAMNED TIME.”

Even with her slightly diminutive stature, Sephone was still every bit as imposing as she had been the first time Kit had lain eyes on her. She wore a high-collared leather vest dyed a deep shade of red, and along her wrists was another set of those spiked cuffs she seemed to favor—silver, this time, rather than the gold ones she had sported in Kingshelm. Kit wondered if her other ones had been dented by all the cultist faces she’d smashed in on the night of the attack.

Kit stared at the fae for half a heartbeat, then resumed her irritated walk down the long palace corridor. She made it four, maybe five strides before Sephone’s voice followed.

“That bad, huh?”

“Worse,” Kit grumbled, releasing a long exhale before pivoting on her heel and stalking back to the fae.

“Yeah, sounded like it.” Sephone’s almond-shaped eyes were crinkled with amusement. She had one boot braced against the wall like she was hanging out at the Gilded Gryphon instead of Aerithia’s royal palace. “Your uncle’s still having a hard time getting over Dentarius’s death, I see.”

“They were close,” Kit said flatly. “And didn’t anyone ever tell you it’s rude to eavesdrop?”

“Please. The king was loud enough that he might as well have broadcast your meeting to the entire palace. And besides . . .” Sephone picked at a

small spot on the front of her vest. “It’d be far ruder for me not to put my talents to good use.”

Kit arched a silver eyebrow. “Your talents?”

“As an eavesdropper, of course.” Sephone grinned.

“Oh, but of course. Thank you for being so gracious with your gift.”

Sephone rolled her black eyes. “You *should* be grateful. It’s how we’ve learned many things over the years.”

“We?”

Pushing herself off the wall, Sephone said, “Oh, come on then, Princess. Let’s go somewhere a little less”—she gestured loosely to the space surrounding them—“to chat. We have a few things to catch up on, I think.” Without waiting for an answer, she sauntered down the hall.

Kit blinked at the fae’s retreating form, lifting her eyes to the ceiling. “Solaris give me strength.” And then she followed.



THE SMALL SALON was dark when they entered, though not for long. With a snap of her fingers and a flick of her wrist, Sephone sent a tiny bolt of lightning into the chandelier above, lighting all six candles in one fell swoop.

“My mother would be jealous,” Kit said with a hum of approval.

“Why’s that?”

“Oh, there are just some things about her magic she’s always wanted to master. But ruling and politics leave few opportunities to put it into practice.”

“The duchess is a stormbender too?” asked Sephone.

“A wind weaver, primarily. As Dentarius was.”

A beat of silence passed between them.

“I can appreciate the wind well enough,” said Sephone after a moment, “though it’s not my favorite.” Sparks crackled along her skin, running up the length of her arms.

“I can see that.”

“It does have its uses though. Good for privacy—muffles noises.” She waved her hand, and Kit’s hair fluttered off her forehead as Sephone cast an

air barrier around them. “Can make it easier for sound to travel sometimes too.”

“Ah. Your ‘talents’ as an eavesdropper, then?”

“Exactly. You might be surprised by how many secrets I’ve managed to pick up throughout the years.”

Kit huffed a low laugh. “There’s actually nothing that surprises me about that.”

Sephone crossed the room, plunking herself down on a crushed-velvet settee the color of grapes. “So,” she said.

“So,” Kit echoed, pointedly refusing to follow suit. She simply took a few steps forward instead, arms crossed over her chest. “You were saying something before? About all the things ‘we’ have learned over the years?”

“Right. Yes.” Sephone tucked a swath of her long black hair behind her pointed ear, where a small golden hoop sat, a single ruby-red bead hanging from it. “Well, you know who I work for.”

Kit scoffed. “Indeed, I do.”

“And you know exactly who he is. Who the Revenant is to him.”

“Your point?”

“My point is that if *your* family will not aid us in locating and retrieving Elyria, then it might be time to turn to *hers*.”

“Your *master*”—Kit all but spat the word—“is not her family. I am.”

Sephone lifted her hands, palms facing Kit in supplication. “Be that as it may, the king is not seeing things clearly. Your uncle is blinded by fear and hardened by grief. His inaction would see the cult left unchecked, and Malakar’s power will only continue to grow.”

“That’s essentially what I told him. I outright begged him to divert even the smallest amount of resources to finding Elyria, because doing so means finding the cult. And once we’ve found them, we can stop them. We can stop *him* . . . before the War of Two Realms is ignited all over again.”

“And he said no.”

Kit flinched. “He said he would take it under consideration.”

“But we all know what that means.”

“Yes,” Kit said sadly. “To him, the accords might as well have been buried right alongside Dentarius. Like the humans are the ones at fault, when it was, in fact, one man.”

“One who is now something far more—and far worse—than a man,” Sephone said. “And, look, it isn’t as though the king is necessarily *wrong*.”

“Excuse me?”

“Elyria is just one person, when there are *many* lives at risk here. Should Malakar’s war fully ignite, should his followers march on Nyrundelle, who knows how many innocents will fall to his campaign. Your uncle’s job is to think about that. To weigh lives and ensure the least horrible outcome occurs.”

Kit blew out a frustrated breath, then slumped into an open armchair opposite Sephone. “It isn’t as though I don’t understand that. But I do not think he is acting—or refusing to act—out of concern for his people. Not really. He is reacting to what happened in Kingshelm, the losses already suffered.”

“I agree with you there, too. So, if the king will not act to stop Malakar’s darkness from spreading, then we will have to do it ourselves.”

There was that “we” again, and Kit knew Sephone wasn’t just talking about the two of them. And she wasn’t talking about their merry band of misfit champions, now spread across the continent, either.

Master Tartanis was a powerful man. Kit had never met him personally, but she certainly knew *all* about him. The criminal overlord of Coralith had resources and connections great enough that they had won him the ear of the king and given him the freedom to send his own underlings into the heart of Havensreach as part of the official royal delegation.

And, for better or worse, he was Elyria’s father.

Tartanis had already made it clear that he wanted his daughter returned to him, and that was before she was even taken. Was it possible he might be willing to help, might have the resources Kit and company needed to finally get a real lead on her location? Was it possible he might *already* know something, might have already started looking? Was this wretched man the ally they needed?

The Kit of a few months ago would have laughed in the face of such thoughts. It made her feel itchy, like a treasonous splinter had wormed its way just under her skin. She wondered if she would ever be able to pluck it out, or if it would stay there, festering, until it turned into a proper wound.

She loved her uncle. Really, she did. Lachlandris Ravenswing was the one who had taken her flying when her mother told her to stay inside, who used to sneak her candied citrus slices before dinner, who once let her braid his hair and then wore the ridiculous result to court. He was a good man. She’d thought him a good king, once. But now . . .

“I really thought my uncle would . . .” Kit raked a hand down her face. “I thought if he knew everything that happened, he might—”

“Everything? So you told him about how you already have both pieces of the crown? About Daephinia’s legacy and the fact that Cedric is actually the heir of—”

“Shhh,” said Kit hastily, and Sephone smirked.

“Exactly. So, *not* everything, then. And don’t fret your royal little head about anyone overhearing. The wind, remember?” She waved her hand, and a breeze swept through the room, reminding her of the air wall that was in place.

“I suppose I have the wind to thank for you knowing about Cedric too, do I? I’d thought you had already taken off from Kingshelm before all that came out in the wake of the attack.”

“What I know is hardly important. What the king knows, on the other hand . . .”

“He knows more than enough to understand the scale of Malakar’s threat. At present, that’s all he needs.”

“Protective of your secrets, aren’t you?” Sephone almost sounded like she approved.

“Some secrets aren’t mine to tell.” Kit shrugged and sank farther into the plush chair. “Besides, you’re one to talk.”

“Me?” Sephone grinned. “I’m an open book. Try me.”

“Is Tartanis here? In Aerithia?”

Sephone’s eyes flashed victoriously. “Yes.”

“Does he know where Malakar is keeping her?”

“He has his suspicions.”

Kit jumped to her feet. “Then what are we—”

“It’s not such a simple thing, Princess. Raefe has been following signs, but there hasn’t been anything substantive enough to—”

The laugh that burst from Kit’s mouth was surely not the appropriate reaction, but she couldn’t help it. “Raefe? That’s your source of intelligence? Sorry, but you won’t find me inclined to believe anything that bastard says.”

“Spoken like a true sister,” Sephone said with a nod. “And believe me, I’m just as horrified by Raefe’s former behavior with the Revenant—”

“I doubt that,” Kit grumbled.

“—but Master Tartanis has already punished him for his transgressions . . . many times over.” She bit her lip, a crease forming between her brows that had Kit wondering just what else Raefe had been subjected to beyond a torn ear and a demotion.

Kit hated the prickle of pity that rippled through her at the thought. She also hated the flicker of gratitude that followed it, knowing that Master Tartanis had, in his own twisted way, been trying to look out for Elyria. But along with that spark of relief came a greater wave of disgust, because whether his motivations for doing so were fatherly or self-serving—most likely both—he was still the cause of so much of Elyria’s pain. And that was something Kit would never be able to forgive.

“What are these suspicions, then?” Kit asked, swallowing the unkind words threatening to throw themselves off her tongue. “Where is Raefe now?”

“Luminaria,” Sephone said simply.

“He’s in the Lost City?”

“It’s hardly lost anymore, you may remember. The humans have resettled within the walls of the city quite well since the Crucible ended. But yes, Raefe has been there since Elyria kicked him out of our travel party en route to Dawnspire.” She smiled, like she was recalling a fond memory, then grimaced, as though remembering what actually happened when they got to the village. The swarms of *sanguinagi* that had ambushed their party had left Sephone broken and bleeding.

Kit’s heart was suddenly hammering in her chest. “And that’s where . . . he thinks Elyria is being held too?”

“Well, not necessarily. All he knows is it seems like *something* is going on there. It’s hard to ask questions without drawing attention to himself, and he’s been doing a decent enough job of blending in. He doesn’t want to jeopardize it. But the castle is still sealed and—”

“What does that mean, ‘sealed?’ Like, off-limits?”

Sephone blinked at her. “Like, physically. Magically. Like Aurelia cast a barrier around the entire palace as soon as everyone exited after the Crucible. Nobody’s been able to get back in. The city’s limping along, resettled, rejuvenated. But the castle itself? It’s little more than a giant monument at this point.”

Kit began pacing. “No one in? No one out?”

“Evidently, it gives folks quite the little zap if they get too close. Raefe says the human younglings had turned it into a bit of a game in the beginning—a game of dares.” She shook her head with a laugh. “The bravado of youth is a universal thing, it would seem.”

Kit thought about how Elyria had described Elderglade being similarly warded when she’d tried to enter the sanctuary the first time. “Certainly *sounds* celestial.”

“Sure does. But still, Raefe says there have been some . . . questionable developments, especially recently. Folks he’d flagged as being of interest disappearing around corners, failing to emerge for hours at a time. He hasn’t actively seen anyone go inside, but . . .”

“I see,” Kit said. She fell back into her chair with a heavy sigh. “What could Malakar be planning inside Castle Lumin, though? The Gate is sealed, Aurelia’s power locked away. The cult has gone underground, aside from what we learned while traveling here.”

“What did you learn? What are his followers doing?”

Kit tilted her head. “Didn’t catch that part with your oh-so-skilled eavesdropping?”

Sephone made a face, then gestured for Kit to continue.

“We ran into a pair of cultists outside Daeglen. And after a bit of . . . creative questioning by Cedric—”

“Good little prince,” said Sephone with a smirk.

“—we learned a few things. Apparently Malakar has assigned some of his followers to spots throughout Arcanis in order to keep tabs on the mana springs. The men said they had to provide regular reports, but that was it. They wanted nothing to do with Malakar or the cult outside of the safety and privileges it provided. They were going to abandon him.”

“And you believed them?”

“Well, I didn’t at first. But yes, eventually. Especially after . . .”

“After what?”

“Something happened when the men were exposed to Cedric’s magic. They changed. Turned monstrous. Malakar has done something with the oaths his followers swear, and whether because of their intent to desert or simply because they realized they were in the presence of Daephinia’s heir, they . . .” Kit chewed on the inside of her cheek. “We had to put them down.”

At that, Sephone's cool composure finally seemed to snap, and she launched to her feet. "Well, there you have it. You asked what Malakar is planning? What he's always sought to do. Orchestrate our downfall. Fight his way to more power, with less constraint. The bastard wants the world of Arcanis bent to his will and all Arcanians either burned to ash or bowing at his feet. And he's obviously more than happy to sacrifice and mutilate his followers in order to do it."

Several moments of tense silence fell over the room, eventually punctuated by Sephone's humorless laugh. "This war is closer than I thought. And Master Tartanis is *very* motivated to stave it off. So whatever you need, if we can provide it, it's yours."

Something was poking Kit in the back of her mind, but she couldn't quite put her finger on it. "Surely war is a profitable time for a criminal like him. Why exactly is he so motivated? I understand a father wanting to rescue his daughter, but for *this* father to do so at the potential expense of his own gain? To undermine his sovereign and risk his position of privilege with the king?" A thought occurred. "How much does Tartanis know about Cedric? Does he know about his bond with Elyria?"

For the first time since their conversation began, Sephone averted her eyes.

"I see. Of course." Kit barked a laugh. "Why bother keeping up pretenses with the king of one realm, when he might have the future king of all Arcanis as a son-in-law?"

Sephone sucked her bottom lip between her teeth, but at least she wasn't foolish enough to refute it.

And Kit, well, she didn't think it much mattered that Cedric clearly had no intention of even facing the reality of his lineage, let alone taking up that mantle. Which, to be fair, was probably a quality that would serve him well in the role. Still, she didn't love the idea of the knightling being used as a bargaining chip, and she knew damn well that Elyria would fucking hate it.

But if King Lachlandris was going to withhold help, wasn't Tartanis their best chance of getting her back? At least that way, Elyria might have the opportunity to express said hatred to her father herself. And with his help, maybe they actually stood a chance of finding out more about Malakar's plans, of *finally* being able to get a single foot ahead of the dark sorcerer.

Images flashed through Kit's mind, each one the opposite of the memory that came before it, like a flipball pinging back and forth between players.

Elyria, mid-laugh, those emerald eyes shining.

Her wings, bloody and limp on the ground.

Thraigg lifting an overflowing mug in cheers.

Dentarius's pained expression as that *sanguinagi* bolt pierced his chest.

Tenny's arms wrapping around Kit when she and Nox found her in Seastone.

The look of death in Cedric's eyes in the moments after Elyria was taken.

The bewildering tilt of a nocterrian chin as they said, *"I like knowing where you are. I like being there too."*

Evander's wink on that last day, moments before he walked through the Gate in Castle Lumin.

Evander, after.

There was so much light in her life. So much that darkness had already corrupted.

So much worth protecting.

Was she really willing to lose anyone else while she sat around, waiting for permission?

Kit rolled her shoulders back and stood to face Sephone. "We need to find out why Malakar is so interested in the mana springs. We need to know how many more followers he may have sprinkled throughout Nyrundelle. We need to confirm whether Castle Lumin really is the base of his activities. And, most of all, I need to get Ellie back."

A slow, satisfied look spread across Sephone's face. "Good call, Princess."

Kit rolled her eyes. "Stop calling me that. I'm *not* a princess."

"Close enough. How long were you planning on staying in Aerithia?"

"Not long. I suppose now it depends on my uncle's 'consideration.' But I'm going to . . . trust . . . your boss to start making the necessary moves."

"That was difficult for you to say, wasn't it?" Sephone winked. "Do whatever you have to. Finish up your family politicking. If the king has a change of heart, wonderful. We'll take all the help we can get. But I wouldn't count on it." She waved a hand, dispersing the air barrier

surrounding the room, and the faint sounds of bootsteps and conversational chatter instantly filtered into Kit's ears.

"I'm staying at the Gryphon if anything comes up." She waltzed toward the door, her hand on the knob as she looked back at Kit, those black eyes amused, assessing. "Feel free to come say goodbye before you leave."

And then she was gone, and Kit was left lingering in an empty room with a thousand burning questions still racing through her mind. But burning underneath them all was the simmering spark of hope. It looked different than she'd expected, but it was there all the same.

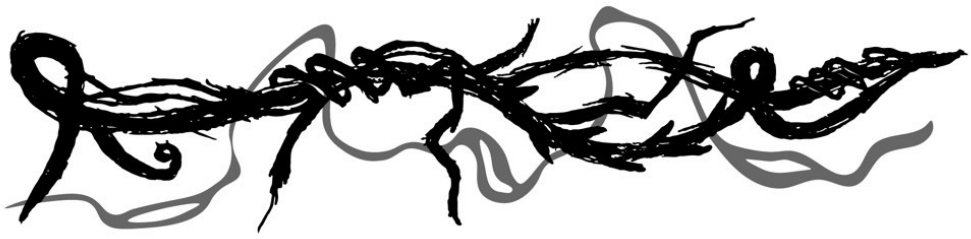
She would cling to it.

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12

DEEPER WOUNDS

ELYRIA



"IT WAS AN ACCIDENT, *MI SANGUINEXOS*, I SWEAR IT. I'M SORRY. I'M SO sor—"

Petra's pleas cut off with a gasp as Malakar twitched his fingers, and the shadows that were wrapped around her throat cinched tighter.

Elyria flinched, tried to say something, shout something. Tried to reach for the girl. But she was still stuck—frozen in place by Malakar's ironfisted hold on the shadow inside her.

"Hmm? What was that?" The dark sorcerer lifted a mocking hand to his ear. "Were you hoping to join the conversation? Come on, then."

He flicked his wrist, and Elyria's body lurched forward, flying across the hall in a single, nausea-inducing rush. She landed on unsteady feet directly in front of Malakar and Petra, the steel grip on her body relaxing.

"Stop!" Elyria cried, staring at Petra, whose glassy eyes were lined with tears as she grappled with the shadowy collar choking her. "You have me. I'm here. Let her breathe. Let her go!"

Malakar sighed. "But I do not have you," he said, sounding tired. He looked tired too, she realized. Dark circles lay under each eye. The lines etched on his pale face seemed somehow deeper, the hollows of his cheeks cutting sharper. And there was something about his general aura—the way he held himself, his black eyes roaming over Elyria with a hunger that had been mostly absent from their previous encounters. "No matter how much I

try, no matter how much I give you, you still refuse to aid me. And I am afraid this little stunt has eradicated the very last of my patience."

"I've done everything you've asked of me, withstood everything you've *done* to me," Elyria said through gritted teeth. "And as anyone who knows me even a little would be more than willing to tell you, I've done so with shockingly little complaint. I cannot relinquish your power any more than you can cut it out of me—I think we have established that."

Malakar wasn't listening. He began pacing back and forth, boots shuffling along the deep red carpet of the entrance hall, paying little attention to Petra, whose head was arched back, her bound hands at her throat, fingernails scratching bloody lines into the skin of her neck as she fought to continue being able to breathe. Elyria's fingers twitched with the need to intervene, but she didn't know if doing so would make things worse. Didn't know what the mad sorcerer would do if she moved to help the girl.

Because mad, he was. *Clearly.*

"We cannot have disobedience. We cannot have dissent," Malakar muttered to himself, still pacing. "I know. *I know.* We are so close. So close. We are so close to reaching the Line." His gaze snapped to Elyria once more. "If only she would give us my power, our glorious purpose can begin. We can reshape this world as it was always meant to be." The next words came out in a furious flurry. "If only you would *help me*!" he shouted, throwing his hands in the air.

Whether he intended it or not, Elyria didn't know, but the motion loosened the grip of Petra's shadow collar, and she sucked in a heart-wrenching gasp. The blood-magic ribbons wrapped around her hands dissipated into the ether. Tears fell down Petra's reddened cheeks as she fell to her knees, sobbing.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she said, her voice raspy, a harsh whisper.

Elyria was beside her in an instant, doing her best not to glare at the dark sorcerer as she rubbed Petra's back, mimicking drawing in long, even breaths through her nose, then exhaling through her mouth.

"It's all right," Elyria said soothingly. "Everything will be all right."

"You will help us, won't you?" Malakar's voice was soft now, pleading. He blinked several times, as though he'd been momentarily stunned. "You will help *me?*" Long fingers wrapped around Elyria's upper arm, and she

found herself being lifted back to her feet, his face only inches from hers. “Please, *regina*, I cannot do this without you.”

He was crazy. He was absolutely, one thousand percent, gryphon-shit insane. But Elyria wasn’t about to tell him that. Instead, she swallowed the frenzied curses that she wanted to spit into his sharp, cruel face, softened her voice, and said, “Help me understand what it is you’re trying to do, and I will help you in any way I can.”

The look of relief on Malakar’s face was so strong, so repulsively close to pleasure, that Elyria had to actively fight the urge to recoil.

“I do want you to understand,” he said softly, “what is coming. What accessing the Line will mean for us, for you.”

What was he talking about? Elyria did her best not to react when she felt a still-sobbing Petra clutch at the leg of her breeches. “The . . . the line?”

“Daephinia did me a favor, as it turns out, by sundering the world in her grief. Accessing it will be so much easier from within the Chasm, you see?” He clasped his hands together in front of his robe, the gold thread from the wolven emblem embroidered in the center of his chest glinting in the torchlight.

Elyria couldn’t help the way her eyes drifted over his shoulder, to the massive front entrance doors still shut behind him.

He frowned when he followed her gaze, his lips pressing into a thin line. But a few blinks of those black eyes—or was that a flash of amber she just saw?—and he was rambling again. “I did not think I would be able to reach the Line on my own. Most certainly not without the crown. But since the Sunfyre Queen already did me the favor of ripping a path directly to it, that’s not an issue anymore. And now all we need is for you to return my power, and we can begin.”

“But I can’t—”

Petra let out a low wail, and Elyria found it very difficult to swallow . . . because Malakar’s hand was suddenly wrapped around the base of her throat. It wasn’t squeezing, wasn’t choking her. But it was *resting* there, long fingers splayed over her collarbone, a reminder of just how easily he could close his hand, of what he had just done to poor Petra.

“Your power is tangled up inside me,” she said calmly, voice low, even as her pulse hammered against his grip. “I still don’t know how to free it for you, *mi sanguinexos.* But that doesn’t mean I won’t try to help you.”

His hand tightened infinitesimally.

“I *will* help you,” she said, more firmly. “Why don’t you dismiss the girl, and you and I can discuss exactly how we can make that happen.”

Malakar smiled.

And whatever momentary flicker of relief she might have felt was quickly undone as his hand moved across her clavicle, sweeping her long periwinkle braid back over her shoulder, and—

“What is this?” he said, head cocking to the side. His grin faltered.

Elyria went very, very still.

On the ground, Petra quieted, head pivoting between Elyria and Malakar like she didn’t know who to pay attention to.

Get out of here, you foolish girl, Elyria wanted to scream at her. She wanted Petra to realize that Malakar was unlikely to notice if she ran. His focus was narrowed so wholly on the side of Elyria’s neck, in fact, that she doubted he was capable of noticing much of anything at all in that moment.

“It’s nothing,” Elyria said, offering a casual wave of her hand in an attempt to mask the way her fingers trembled. “Just an old scar. I have many from over the years. You should see the ones on my legs. They’re—”

“You are lying.” There was something almost like curiosity in his tone. Much to Elyria’s surprise, there was no hint of anger, though she almost wished there was. Because when the dark sorcerer brushed his thumb over her bondmark, something *wrong* gleamed in the pitch-black depths of his gaze, and no power in all four quarters of hell could’ve kept Elyria from shuddering at the intrusion.

Not yours! she shouted in her mind. She bit the inside of her bottom lip to keep herself from shouting it aloud too.

“You said my power is tangled in you. But tangled in what, I now wonder.” Malakar took a step back, lifting his hand just enough to pinch the chain of Cedric’s token, pulling it out from beneath Elyria’s tunic. He rolled the lightning-streaked blue stone between his thumb and forefinger, the empty emerald cruelly winking at her with each pass. “In *who?*”

Elyria couldn’t speak. Her head was suddenly pounding, muddying her thoughts.

Malakar gripped the token more firmly, pulling her another few inches toward him. “Who did this to you?” he asked, and Elyria recoiled.

For a second, she flashed back to that moonlit hallway in the Celestial Sanctum, to the way those same words had fallen from Cedric’s lips when

he saw the scars carved into her thighs. Back then, his voice had been like the first signs of spring thawing a long, cold winter. That night had been one of the first indications that she and Cedric were connected on a level that went beyond what she had been able to comprehend at the time.

The way Malakar spoke those same words now, though, was an assault. An unwanted claim. She hated it. Hated him. Hated how it immediately tainted her memory, ruined that moment.

Something behind her ribs fluttered—a spasm, an ache—as if in protest of that thought. Elyria nearly gasped. It had been so long since she'd felt anything close to that. Almost like a—

"You are bonded," Malakar said, ripping her attention back to him. "How *interesting*."

The chain from Cedric's token dug painfully into the back of Elyria's neck as the dark sorcerer lifted it, examining the stone with deeper interest.

She saw the moment realization dawned on his face, and Elyria wanted to crumple to the floor.

"No wonder you came with me so willingly," he said softly, dropping Cedric's token but grasping Elyria by the neck once more. "To a human, no less. The one from the tower. 'He is nothing like you.' Is that right?"

She didn't answer.

"Who is he?"

She didn't answer.

"Tell me." His fingers dug into her hard enough to bruise.

She released a hiss of pain.

There was a quiet clearing of a throat. "*Mi sanguinexos*, if I may, perhaps—"

"Quiet," he reprimanded.

Elyria blinked at Petra, suddenly standing next to her. She hadn't even realized the girl had gotten back up.

Petra pressed her lips together, her bloodshot gaze darting nervously around the room. Elyria didn't understand why she wasn't running . . . until her eyes fell to Petra's neck, and she realized that though he had loosened its choking hold, that shadowy collar was still there, a smoky leash.

"If a bond is what has locked my power inside you," murmured Malakar, looking Elyria over as though he was puzzling out an equation, "then perhaps . . ." He trailed off, his eyes darkening.

All the blood drained from Elyria's face. She felt another pang behind her ribs—almost painful, this time.

"Perhaps another bond is what it will take to free it."

Elyria thought surely the sound of her heart dropping into the pit of her stomach had to have been audible. She swallowed back bile. Bit the inside of her cheek so hard, she tasted copper on her tongue. But her voice was like a steel blade when she said, "Touch me, and I will take your power with me straight to the Hereafter, where you will *never* get it back."

His lip curled. His grip tightened. "You overestimate your leverage."

"And you underestimate how far I'm willing to go."

"Do I? And here I was, about to say the same about you. Bonds were made to be broken, *regina*. I think I will enjoy finally seeing you break."

It was like it happened in slow motion.

The way he spun Elyria around, pulling her until her back was flush against his front.

The way he lifted his hand.

The curling of his long fingers, one by one, into a fist.

A bloodcurdling shriek—lasting barely more than a single second.

A splash of warmth across Elyria's face.

And two sickening thuds—the first, as Petra's head fell from her neck, blond hair stained crimson, rolling to a stop a few feet away. The second, when her still-twitching body collapsed at Elyria's feet.

Screams echoed in Elyria's ears.

She didn't understand why. Petra was dead. Gone in an instant, before she'd even had time to live.

So why was there still screaming?

It wasn't until Elyria felt ice-cold fingers over her mouth, muffling the sound, that she realized she was the one who had been doing it.

Malakar's body was like a block of stone at Elyria's back—until it wasn't. Her shock still had her rooted to the spot, so it took her a moment to realize he had released her. To realize he had taken several steps toward Petra's body and was crouched low, two fingers dipped in her blood.

And now it did not feel like time had slowed. No, it felt like it sped up, everything happening so very, very fast.

In one of Malakar's hands, a wicked-looking red crystal dagger formed. In the other, bands of scarlet slithered from his fingertips, catching Elyria's wrists, crawling up her arms, pinning them to her sides. They slid along her

breeches, wrapping around each limb, cinching tight before pulling her legs apart, forcing her stance wide.

The world tilted, and Elyria suddenly found herself staring at the floor, at the thick, plush carpet . . . and the wet crimson stain inching ever closer.

It was like she was suspended in midair, her body rigid, Malakar's *sanguinagi* magic folding her in half, bending her over an invisible table. She tensed when she felt him move behind her, felt something cold and sharp trailing over the thin fabric of her blouse.

Malakar released a low hum. "I know you will not believe me, but this is the very last thing I wanted to have to do, *regina.*"

Elyria barely recognized her own voice when she said, "You're right. I don't believe you." The words were monotone, leaden. A reporting of fact. If his actions leading up to this point weren't proof enough, the dark hunger she could hear weaving through every syllable certainly was.

"Perhaps if you had not been so quick to try to steal your freedom . . ." He sighed. "It is so very uncivilized, this fae business of *claiming*. Boorish. Brutish. A savage practice, really. But if this is the only way to get my power back, it is what must be done."

"Fuck. You," she snarled, thrashing against the blood magic's hold. At least it was *his* power holding her this time, she thought. Unlike when he turned her shadows against her, used them to slice off her own wings. It made what was about to happen the *slightest* bit less horrifying.

"It might even turn out to be a good thing," Malakar continued, supremely unbothered by Elyria's grunts of furious effort, the flurry of curses spewing from her mouth. Clearly the time for feigned cooperation was over. "Your bond is new. Incomplete. This could give you everything you might have hoped to get from *him*. After all, Daephinia unlocked a whole new sort of power within herself when she claimed Juno. Perhaps this will grant us similar gifts. Would you not like that, *regina?* It was quite the spectacle then, you know, their life-bonding. A performance I was blessed enough to witness at the time."

He exhaled, a wistful sort of sound. Running his hand over the side of Elyria's neck, he ripped Cedric's token from her and tossed it aside. His fingers danced over her mark as he continued. "Think of how much stronger you and I might be . . . *after.*"

And that was what did it.

That was what finally caused the churning in Elyria's gut to spill over, vomit surging up her throat, spilling onto the carpet below her. Malakar let out a disgusted noise as her body convulsed and she retched, and retched, and retched.

And all the while, that spasming pang in her chest only seemed to grow, like someone was knocking on the backside of her ribs.

She spat when it was over, sweat dripping down the bridge of her nose. And as though she had expelled her last remaining ounce of fight when she expelled everything else, Elyria didn't even flinch as the dark sorcerer sliced clean through the fabric of her blouse, exposing the bare skin of her back. She didn't whimper when he ran a cold hand across each of her shoulder blades, then trailed his blade's razor-sharp edge along the same path. She didn't cry out when he pressed down, almost curiously, reopening her scars.

Warmth trickled down the sides of her body, slid over her ribs, dripped onto the carpet. And like her own blood was feeding the magic holding her, strengthening it, the *sanguinagi* ribbons wrapped around her tightened.

And still, Elyria didn't make a sound.

Not aloud, at any rate.

But inside?

Her heart was a war hammer in her chest.

The aching pang behind her ribs was pounding so hard, she wondered if she was bruising internally.

And her mind was a wild chorus—those three unspoken words sung over and over and over, a haunting refrain. Why hadn't she said them? She wished she had. It would be her greatest regret in the life she had been given, save for what was about to happen.

Every muscle in Elyria's body tensed, an involuntary shudder thundering through her as she felt Malakar settle between her legs. He was really going to do this, then. Right here, in the middle of the entrance hall of this stars-forsaken bloody fucking fortress, with Petra's still-cooling corpse only feet away. Where any number of his followers could waltz around the corner and see.

Maybe that was what he wanted. A spectacle, just like Daephinia had made of her own bonding. Elyria's face twisted at the thought of what she and Cedric shared—what she had hoped they might've shared still—being turned into some sort of grotesque performance.

Malakar let out a low growl, pressing against her backside. She tried not to wince as his blade dragged down the length of her spine, then cut into the belt securing her breeches.

He leaned forward, his presence suffocating, his weight smothering. Grazing the side of her neck with his lips, he murmured, “Do not fear, *mi umbrae regina*. Soon you will forget all about him. I will snuff out whatever tiny, insignificant bit of himself he may have left with you. We will be so much more.”

Elyria recoiled, her shadows writhing, struggling, in her veins. Just as she struggled against Malakar’s grip on her shoulder, cutting herself further on his knife as she tried to twist against the ever-tightening bind of his blood magic.

“Shh,” crooned the dark sorcerer, sweeping his hand gently—*lovingly*—down the length of her blood-soaked back, hooking his fingers into her waistband.

This wasn’t happening.

This would not be how it ended.

Elyria shut her eyes, diving into the rattling box inside herself, filling every thought with memories of him, with warm embraces, with safety, with cold cider and friendly laughter, with the thrill of training, the feel of Sid’s fur under her fingertips, the wonder of her magic—anything, anything, anything that wasn’t the here and now.

That pang behind her ribs was still pulsing, pounding—someone trying to beat down a door.

That’s when she felt it.

A spark.

A speck.

A kernel of light.

It flared bright in the center of her chest, washed through her veins, illuminated her from within. More and more, it grew and spread and shone, igniting the edge of her shadows until they, too, seemed made of sunfyre.

Only for a second.

An instant.

A moment.

Just long enough.

Because, with a hissed curse, Malakar suddenly wasn’t there anymore. Not with his weight on her back, nor his lips at her neck. Not pressing

himself against her. Not carving into her skin or whispering in her ear.

His magic wasn’t there anymore either, she realized. Those bloody ribbons had dissipated, her limbs finally loose again, her body free.

Elyria fell forward, her knees hitting the floor, just barely catching herself with her hands before her face plummeted into the blood-soaked rug.

Vaguely, she registered shouting.

Heard the pounding of boots on stone.

And then felt herself being flung aside, some unseen force blasting into her, shooting her body backward, where she collided with the heavy entry doors, her head slamming against the metal.

She blinked, dizzy. Her mind felt cloudy. Like it was filled with smoke.

No. Not just her mind.

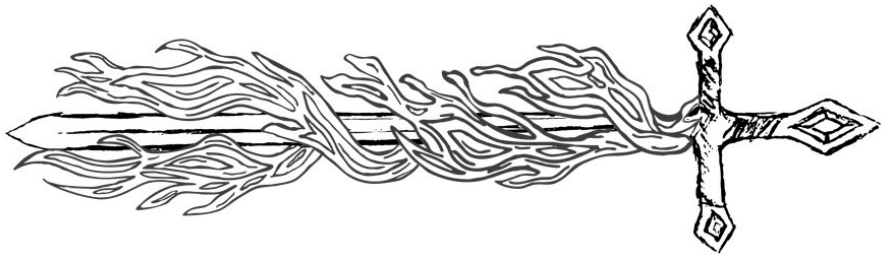
Because when Elyria lifted her head, her vision blurred, her body aching, the hall was on fire.

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13

THE SUNFYRE HEIR

CEDRIC



SHE WAS CLOSE.

The instant he stepped out of the dark, Elyria's presence wrapped around Cedric. The tether in his chest thrummed to life, his lungs filling with new air, as though he hadn't taken a true breath in weeks.

He still couldn't feel her on the other end of their bond, but it was as though shrinking the distance between them had strengthened it, even if there was still a wall in the way.

She was here, and he was here, and he was going to find her.

It took Cedric several moments to place himself, to realize exactly where following that bond through the shadows had led him.

Brisk night air. Rough-hewn stone walls to his left and his right. An alleyway, light pooling at the far end of the narrow passage. Beyond it, flickering lanterns hung above doorframes. A city.

His boots skidded on uneven stone as he stumbled forward, blinking rapidly as he reached the end of the alley and the world snapped into brutal focus before him.

Not just any city.

Because there, beyond the cobblestone streets and neatly-laid-out rows of homes, the towers of Castle Lumin stretched into the starlit sky.

Cedric's chest nearly caved in.

Here? She was *here*? Had she been in Luminaria, under their very noses, all along?

Cedric shook his head, refusing to believe it. Hadn't Ollie and Jocelyn both had the Lost City on their long list of places to hunt down leads in the Midlands? Surely they would have seen something. And Elderglade was, what, two, three days' ride from here? How many times had he seen the looming spires of the castle from afar as they'd traversed the continent? Wouldn't Cedric have felt it—felt her, felt the hum of their bond, felt a pull toward his *solimaeus*, as he did now?

For all that new breath he'd thought he was inhaling, now Cedric was suffocating. The light travel armor he had worn during their trek up the Sacred Mountain suddenly felt too heavy. Ashrender was an anchor strapped to his waist. He careened into the wall next to him, fingers pressing into the rough surface like he was scrambling for purchase.

Months. It had been *months* since he'd last seen her perfect face, since the sweet melody of her laugh seeped into his bones. Since he'd last brushed a strand of periwinkle from her face or heard the steadying beat of her heart in his ear as he laid his head against her chest.

Months, and all this time she had been stuck in the place where it all began.

Had he truly failed her so greatly?

It ended now. Tonight.

He would get her out, he would see her free, even if he died trying.

Mind racing, lungs tight, Cedric launched forward—

Only to come to a jolting stop as strong fingers wrapped around one of his arms and hauled him back into the alley.

Ashrender was unsheathed and pressed to the neck of his assailant in a heartbeat, instinct surging, sunfyre flaring in his veins, ready to ignite, ready to *kill*—

"Put that the fuck away, you stars-damned idiot. Do you want them to find us?"

Cedric froze. Blinked. Lowered Ashrender a fraction of an inch.

"You want to keep that thing moving?"

Cedric didn't budge, though his power immediately guttered out, like it had been doused in a bucket of water.

Another huff. "By all means, take all fucking night. It's not as though you're in a hurry, right?"

Cedric let his arm drop, though he kept a firm grasp on Ashrender at his side. "What are you doing here?"

The fae pulled the hood of his cloak back, revealing strands of blond hair that fell to his chin, half of it tucked behind a scarred, torn ear. Raefe's gray eyes narrowed on Cedric for half a second before he said, "Possibly the very same thing you are, though I've been at it for longer."

"Explain."

"I imagine you can recall the way I was so unceremoniously ousted from our traveling party after leaving Kingshelm."

Cedric snorted. "I recall breaking your nose outside of King's Keep and the softness of your gut around my fist on the road, yes."

"Well, that was unnecessary," Raefe said with a sniff. "But I've been here in Luminaria since then, keeping an eye out for more leads on the Cult of Malakar for—"

"For Master Tartanis," Cedric finished for him.

Raefe nodded.

"Elyria's father."

Raefe nodded again. "I figured you two would have had a heart-to-heart after that whole mess. Sorry for letting my temper get the better of me yet again."

Cedric saw red. "*Sorry?* You blame your *temper* for what you said to her? What you *did* to her?"

Raefe pursed his lips tightly, then sucked them between his teeth as though the effort of keeping in whatever he wanted to say was very great indeed. He managed it, though, swallowing whatever defense had been on the tip of his tongue to instead say, "Rehashing all of that will get us nowhere. Not when you've come a very long way for a very specific purpose, I assume."

Cedric watched the fae's eyes dip to around neck height, and he knew he was envisioning the bondmark Elyria had left on him, the claim he'd taken such umbrage with in the fall.

"How much do you know?" Cedric asked guardedly.

Raefe's eyes nearly rolled into the back of his head. "Sephone has kept me apprised of things learned, as I've needed to know them. And it turns out that my suspicions about what's been going on behind closed doors here in Luminaria may not be too unfounded. I was just following a suspected cultist to see if I could finally get a sense of how they've been getting into the castle when your ass showed up."

Cedric’s heart lurched so hard he found it difficult to catch his breath. “She’s being held in the castle?”

Raefe took a moment before replying, something that had Cedric shifting his weight from foot to foot. “Before you showed up, I wasn’t entirely sure whether my mind had been playing tricks on me. The castle has been sealed since the end of the Crucible, mind you. Some sort of celestial ward cast around the entire fucking thing. Gives quite a sting if you get too close.”

“So, when you said you were trying to see how the cultists enter the castle . . .”

“Yes.”

There was a pang behind Cedric’s ribs, like the thread was being strummed. “I don’t think the ward was placed by any celestial, Raefe.”

“Neither do I, anymore. They must be using some blood mage nonsense to get past, but I’ve yet to witness how. Keeping a low profile has been paramount to me being able to observe as much as I have. I pass well enough for human from a distance—”

Cedric’s gaze flicked to Raefe’s torn ear.

“—but it’s to everyone’s benefit that I remain . . . unobtrusive.”

“Then how do you propose we—” Cedric swayed on his feet, dizzy, disoriented. The bond in his chest pulsed hard.

Too hard.

A sharp pain spiked through his sternum, and he doubled over with a strangled yelp, Ashrender clattering to the ground beside him.

Raefe grabbed his shoulders in an attempt to steady him. “Whoa, what’s hap—”

Cedric’s hands gripped the sides of his head, his thoughts blurring. There was screaming inside his skull. Fear and horror pulsing through him.

“Elle,” he choked out. “Something is *wrong*.”

He tugged on the tether between them, yanking, pulling, slamming his consciousness against it like a man trying to break down a door.

Nothing.

He couldn’t hear her.

Couldn’t feel her.

Couldn’t use it to go to her.

But he knew.

He knew she was there, just on the other side of it, blocked and muted as it was.

Cedric didn't even realize he was thrashing against Raefe, trying to break free from his hold. "Let me go!" he yelled. "I have to—I need to—she needs me—she—"

Slap.

The firm blow of Raefe's palm on Cedric's cheek was clarifying.

"Focus," hissed the fae, holding Cedric at arm's length, gray eyes burning into golden brown. "You'll be of no use to her if you get us caught before we even have a chance to sneak inside. Take a fucking breath."

"I can't—she's in—he must be *doing* something to—"

"I know," Raefe snapped. "I know. And we're going. But you need to keep your shit together until we get there, all right?"

Cedric sucked in a broken breath and, still wobbling slightly on his feet, nodded.

Raefe released him. "Come on, then."

They moved, quickly but quietly, out of the alley, down one street and then another. They stuck to the shadows, but the late hour made for few strangers to avoid. It was clear enough that Raefe knew the layout of the city like the back of his hand, and Cedric didn't quite know how to feel about the swell of gratitude growing in his gut as he followed behind the fae. He didn't like the idea of feeling grateful to the rat bastard at all, and he certainly didn't like the thought of Raefe potentially holding his assistance over him later. But that would be a bridge to cross if they ever came to it. For now there was nothing Cedric wouldn't do, no alliance he would not strike, to get Elyria back.

The screaming in his head had dulled, the sharp pang in his chest more of a rumbling, trembling ache once more. And the closer they got to the ivy-covered walls surrounding Castle Lumin, the thicker the air felt. The towers were dark, no movement, no motion. It really did seem just as abandoned as it had the first time Cedric had approached it, with the aurora blazing high in the sky overhead and pilgrims from both Havensreach and Nyrundelle alike gathering to witness the onset of the Arcane Crucible. The physical condition of the castle was much improved, of course. Like rewinding the effects of time itself, it was no longer the mausoleum it had decayed into after the war. Winning the Crucible had restored the castle to its former glory, along with the surrounding city, and Cedric's eyes pricked in the

inner corners as he allowed himself a singular moment to take in the grandeur, the architectural beauty, the majesty of it all.

This was the place from where his grandparents had ruled over Arcanis.

Where his mother was born.

Where he would—

"This way," cut in Raefe's low voice, leading Cedric along a thin path that wound past the front entrance and to a partially ajar side gate that was easy enough to slip through.

It wasn't until they were yards away from the castle itself that Cedric felt it—a prickle that ran down the back of his neck, had his skin pimpling. The air felt charged—like lightning was weaving through it, waiting to strike. He smelled the tang of magic, though it was laced with something sour, metallic.

"That's where I suspect the ward is the weakest. The kids in town used to be able to get within four or five paces before they felt it." Raefe was pointing to a heavy iron servants' entrance set in the dark stone.

"Kids?"

Raefe shrugged. "You know how it is. It was all so exciting at first—the grand castle restored. But after you lot waltzed out from the Gate, nobody could get back in. The human youths used to dare one another to see who could get the closest. Made a whole game of saying whoever could finally break through got to be king of Arcanis." He huffed a low laugh. "Feel like making an attempt, Your Majesty?"

Cedric shot the fae a glare. "Hilarious." The air vibrated as he strode several paces closer to the door. That current in the air crackled, consolidated, like it was preparing to strike.

Raefe inhaled sharply through his nose, and from the corner of his eye, Cedric saw the fae back up.

He took another step.

But when the magic surrounding the castle pressed outward, consolidating into a blow, a strike . . . something inside Cedric pressed back.

The furnace of power in his chest flared white-hot.

The bond throbbed, pounded, a drumbeat in his soul. Calling him. Summoning him.

To her.

Cedric took a final step forward and wrapped his fingers around the door handle.

He heard the awestruck breath push from Raefe's lungs as the ward shimmered. Heard the hissed curse fall from the fae's lips as thin gold flames spread out from where Cedric's hand touched the metal of the handle, like cracks spiderwebbing through a sheet of ice.

For a moment, Cedric's hand was soldered to the door handle, unable to shift it, to move it, had he wanted to. Light poured from his fingers, the veins on the back of his hand and running up his forearm illuminated, blinding.

And then, all at once, the ward shattered, a hundred shards of fractured magic raining down around them before dissipating back into the ether.

The door swung inward.

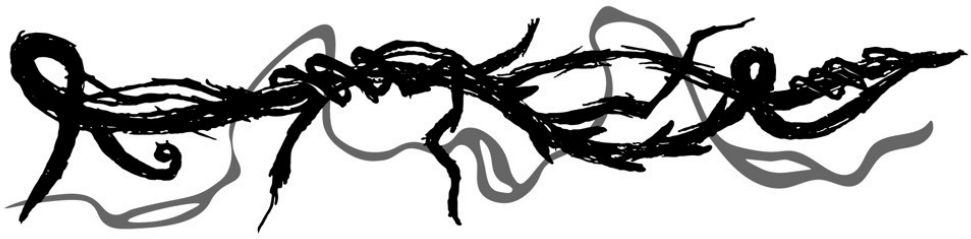
And Cedric Thorne stepped over the threshold.

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14

SOLIMAEUS

ELYRIA



THE FIRE WAS THE WRONG COLOR.

Or, rather, it was a perfectly normal color. Spitting flames of yellow-tipped orange crawled around the corner at the end of the entrance hall, consuming tapestries, leaping down the carpet. Thick smoke filled the air as dozens of cultists ran into the hallway, their faces slick with sweat, their eyes wild. Some of them were yelling at one another. Some of them were attempting to smother or slow down the flames. Some of them were simply looking expectantly at Malakar, who stood a few feet in front of Elyria, chest heaving.

With her vision still blurred by the blow she'd sustained after she'd been freed from Malakar's hold and he'd presumably flung her behind him —in defense or rage or a combination of both—it took Elyria a moment to understand exactly what was happening. Took a moment to register the distant sounds of metal grating against metal, the voices still shouting, yelling, screaming around her.

"Ambush!"

"Seal the doors to the western corridor!"

"How did they get in?"

"Get to the forges!"

"Stop them!"

"Kill them!"

Dark boots and darker robes whipped across her vision as cultists sprinted past, one of them cursing as they tripped over Petra's body. They stumbled with a downward glance, then continued on, completely unconcerned with the headless corpse lying in the middle of the floor.

Elyria's stomach lurched.

The whole hall seemed to tilt, the crackle of the still-blazing fire mixing with the cannonade pounding in her skull. She lifted a shaky hand to prod at the back of her head, and it came back covered in red.

"To the grand hall," yelled Malakar, and fingers bit into Elyria's arm as she was hauled upright, her bare feet dragging over the blood-soaked carpet. "Move," he snapped.

Elyria wasn't entirely convinced her legs remembered how to move, and the thought passed through her cloudy head that this would have been a *really* nice time to still have her wings.

Her slowness did not impress the dark sorcerer. This became evident when coils of black mist suddenly wrapped around her, snaking down from where he held on to her, winding around her arms, her calves, her ankles, moving her forward like a puppet being pulled along a string.

Elyria tried to muster that kernel of light inside her once more, tried to get it to burn through Malakar's hold on her, but it was small, slippery. Her own power flared, a mix of wild and shadow streaking through her veins, as though whatever spells had dampened it all this time had been suddenly undone. But it was too much, too fast, and though she could feel it, though she wanted to sob with relief, she couldn't grasp it. Couldn't wield it.

She was so, so dizzy. How hard had she hit that fucking door?

Malakar shuffled her down the hall, a dozen *sanguinagi* surrounding them both, and with the dark sorcerer's shadows forcing her to face forward, she couldn't see what was happening at her back. But even through bleary eyes, she could see how each cultist's gaze was fixed on whatever was going on at the opposite end of the hall. She could see the fear in their eyes as clashing metal, shouts of warning, and pained cries continued filtering through the smoke.

Something almost painful pierced Elyria's heart as the voices behind her started to take shape, as she reconciled that not all the words being shouted were from the cultists fighting whatever this invading force was.

As she realized one of those voices sounded . . . familiar.

Sounded a little bit like one she used to know.

Because beneath the nausea churning in her gut and the ringing in her ears and the pain—four hells, the pain—something else was *tugging* at her.

And that realization had hope poking out from within that rattling box inside herself. Hope she hadn't let herself feel in months.

Elyria's chest was an echoing cavern, that *tug* behind her ribs banging, pounding, booming—louder than the beat of her heart. Confirming what she knew in the marrow of her bones was always bound to happen but that she had still fought against believing.

He had come for her.

The thought filled her with such immense joy that it stole the breath from her lungs. But it wasn't the only thing leaving her breathless.

Because that was when she heard it too. Inside her mind and outside of it, loud and bright and clear as a bell, like a door had been unlocked, a window flung open.

"Elle!"

Struggling against her shadowy restraints, Elyria jerked, her neck twisting as she looked, sought, strained to see.

To get a single glimpse of him.

With a desperate pull against Malakar's hold, Elyria spun around just before they reached the open doorway they had been moving toward. Her eyes greedily took in the sight of him, blood-spattered but whole, pulling Ashrender from where it had been plunged deep into the chest of a *sanguinagi* cultist. Behind him, another enemy ran in frantic circles, screaming, flailing, before collapsing in a convulsing heap of white-gold flame that illuminated the planes of his face and the way his scarred lip curved into a sneer.

He was the most beautiful sight Elyria had ever seen.

Cedric's head snapped up.

Gold-ringed eyes met hers, widening with wild relief, then narrowing with realization as Elyria was hauled across the threshold.

It was the last thing she saw before the doors shut.



"THERE," said Malakar calmly, dusting his hands before smoothing the front of his robe. "That should give us a little bit of time to figure this out."

Behind him, the bloodred crystal barrier he'd erected over the doors gleamed, torchlight reflecting off its glassy surface like a wicked mirror. Cedric's voice, the bond between them, so clear during that moment in the hall, felt once again muffled, like she was underwater. So, too, was her power, still skittering through her veins, seeking and searching for purchase, for an outlet.

It was wild and thoroughly uncontrollable, especially in her current state. But it wasn't cut off. Wasn't blocked entirely. And that was why, when there was a sudden, violent pounding at the door, Elyria smiled.

"It won't keep him out," she said, her words somewhat slurred. Her gaze dropped to the front of her blouse, turned nearly entirely scarlet now, the wet fabric clinging to her skin. She was very cold.

"Shut up," hissed one of the cultists who had escorted her and Malakar into this new room. "One man cannot best *mi sanguinexos*. Wait and see, you fairy whore." Elyria vaguely recognized him as the short man with the shaved head she had eavesdropped upon earlier.

"But there is more than one, Xander," said his taller compatriot.

Cornelius, Elyria thought giddily, feeling proud of her *excellent* memory skills. She then remembered that giddiness was probably a wholly inappropriate emotion to be feeling at this juncture and was, thus, probably not a very good sign.

Xander waved away Cornelius's protestation. "Even if there were a dozen, even if it were an *army,* it would not matter. Have some faith in your king, man."

"But it's *him*." Another resounding boom echoed from behind the blood-magic-covered doors. "He wields the power of the sun," Cornelius continued, voice rife with panic. "The son has risen, and he is going to—"

There was a sickening squelching sound, a sort of grunt, and a horrified gasp that Elyria realized came from her own mouth, when Cornelius suddenly fell to his knees. He was staring down at his own chest . . . and the massive hole that had been pierced straight through it.

Her gaze shot to Malakar, who had a hand extended, fingers splayed, the shadowy bolt he had just used to rip through Cornelius's chest retracting, being sucked back into himself.

Xander let out a sad exhale but said nothing as his friend collapsed on the marble floor beneath them.

“You lot and your fucking blood,” muttered Elyria, swaying on her feet. She was actually thankful for the way Malakar’s shadow restraints tightened around her at the remark, because she didn’t think she would be able to stay upright without them at this point, and she really didn’t feel like falling face-first into the steaming pool of blood leaking from Cornelius’s body.

Her eyes roamed over his corpse, stuck for a moment on the contrast of the dark crimson staining the pristine floor. Then they trailed along until they reached the nearest wall, taking in the fresco painted across it, constellations spread across an aurora-filled sky.

Why did it look so familiar?

Why did this room *feel* familiar too?

The grand hall, Malakar had called it. That seemed right. With its high ceiling and decorated walls, with banners draped over carved columns, it certainly looked grand.

Much grander than a fortress probably warranted, she thought. Her brow furrowed as she shifted against her restraints, Malakar and his followers paying her little mind. On the other side of the doors, Cedric was still pounding away, his efforts interrupted every once in a while with a few extra seconds of silence, while the *sanguinagi* all had their heads bent together as they plotted several paces away.

And it wasn’t until Elyria managed to turn around that she realized where she was.

Where she had been all along.

Because there, right in front of her fucking face, was the Gate.

It was closed. The intricately welded metal doors that had once greeted every would-be champion of the Arcane Crucible were sealed. There was no shimmering light now, no gentle thrum of celestial magic. The Gate was nothing more than a beautiful frame taking up space in the center of the cavernous room.

But Elyria knew. She remembered.

Her spinning mind was awash with memories—the moment the Arbiter had first emerged from the Celestial Sanctum. Watching each champion, including Cedric, take their vow and stride through the Gate. Kit’s hand on the other side of a massive wall of ice, erected to keep Elyria from following her.

Choosing to follow her anyway.

Elyria recalled how this was the place where she'd had her first argument with Cedric. First of many, in fact. And with many more still to come, she hoped.

Rage built against the bond in her chest, making the tether vibrate, her magic surging and waning inside her, uncontrolled. The pounding at the door grew louder. All this time, she thought she had been kept in some dark corner of the world. Thought Malakar might even have taken her to some secret stronghold in Nocterrum or whisked her across the Sea of Sorrows to some new, foreign place.

She'd never considered he would have kept her in the very middle of the continent, hidden in plain sight.

"Here?" she whispered, eyes finding Malakar as he lifted his head, his expression shifting from dark concern to amusement in an instant. "I've been at Castle Lumin this entire time?"

"What, you did not realize on your little sojourn through my palace earlier tonight?" He laughed, a soul-scraping sound. "My descendant was a clever man, I will say. Manipulating so much just beneath the surface. I thought about rebuilding his stronghold exactly as he had it. He had so many pieces in place already, after all. But then I thought that might make it a little too easy for others"—his gaze drifted to the doors, which shuddered with the force of another blow from the other side—"to find us. It was easy enough to pick up said pieces and move them around, just a touch. A nudge here, a tweak there. To give them new purpose. *Glorious* purpose." Amber flashed in Malakar's dark eyes as he strode back over to where Elyria teetered against her restraints. "The poeticness of it all, however, I will take credit for. Once I learned of the state of Castle Lumin, how it sat, abandoned and protected, I knew I had to bring us back to where it all began."

Boom.

The crystal barrier in front of the doors was vibrating now, as though it was on the very verge of collapsing, but Malakar simply smiled and moved closer. And it was then that Elyria realized that her arms and legs were not the only parts of her that Malakar had wrapped in his shadowy shackles. She shivered, stretching her neck as the rope of shadow around her throat—a collar of darkness, identical to the one he had used to leash Petra—tightened.

"And where it will all *end* . . . for someone."

Like it had been scripted, the barrier shattered, and Elyria felt a fresh surge along the tether in her chest—a bright, aching *tug* that made her gasp, before the doors burst open in a blaze of smoke and fire.

But it wasn't Cedric who came running through the haze.

Elyria's thoughts were slow, her vision blurring in and out of focus as she watched a fae with rust-colored wings soar into the room and land atop one of the cultists, immediately driving a dagger into the man's chest.

She knew that fae.

Several *sanguinagi* jolted forward immediately to engage with Raefe, who had already leapt off the first cultist and was back in the air, hurling a fistful of fire into the face of another. The others lingered, bouncing on their heels as they circled tight to Malakar, forming a protective halo around him.

The dark sorcerer only moved slightly behind Elyria, dragging a finger along the edge of her blood-soaked blouse—possessive, threatening—and grazing over her bondmark once more with a gentleness that would have had her vomiting again, had she anything left to spew.

"Go," Malakar commanded.

There were hisses of pain as the remaining *sanguinagi* smashed their palms against their medallions, piercing their flesh and conjuring weapons of red crystal with their blood. Xander bent down as he ran forward, sweeping his hands through Cornelius's still-cooling blood, and used that instead. Elyria grimaced, as even through her half-conscious state, she knew that it was too many. Too many weapons, too much magic, too many cultists. And where was—

A crystal scimitar sliced into Raefe's leg. He plummeted to the ground with a yelp, a blur of gray eyes and rust wings and blond hair. The surrounding cultists stalked closer, weapons brandished, blood magic crackling in their palms, and never in a thousand years would Elyria have thought she would be rooting for the misguided fool who worked for her father and had thought it fun to burn marks into her flesh. But here she was, wishing and hoping and downright fucking praying for this asshole to come out on top.

Please, she thought, without words, without shape. *Please*.

The bond in Elyria's chest lit up, burning.

Her eyes stung.

The smoke-filled doorway filled with light—sunrise peeking over the horizon, the birth of a new star. It was so brilliant, so blinding, that Elyria

had to shut her eyes against the glare.

And when it subsided, when the bright burst behind her eyelids had dulled to a rolling orange, when she opened them again, there he was.

He walked through the bloody wreckage of the room, past the bodies Raefe had left littered by the entrance, like a star god. Light clung to him, seeped from him. It poured from the tips of his fingers, his palms, the seams of his armor. His hair was dampened with sweat, his face soot-streaked, his jaw shadowed, and his eyes—

Stars above, his *eyes*.

Gone were those warm brown irises that looked like home, ringed with the thinnest golden band. No, they were entirely made of molten gold—iridescent, incandescent. They narrowed, blazing, as they locked on Elyria, taking in the shadow collar around her throat, the blood dripping down her sides, the grip of Malakar's hand on her shoulder.

The way she shook.

And Cedric moved.

Elyria had seen him fight before, of course. Practicing in the training yard, sparring together, fighting through the Crucible, against the cultists in Dawnspire.

She had never seen him like *this*.

He was fury made flesh.

Cedric was little more than a wild streak of crimson-stained sunlight, Ashrender lit with sunfyre from point to pommel. Raefe was all but forgotten as the *sanguinagi* turned their attention to the sun god charging into the room, aiming their scarlet bolts of magic at his heart.

Elyria didn't even have time to feel fear. Not when the magic hissed into steam the instant it met Ashrender's searing sweep. Sparks showered where the sword clashed with crystal weapons, shattering them in a matter of hits, then sliced across torsos, plunged into abdomens, and cut, and cut, and cut.

A cultist lunged at Cedric's flank with a crystal spear formed in his grip—sharp, spiked.

It never even got close.

A deep orange-red burst of fire exploded across the *sanguinagi's* chest, hurtling him backward. Xander, Elyria realized as her eyes followed his flight across the room, watched him crash into the back wall, then slide to the floor with unseeing eyes, the metal medallion on his chest melted.

“To your left!” Raefe barked, and dully, Elyria thought he must have woven a sliver of healing magic around his leg because he wasn’t bleeding anymore.

Cedric pivoted without looking, catching another cultist’s blood-crystal blade on Ashrender’s edge. The woman screamed as her sword shattered into glittering shards, pieces of glass tinkling against the marble floor when they fell around her feet.

She backed up, taking one look at the sunbringer before her and the flamecaller behind him, then turned on her heel and *ran.*

Raefe readied himself to launch after her, but he didn’t have to. Not when the *sanguinagi* was suddenly screaming again, not a sound of distress or disappointment like before, but one of panic and pain—of *terror*. She doubled over mid-stride, her body heaving, her scream shifting into a howl, barely human.

“Shit,” Cedric muttered, and Elyria wasn’t sure if she heard it aloud or in her head. She didn’t think she could hear much over the sounds of snapping bones, of those agonized howls. She watched in horror as the woman spun back around, claw-tipped hands tearing at her hair, carving lines down her face, on either side of bloody, vein-filled eyes.

“What the fuck is this?” Raefe shouted, and it was only then that she realized the same thing was happening to the remaining handful of *sanguinagi*, as though the shifting tide of the battle had triggered this horrifying transformation.

A quick glance up at Malakar beside her revealed the sorcerer was watching his twisted creations with fascination, delight sparking in his black eyes, and disgust pulsed through Elyria.

The beastly cultists lunged at Cedric and Raefe in a flurry of claws and teeth. Raefe clapped his hands together, then drew them apart, revealing a long rope of orange fire strung between his palms. With the flick of his wrist, the fiery whip shot out in a sweeping arc, taking the creatures’ legs out from under them. They hit the ground hard, and Ashrender followed an instant later, Cedric’s strikes clean and efficient and so, so fast as he separated head from neck—once, twice, thrice.

Raefe took care of the final cultist-turned-monster with another flick of his flaming whip, turning feral screams into whimpers and whimpers into silence.

“Hmm. Disappointing. I suppose there are always improvements to be made. I shall have to keep what I learned here in mind,” Malakar said, surveying the scene before him with a cluck of disapproval.

“Let her go,” Cedric growled, wiping black blood from Ashrender as he stood.

Blade still aloft, Cedric lurched forward . . . only to stop in his tracks as Elyria let out a hiss of pain, the shadow collar around her neck cinching ever tighter.

“Ah, ah, ah.” Malakar arched a dark brow, his black gaze piercing, assessing, calculating as it raked over Cedric. “I would be very careful about what you do next, boy.”

“It’s over. Release her, and I will make your death swift and painless.”

Elyria swallowed a scoff.

“Relatively,” Cedric added down the bond, and it took everything in Elyria not to release the choking sob trying to crawl up her throat. Or maybe it was a laugh that she was trying to push back down. She wasn’t quite sure. This entire thing—her entire life, really—just seemed so ludicrous at this point, she wasn’t sure there was anything to do *but* laugh. It was a clarifying thought, despite the muddiness still creeping in across her consciousness. She really must have lost a *lot* of blood by now.

Still, it wasn’t so much that she couldn’t muster the wherewithal to tell Cedric, *“He won’t kill me. He doesn’t know what will happen to his power if he does.”*

A visceral sense of relief flooded down the bond, and Elyria felt the inner corners of her eyes pricking once more. He could hear her. He could *hear* her.

Warm golden brown started to break through his gilded irises as Cedric continued inching toward Malakar. The rest of his face, however, betrayed nothing. “You’ve lost. Release her.”

The dark sorcerer smirked. “Have we?”

Elyria’s ears picked up the faint sounds of shouting from outside, and she drew in an unsteady breath.

“Cedric . . . ,” Raefe warned, gray eyes darting between the standoff before him and the open door to the room, as though expecting another dozen cultists to burst in at any moment.

Malakar tilted his head at Cedric, black pulsing with flares of amber in the light. “That’s right. *Cedric*.”

Elyria's face twisted at the way the dark sorcerer said his name. Like he was already entirely too familiar with it. Like he was testing out what it felt like to keep it.

"We know you, don't we?" asked Malakar, his tone darkening. "Sunbringer."

Elyria felt confusion pulse down the bond—Cedric's, her own. She tried to twist away, but the sorcerer only dragged her against his chest. Chuckling darkly, he dipped his head, pressed the flat of his tongue to Elyria's shoulder, and lapped up a thin rivulet of blood that was still trailing down from the back of her head.

Revulsion—hers—and rage—Cedric's—slammed through her in equal measure. The sound that left him at the sight was *feral*—a low, guttural growl that ripped from her knight's chest.

"She is *mine*!" he roared, lunging forward another few paces. The air around him began to shimmer, refracting, heat rolling off him in waves.

The shadow around Elyria's throat tightened further, black spots blooming at the edges of her vision. Her magic slipped and slid through her blood, still an untamable, elusive thing, though it felt stronger and stronger with every passing second—with every step Cedric took closer to her.

Malakar licked his lips. "You have been keeping secrets from me, *regina*. He is not quite so human after all, is he? How curious." His finger trailed along the edge of Elyria's bondmark, and she shuddered violently.

"Get your hands off her," Cedric growled, though he had halted his approach again.

Malakar ignored him, his voice hushed, low, as though he was once again conversing with only himself. "Ah, then she is not the only one who has been keeping secrets from me, hmm? *Tsk, tsk.* Good thing we will have plenty of time to sort these things out later, once he is gone and she is ours entirely."

Alarm sped up Elyria's already fluttering heart, but the dark stalemate between her captor and her *solimaeus* continued. It didn't matter that Elyria knew Malakar would not risk losing his power by killing her—not before he'd exhausted his other, previously interrupted, options, at least. She knew it didn't matter what she said to Cedric, because he would not risk losing *her*.

And Elyria knew that Malakar knew it too. Knew that he had to be stalling at this point, waiting for more of his followers to rush through the

doors, waiting for there to be enough of them to win, now that Cedric and Raefe had already fought through so many. Now that they were tired, their wells of power spent.

And as multiple bootsteps approached and the shouting grew louder and Raefe's harsh, "Hurry the fuck up!" and "We need to *go*, dammit!" filtered in and out of Elyria's ears, she knew she had to do something.

She had to protect what was hers.

Mine, whispered something in the back of Elyria's mind. *Ours.*

"Ours," Cedric whispered back, his eyes locking with hers.

And that kernel of his light, so difficult to grasp, flared again in the center of her chest, tangling with her shadows and a wave of wild magic so bright she wanted to cry. She couldn't handle it. Her head felt so heavy. Everything hurt. And yet . . .

"Cedric," Elyria rasped, the word half choked, half thought. "Don't—"

"That is right, *regina*," Malakar crooned. "Tell him to stop. Tell him to go. We do not need him anymore, do we? Just as we do not need these."

With a laugh and a snap of his fingers, Malakar released the shadows binding Elyria, and she immediately slumped into him, unable to stay on her feet. The dark sorcerer grasped her upper arms, one hand digging into her flesh on each side, holding her upright like he was showing off a rag doll.

But that wasn't the grip she was focused on.

She steeled herself against the way he tried to grab at the shadows inside her. Tried to close his fist around the darkness behind her ribs and hold fast.

No.

When she was caught off guard, when she was weakened by wards and spells and sadness, when she was not with *him*, Malakar might have been able to seize her shadows. Might have been able to wield them against her, because she thought they answered to him.

But they did not.

They were not his.

They were hers.

And, just a little bit, they were her knight's, too.

Just as Cedric's sunfyre had melded with her magic, a thread of gold woven through the black, so too did a tiny wisp of herself live in him.

She was strongest when he was with her.

They were stronger together.

The wards were down. Cedric was here. And as physically weak as Elyria might have been now, her power was *not*.

Because she was not alone.

Every muscle screaming in protest, Elyria lunged, ripping herself from Malakar's grip. Her shadows slipped through his fingers like smoke when he tried to use them to haul her back.

And like the air itself had been sliced open, roaring, thrashing fury suddenly burst into the room.

Claws raked down Malakar's face, tore at his chest. Teeth snapped at his arms as he launched himself backward with a yell, scrambling to get away from the pitch-black volacarnii that had just leapt from the shadows.

Elyria barely had time to appreciate the sight of Sid chasing the dark sorcerer back. She was still stumbling forward, her legs unsteady, unusable.

She was falling.

Until she wasn't.

Until a pair of arms closed around her, spinning her around, holding her, cushioning her, as she careened toward the ground.

"I have you."

He had her.

The scent hit her first—steel and sweat and that familiar, impossible blend of sandalwood and embers and something so perfectly, ineffably him. The next thing that registered was the sound of his breathing, ragged and frantic against her ear as he held her in his lap. Then the hitch of his chest as he repeated, over and over, *"I have you, I have you, I have you, I—"*

"This is impossible," seethed Malakar, now clear on the other side of the hall, cowering by the Gate, black blood dripping from his face and hands.

Sid prowled back and forth in the space between them, growling, like she was torn between pursuing the dark sorcerer and protecting Elyria.

She was majestic, as large and beautiful as she had been when Elyria had last seen her in Kingshelm, her shadowy wings folded against her back, her feline gaze never leaving Malakar.

A sob bubbled up in Elyria's throat, but this was not the time to break down. Not yet. The sounds from the hall were loud now. Reinforcements had almost arrived.

From the doorway, Raefe shouted again. A curse. Then another one. A flare of heat singed the back of Elyria's head, and she peered over Cedric's shoulder to see the fae standing in the doorway, pitching balls of fire down the hall.

With heartbreaking gentleness, Cedric shifted Elyria off him. She wanted to protest, wanted him to come back. She needed him, needed to feel him, needed to make sure he was real. But she did not have strength left even to speak.

"Sid," he said, snapping his fingers, and the giant shadowcat leapt back—eyes still on the dark sorcerer—and butted her way under Elyria's side, supporting her.

Cedric stood.

Tightened his grip on Ashrender.

Stalked toward Malakar.

"This is not over," spat the dark sorcerer. "We will not be denied. The Line will be pierced. The world rewritten. Should you survive tonight, you will see." His gaze shot past Cedric, piercing Elyria where she lay half-propped against Sid on the floor. "You will see."

His shadows rose around him like a cloak, wrapping him in darkness.

Cedric shouted. Lunged.

But he was already gone.

There was no time to revel in Malakar's absence. In the monumental weight that lifted from Elyria's shoulders instantaneously. To marvel at the tears suddenly pouring down her cheeks, surely leaving tracks in the soot and blood spatter covering them. To relish the feel of Cedric's arms around her once again as he returned to her, muttering a low curse under his breath.

"I'm sorry he got away," he said.

Elyria shook her head. Well, she tried to shake her head. It ended up as more of a kind of limp bobbing against his chest as he carried her toward Raefe, who had darted back inside the doorway with a grim expression.

"There's a fuckton of them," he said. "They clearly don't know their fearless leader turned tail and ran. Can you still fight?"

Cedric looked down at Elyria, the weak grip of her fingers around his doublet, and shook his head. "Not like this."

Raefe pursed his lips, his gray gaze flicking between the two of them, then down to Sid.

"Can she carry her?"

Sid huffed as though the question was insulting and flared her wings wide. Cedric nestled Elyria between them, but dizziness, fatigue, and blood loss made it impossible for Elyria to stay balanced on the shadowcat's back. She immediately slumped to one side, and Cedric was quick to catch her.

Raefe sighed. "Can she carry you both?"

Cedric blinked. "What are you—"

"Take her now." The fae sucked his bottom lip in between his teeth. He reached for Elyria, brushing a stray lock of bloodstained periwinkle from her forehead. "Maybe now you'll believe I'm sorry, yeah?"

And then he soared back into the hallway with a victorious whoop, fire leaping from his arms once more, and disappeared from sight.

Cedric cursed but did not pursue him. If this was the choice Raefe was making, it was clear her knight would honor it.

He climbed onto Sid's back, one arm secured around Elyria's waist, the other fisted in the shadowy fur at the nape of Sid's neck. Elyria felt the mix of sadness and pity and heartbreak and rage that flitted down the bond as he took in the sight of her back, surely a mess of blood and cuts and—oh.

Right.

Scars.

She leaned against him, her head lolling onto his shoulder. "You came for me," she said, her voice a soft, whimpering thing.

And the world went dark.

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PART II

DUSK

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15

NOBODY'S DAUGHTER

TENNY



KINGSHELM WAS QUIETER THAN SHE'D EVER KNOWN IT.

Not in terms of noise. There were still the everyday sounds of life echoing from every corner of the rebuilding city. But it was quiet. Exhausted. Grieving.

Or perhaps that's just me, Tenny thought from her balcony, hands resting on the railing. From this height, she could see over the palace walls and into the main thoroughfare of the city. She could even make out part of the Walk from up here—could see the tangle of narrow streets, the rooftops much in need of repair.

More than two months had passed since her father's mutinous attack on King's Keep, and *finally* the king and his council seemed to be righting itself. Still, it was clear that whatever small efforts they were making to actually rule over this city—let alone the kingdom—had yet to reach its most vulnerable citizens.

Tenny had been trying where she could, when she could. Which, lately, felt like always. Better to spend her time visiting the children of the Walk, bringing food and provisions and at least some modicum of relief, than to let her thoughts dwell on everything that had happened though. On just how lonely it was here lately.

On the ground below them, workers were rebuilding one of the garden walls that had been destroyed during the attack. They swung a large beam

into place with a *thump*. A few children who had gathered at the gate beyond the courtyard clapped, delighted.

Kingshelm was healing.

Slowly. Messily. But healing.

Tenny wished she felt the same.

Instead, it felt like she was frozen in her current state of grief—unable to move forward, unable to move on. It probably didn't help that she was just so, so tired. She dreaded going to sleep, never sure if her unconscious mind would force her to recall the horror of the attack, of what she'd learned about her father that night and in the days after. If she would dream of seeing his dead body, or if instead she would witness the horrific sight of Malakar rising in it.

She was able to stave off the thoughts while she was awake. Able to seek purpose. But the more capable the king and council became again—*finally*—the harder that was to come by as well.

At least there was still the role she filled for her friends. Tenny was thrilled to be able to stay current on everyone's whereabouts, thanks to all the missives she received—both by regular means and, even better, the ones that occasionally *poofed* into existence from the shadows. She enjoyed being a kind of home base for updates on how all their various missions were going, spread throughout Arcanis as they were. If she couldn't be out there with them, at least she got to be the first to receive notice, to pass along news when necessary, to help keep everyone connected.

Still, it wasn't the same.

Wasn't the same as having them back here, seeing their smiling faces, getting to share meals and quiet moments.

She missed them.

Missed being an active part of all the important things they were doing.

Wished she could be part of them too.

But she was not a victor of the Crucible.

She was not a diplomatic knight. She was not a nocterrian, burdened with knowledge so vast, her human brain could barely comprehend it. She was not the niece of a king or the daughter of a duchess.

She was nobody's daughter.

"Gee, Ten. I don't think I've seen an expression that glum since the last time I took Thraigg to the Cracked Keg only to find they'd run out of tinkerbrew." Ollie's crooning accent pulled a reluctant half smile from

Tenny as she turned to face the fae, his ice-blue wings folded against his back as he leaned with one shoulder braced against the doorframe.

“Tinkerbrew?”

“Don’t tell him I told you, but it’s his favorite.” Ollie winked, and Tenny immediately felt lighter. It helped that at least he had elected to stay. She’d thought it a given that he would have wanted to go with Jocelyn when she departed Kingshelm for Elderglade. Tenny wouldn’t have blamed him if he had—she only wished she had been able to go too.

The hope that had sparked in her last week when she received Nox’s note informing her that Cedric had figured out how to find Elyria at last could not be overstated. Neither could the emotion she’d felt when a messily scrawled letter arrived from Young Shep a few days later, alerting her that the two of them had arrived safely at the sylvan sanctuary.

The relief that swept through Tenny upon reading those words had brought her to her knees. It had taken everything in her not to run out to the stables, saddle up her horse, and immediately make for Elderglade. But even if her pampered mare had the stamina to make the long journey into the Midlands—something that was questionable at best, given the horse’s name was *Elizabeth*, for Aurelia’s sake—it had been out of the question.

With the rebuilding efforts still precarious, with Barcroff’s voice in King Callum’s ear and entirely too many issues for the council to tackle at once, she wasn’t sure if she trusted the city to thrive without her.

It wasn’t a boastful thought. Tenny was tired, after all. She’d much prefer being able to jaunt off and do as she pleased. But this was where she was needed, for now. Where she was best able to help.

Wasn’t it?

“Buck up, buttercup,” said Ollie. “I come bearing gifts.”

“Oh?” Tenny huffed a small laugh—the first one she’d managed that morning.

Ollie grinned as he held out a neat stack of letters, and Tenny’s heart clenched at the sight of them. Not because she wasn’t glad to have them but because each and every missive in the pile was written on white paper, which meant yet another day would pass without an update from Nox. She’d run out of the supply of shadowscript parchment the nocterrian had left for her, which made sending a message back to them impossible now. She didn’t know where they were, and she didn’t know why that made her so uncomfortable—like her skin fit just a little bit wrong.

Playing the role of makeshift postmaster had simply gotten her used to knowing everything, and she didn't like the thought of being *out* of the know now. That was all. She would have been uncomfortable with not knowing where any of her friends were.

Tenny took the stack from Ollie, smiling at the messy script of her own name scribbled atop the first one, and tore open Kit's letter.

"Kit received our message about Elle. She plans to make for Elderglade immediately." Tenny exhaled, her shoulders sagging with relief. At least she knew where *she* was.

She moved Kit's letter to the bottom of the pile, then gave Ollie a knowing glance as she noted that the next one had very clearly already been opened. "You do know that Tristan wrote *my* name on this envelope, yes?"

Ollie shrugged. "Did he? Huh. Must've missed that."

"Why don't you just tell me what he said, hmm?"

"Oh, nothing much. He and Zephyr are still en route to Kinsgaith. Sent that note when they stopped in Goldenvale. It's been a long journey—"

"Well, yes, the Chasms will do that."

"—but they should reach the village soon. And once there, they'll have a better sense of how deep Malakar's influence and corruption have bred there. They are . . . hopeful that after what happened in Daeglen, there is much they will be able to uncover."

Tenny sighed. "I wish I could be there. Wish I could do more—do *anything*."

"You are doing something," Ollie said firmly. "Imagine the state Kingshelm would be in without you. Would King Callum even be able to entertain discussions of what to do about the Cult of Malakar? Would there be any chance of him sending his forces to the Midlands, to try to reclaim Castle Lumin?"

"I have nothing to do with any of that."

"Is this unnecessary modesty a common human trait, or is it something unique to you?"

Tenny rolled her eyes. "I'm just being factual."

"Portentia Church. Imagine, for a second, you are but an average citizen of Kingshelm. Your city has been ripped apart, friend turning on friend, one of the most esteemed members of the court revealed to be a dirty, dastardly, mutinous traitor—sorry—and both king and council in ruins. Mana has run scarce, and chaos and confusion fill every new day."

“I don’t have to imagine very hard, Ollie. That is exactly what it was like in those early days after the attack.”

“Exactly. But imagine *you* hadn’t been there to help pick up the pieces afterward. The people of this city know you. They trust you. And they have watched you throw yourself into rebuilding even the smallest sense of normalcy for weeks and weeks and weeks. Your contributions have not gone unnoticed.”

Tenny blinked up at the sky, fighting the prickle of tears.

Ollie rested an arm around her shoulders. She leaned in, grateful.

“I just want to fix the things he broke,” she whispered. “I want to make Kingshelm better than he ever did. And I want—”

She stopped.

Ollie raised a brow. “You want . . . ?”

Tenny shook her head. “Doesn’t matter.”

A beat of silence passed between them, and Tenny busied herself reading through the rest of the messages Ollie had brought: A grain report from the head of the farmer’s guild. A bill from Master Llewis that she would be more than happy to pass on to Barcroff. And finally, a note from Jocelyn confirming her journey to the Midlands had gotten her at least as far as Dawnspire, though aside from stopping long enough to send the missive, she wouldn’t be lingering there—for obvious reasons. She was probably due to arrive in Elderglade any minute, in fact.

“Was there anything else?” Tenny asked. “Any other letters?”

Ollie hesitated.

Her stomach sank. “Just say it.”

He exhaled. “No word from Nox or Thraigg yet.”

She gripped the railing so hard, her knuckles ached. “But they should have arrived in Elderglade from the Sacred Mountain by now.”

“I know.” Ollie’s voice softened. “But there could be a hundred different reasons why we haven’t heard that they have. Besides, Nox can’t technically get into Elderglade anyway, right? So there’s no rush on their part.” The breezy way he said it told Tenny the fae was trying to lighten her mood, to counteract the way he must have heard her heartbeat pick up.

These fae and their heightened senses, I swear to the Five, she thought. And then, because she didn’t want Ollie’s pity, nor did she want to think any deeper about why she cared so much that it had been so long since she’d heard from Nox, she said, “I’m just sick of being stuck here.”

Ollie shrugged. “So, let’s go somewhere else, then.”

Tenny blinked at him. “You just went on and on about how important I was to this city, how much it mattered that I’d chosen to stay.”

“Yes, well, that was before. They did need you then. They need you less now.”

“Where would we even go?”

Ollie grinned.

Tenny loosed an exasperated sigh. “What reason do the two of us have to visit Kinsgaith, Oleander?”

“You read Tristan’s earlier letter,” Ollie said with a shrug. “Rumors are that the Chasm has been slowly expanding. Kinsgaith is right on the edge. Would it not make sense for you to extend your humanitarian efforts to the citizens of Havensreach most in need of aid?”

“Uh-huh. And this has absolutely nothing to do with the fact that a certain knight is on his way to this very same village at present?”

“Never even crossed my mind.”

“It’s dangerous for you. We know Kinsgaith to be home to scores of sympathizers, at best, and full-blown *sanguinagi* at worst. They will not be happy to see an Arcanian in their midst. And unlike Zephyr, you do not have the ability to glamour yourself into looking human.”

Ollie *tsk*ed. “*Unlike Zephyr,*” he mocked, “I do not have green skin or sylvan proportions.” He raked his fingers through the mop of turquoise hair on his head. “All I need is a proper hat, and we’ll be golden.” As if to emphasize his point, he snapped his fingers, and the ice-blue wings on his back disappeared.

Tenny bit her lip, and victory flashed in Ollie’s brown eyes.

“Don’t get too excited. We can’t just up and leave,” she said. “There is still work to finish here. And we need to prepare an official petition for King Callum before I can even think of going anywhere.”

“To send reinforcements to Luminaria?”

“Yes. Reports say that the castle has been re-warded and is impenetrable once more, but who knows how many of Malakar’s followers are living within the walls of the Lost City?”

“Right. And whether he’s hiding once more within the castle or is licking his wounds somewhere else, we all know his plan cannot be finished.”

Tenny breathed in, her lungs filling fully for what felt like the first time since the night of the attack on King's Keep. This was exactly what she had been missing these past weeks. Drive. Purpose. Something to push all this agony into.

Tenny did not want to miss out on anything else.

She would not let her father's shadow define Kingshelm.

She would not let Malakar tear the world apart.

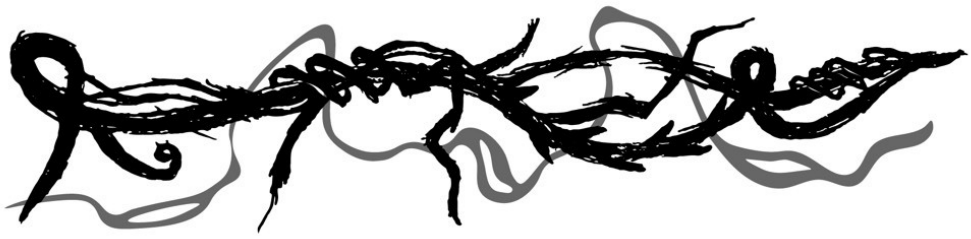
And she would not let the people she loved face it all without her any longer.

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16

HOME AGAIN

ELYRIA



WARMTH.

The kind that seeped into limbs, curled over goose-pimpled skin, heated chilled bones. Sunbeams streaming through light-dappled leaves. A roaring fire in a cozy hearth. Warmth and light and an unmistakable hum of power coiling right in the center of her chest. That was what Elyria felt as she roused.

Such a pleasant dream, she thought, the final vestiges of sleep still clouding her mind. A welcome reprieve from the nightmares she'd had each night since the events at Seastone. The nightmares she'd lived during the days since.

She did not particularly want to wake from this one. Not as that warmth traveled through her body like it was a physical thing, a grip against her body, holding her close, banding around her hips, across one of her arms.

It felt so *real*.

Understanding crested like dawn on the horizon. It felt like waking up—slow at first, and then all at once. Breath caught in Elyria's chest as her eyes fluttered open. She dipped her chin to take in the strong, tanned arms wrapped around her midsection, watched the early-morning light glint off the silver ring looped around one finger.

Was it real?

She tried her very best not to move, not even to breathe. She didn't dare disturb this blessing, this miracle she had been granted. But eventually, the

moment came when she could hold her breath no longer, and when she was finally forced to exhale, it was on a shaking sob.

Cedric's arms tightened around her, and he drew her closer, fitting the length of her body perfectly into the curve of his. His breaths were slow and even, each one the very sound of contentment as they ghosted across her ear, and Elyria had to shut her eyes again to keep the tears burning along the edge of her vision from spilling over.

Please, please, she begged whichever celestial might possibly be listening. *Don't take him from me again.*

The memories of everything that had happened rushed in, a violent assault on Elyria's senses. The warm creep of blood dripping from her back, her head. Malakar's wretched whisper in her ear, his touch on her body. The sheer amount of *death* she had witnessed.

But then, also, a spark of heat. A voice that sounded like hope echoing in her mind. Brilliant, blazing, blinding light.

Elyria laid her hand over Cedric's, lacing their fingers together and drawing his palm to her heart, where it beat a wild rhythm—louder and louder as her recollections surfaced. But he was so warm. He was so solid. And despite the memories still racing through her mind, Elyria felt so safe.

Her knight let out a sleepy groan as he moved their joined hands up to Elyria's neck, resting them over the mark he had left there almost as if by instinct. He buried his face in her hair, dragging a long inhale into his nose as though memorializing the scent of her, and his grip around her grew even tighter. Something hard and insistent pressed against the small of her back, and Elyria wanted to laugh at the sensation that immediately coiled deep in her core in response.

All blessings to the Five, she thought. *At least some things haven't changed.*

She didn't know if Cedric was awake, didn't know if he realized what he was doing or if it was some innate, instinctive, unconscious thing to be drawing her so close. All she knew was that it wasn't close enough. His hold on her wasn't tight enough. She wiggled her hips, trying to settle into him even more. Were she able to, she might've crawled right inside his chest. She wanted the light that burned inside him to wash over her, wanted to nestle against his heart and live there.

She felt as though her own heart might be glowing at the thought, but before she could check, Cedric suddenly stilled against her. A strangled

noise streamed from his throat as he scrambled away, the loss of warmth against her back making Elyria shiver.

“You’re awake,” he said, his voice equal parts awestruck and panicked. “You’re *really* awake.”

She rolled over, blinking the final remnants of sleep from her eyes, and took a deep, long look at the knight standing beside the bed she was currently draped upon.

He stared right back at her, his gold-ringed eyes wide.

His hair was mussed. That was the first thing she noticed. His tousled waves were disheveled, sticking up adorably on one side. The black tunic he wore was wrinkled, the ties that crossed over his clavicle tangled with the golden chain of his necklace. His scarred lip twitched, his mouth slightly agape, like he was searching, cataloging, awkwardly contemplating what he should say.

He was perfect.

“You’re real,” she said softly, and his expression crumpled. He leapt back onto the bed, drawing her into his arms, onto his lap, and Elyria sighed into the heat of him. She laid her cheek against his chest, wrapped her arms around his neck, and listened to the mesmerizing *thump, thump, thump* of Cedric’s heart.

Not a dream, she thought. And though she hadn’t meant to send the words down the shimmering bond between them, Cedric answered anyway.

“Real,” he confirmed, and the relief that tore through Elyria was such a powerful, visceral thing, it made her entire body shudder.

He could hear her.

He could really hear her.

He was here, and she was here, and they were together.

“I’m sorry, Elle,” he whispered into her hair, his voice thick, the words choked. *“I’m so fucking sorry.”*

She lifted her head, dropping her hands and shifting slightly in his lap to look at him.

“Oh, Sir Worrywart. What do you have to be sorry about?” She tried to make the words sound casual. She wanted nothing more than for them to pick up exactly where they’d left off, for nothing to have changed, for things to go back exactly as they were *before*. But she couldn’t stop her voice from hitching on the last word, and she had to press her lips together hard enough to hurt in order to keep from crying.

She really, *really* didn’t want to cry. Because once she started, once she let that dam break, Elyria wasn’t sure she would ever be able to stop.

“I took too long,” he said seriously, blowing out a breath and tightening his hold around her. “I was almost too late.”

“But you weren’t,” she insisted. “You were right on time.”

He shook his head. “You are too generous with me. I’ll never forgive myself for letting him take you. For failing to protect you.”

Elyria bit the inside of her cheek. She could feel the pressure in her chest rising, the vivid memories of everything that had happened swirling underneath the layer of relief and gratitude and joy at being reunited with her *solimaeus.*

She didn’t want those memories. She didn’t want to think about what had happened or what had *almost* happened. She didn’t want to think about any of it ever again.

Elyria cleared her throat and twisted halfway out of Cedric’s lap so she could take a better look at the room. She noted the beautiful woven branches of the headboard of the bed they were on, the raw wooden planks of the surrounding walls. “Where are we?”

“Elderglade,” Cedric replied. “You are safe here.”

Elyria swallowed. “How long has it been since . . . ?”

“Four days,” Cedric replied, and Elyria squeezed her eyes shut.

Four days. Four fucking days.

“How was I . . . ? How did we—” Glimpses started to form in Elyria’s mind—flashes, a series of unfamiliar moments.

The soft thud of her body against Cedric’s chest as he walked with her in his arms.

Spoonfuls of warm broth sliding down her throat.

Low murmurs, voices speaking gentle words. And some not-so-gentle ones too, though she’d never be able to recall exactly what was said.

Warm, soapy water cascading down her arms.

The distinct memory of lying on her stomach, her arms crossed under her chin, while someone examined her back.

Nimble fingers untangling her hair.

“This isn’t the first time I’ve awoken, is it?” she asked.

Cedric shook his head. “You’ve been in and out since we arrived.” He pursed his lips to one side. “Mostly out. And even when you were technically awake, you didn’t seem . . .”

“All there?”

“Fully lucid, is what I was going to say.”

Elyria scooted backward so she could lean against the headboard, leaving her legs draped over Cedric’s as he sat on the bed. If there had ever been a sign of the head injury she’d suffered before fleeing Castle Lumin, there certainly wasn’t one now. Her body felt surprisingly healthy as she took stock of herself. She felt almost . . . whole.

She looked down at the loose waves of her hair falling over each shoulder. No matted blood. No tangles or snarls. It looked . . . nice. Smooth and brushed and smelling faintly of lavender and merryleaf. “Did you bathe me?”

Cedric raked his fingers through his own hair, his hand lingering at the back of his neck. “Well, I—I mean, I didn’t think you’d mind if it was me, and—that is, I thought you wouldn’t want—”

The corner of her lip twitched. “Calm yourself, Sir Flustered. It wasn’t an accusation.”

“The first time, it was simply to clear away the blood, so the healers could get a better look at your injuries. You fell back asleep mid-bath.” His scarred lip pulled into a soft smile, but it only lasted for a second. “When you awoke the next day, though, you were inconsolable. Like you’d had a nightmare. You were crying and thrashing and sweating, and I just . . .” He swallowed. “It calmed you.”

Elyria blinked. It was strange hearing about herself like this, so detached from what Cedric was describing. She thought hard, trying to dredge up the memories of these things happening, but they were disjointed, foreign flashes. So, in the spirit of keeping that dam inside her intact, she didn’t think particularly hard. She did her best, in fact, to push down those feelings, forcing a half-tipped smile onto her lips. “Ah, so you bathed me *multiple times*, then.”

Cedric offered a sheepish grin. “Just twice.”

“Here’s to hoping I remember the next one.” She gave him a wink, then let her eyes trail down his torso, lingering slightly on the still-present—and yes, still-impressive—bulge in his pants.

Well, if there’d been any lingering doubt as to whether or not this was real, that would’ve put paid to it.

There was nothing more real, in fact, than the choked sound Cedric made as he followed her gaze to the evidence of his morning desire.

“I—four fucking hells, Elle,” he sputtered. “You know I don’t have any control over it, and it’s not—I didn’t—I’d never—” His entire face had flushed the most adorable shade of pink. “You have to know *that* is truly the last thing on my mind.”

“Mmm,” she said. “That’s a shame.”

Elyria wanted to appreciate the way she’d rendered her knight speechless, but consciousness had rapidly caught up with her, and nature had a more pressing concern. She sat up, swinging her legs off the side of the bed, and stretched her arms overhead. “Speaking of the bathing room . . .”

“Oh. Oh! Of course. Right over here.” Cedric leapt up, took Elyria’s hand, and led her across the room to a wooden door centered on the opposite wall. “Take as long as you need.”

“Thank you for your permission, Sir Knight,” she said with a grin, then closed the door on a spluttering Cedric.

In the solitude of the small bathing chamber, though, Elyria’s face immediately fell. She leaned against the door, sucking in several slow breaths before she was ready to move again. Despite all evidence to the contrary, there was still something surreal about being here—or, more accurately, about not being *there* anymore. It was as though she half expected to be yanked from this dream—like if she closed her eyes for too long, when she reopened them, she would be back in that hallway, bound and helpless, watching Petra’s blood creep closer and closer while Malakar ran his wretched hands over her body.

Elyria shook her head. Then she pinched the underside of her wrist for good measure. *Real,* she reminded herself. *This is real and you are free and he is here with you.*

She relieved herself, then lingered over the washbasin, taking a moment to appreciate the smoothness of the wooden bowl, delighting in the whimsy of the water spout that seemed to be made of a living silveroak sprig. Sylvan magic really was something to marvel at. She washed her hands and braided her hair to keep it back before splashing water on her face. And then, finally, with some reluctance, she looked at herself in the simple frameless mirror that hung in front of her.

Elyria wasn’t sure what she’d expected to see. Wasn’t sure *who* she’d expected to see. She thought perhaps these past months would have left physical signs—dark circles under her eyes, a sallowness to her skin,

hollows in her cheeks. And maybe those things were there—a touch of them, at least. Maybe she did look tired, looked like she still carried a heavy weight. But overall, she looked . . . normal.

Her face was not nearly as thin as she'd thought it might have gotten with how little she'd been eating. Her cheeks had a pleasant peachy flush, her lips rosy. She was dressed in a long white tunic and loose linen pants. Any thought that she might turn around and try to get a look at the state of her back was quickly squashed. She was sure she wouldn't find anything but the original scars from where her wings had been anyway. And maybe even those would be gone now, given that Malakar had taken it upon himself to slice them open anew. Based on how good she felt physically, Elyria doubted there would be a single scratch to be found.

There was really only one scar that mattered anyway.

She peeled the neckline of her tunic aside and saw the evidence of her bondmark, those faint crescents still in place where her neck met her shoulder, exactly where it belonged. She skated the pad of her finger over the mark, and a flash of emotion pulsed down the bond so fast, she wasn't sure how to name it. She thought she might've heard a *thud* from the other side of the door, though, followed by a low hiss, like the kind that accompanied the stubbing of a toe.

Elyria gave her reflection a bewildered shrug. Whether thanks to the sylvan healers or the days of rest—four fucking days of it—or just being in Cedric's presence, Elyria Lightbreaker simply looked like . . . herself.

And that was almost enough to make her break right then and there.

Cedric was sitting on the edge of the bed when Elyria exited the bathing chamber. He bolted to his feet in an instant, wringing his hands, bouncing slightly. Nervous, jittery. And Elyria couldn't help but think that this was a bit extreme, even for her Sir Worrywart.

She sucked on her teeth as she watched him. "What's wrong?"

"What?" he said, too fast. "What do you mean? Why would anything be wrong?" He closed the distance between them and took her hands in his, pressing a kiss to the back of both sets of knuckles. "Everything's *right*, now that you're here. Now that you're awake. Everything will be fine."

Her brow arched. "Why wouldn't it be fine?"

"So you don't remember how we got here or what has happened since we arrived," he blurted. "How about what happened before I arrived at Castle Lumin? Do you remember—"

“Fortunately or unfortunately, I remember everything right up until the moment we fled,” she said with a grimace. “Just nothing after that.” A thought occurred. “Is Raefe . . . ?”

Cedric gave a sad sort of shrug before saying, “I do not know.”

Elyria was surprised at the strength of the wave of sorrow that rolled through her. But then there was another thought, another memory. “Four hells. Sid! Where is she? Is she—”

“She’s fine,” Cedric said soothingly, drawing her against him. She laid her cheek on his chest once more and breathed in his calming, charred sandalwood scent. “Better than fine, really. She took us all the way to the Elderglade entrance, then slipped into the shadows and, I assume, is back to doing whatever it is she does when left to her own devices.”

Elyria blew out a long breath.

Cedric inhaled an even longer one. “You have no idea the relief I felt when she emerged from the ether at Castle Lumin, Elle.”

“Oh, I think I have *some* idea,” Elyria said into his shirt. “There isn’t a word strong enough to encompass the satisfaction I felt seeing her claws rip down Malakar’s face.”

Cedric released a chuckle, though Elyria could tell it was only half-hearted. “Well, yes, that too, of course. But I meant . . .”

She pulled back slightly to look at him, her head tilted. “You meant what?”

“After you were taken, it seemed like she had started to . . . revert. Regress? It was like she was getting smaller and smaller with each passing day. When last I’d seen her before she emerged at Castle Lumin, she was barely bigger than the day you created her. I didn’t know if she would disappear entirely soon. And I thought . . .”

“You thought it meant I was disappearing too.”

He nodded.

“Maybe I was,” she said sadly, crushing her face to his chest once more. “I think that if you hadn’t come *exactly* when you did, even if my body had kept me alive, I think . . . I think my soul was dying. Every minute in that place, with my power suppressed and our connection cut off, and forced to be there with *him* . . .”

Anger and heartbreak pulsed down the bond in equal measure, pressing in on Elyria from the inside. From the way Cedric’s grip tightened around

her, she knew her knight was trying very hard to keep it all from spilling over.

She could relate to that inclination.

"It's all right," she said soothingly down the bond, trying to send calm and reassurance to him. *"Like I said, you were right on time."*

"By the stars, you *should not be the one comforting* me.*"* He cleared his throat. *"You forgive me too easily."*

"There is nothing to forgive. I'm the one who chose to—" Her thoughts stuttered. She swallowed. *"I chose to go with him."*

And then Elyria was in motion, an arm sliding behind her knees as Cedric scooped her up and deposited her back on the bed. He sat down next to her, taking one of her hands and interlacing their fingers, like he was scared she might float away if he wasn't holding her down.

The bond between them thrummed, her chest filling with his love and adoration and, yes, a little bit of pity and a lot of heartbreak—all rippling down the tether between them.

She was feeling too much.

"I chose to go with him," she repeated aloud, "and I can't—"

"You chose to save us," Cedric interrupted, each word as solemn as a vow. "You chose us over yourself." A flash of anger sparked amidst the overwhelming waves of other emotions surging from Cedric, and Elyria had to suck in a steadying breath.

"And maybe you're right that I shouldn't be the one saying sorry," he continued, his voice clipped, though he didn't shift away from her, didn't drop her hand. "Maybe *you* should be. Because how could you ever think that was an acceptable trade?"

Elyria blinked at him. "He would have killed you, and I—"

"And you what? How could you think even for a second that I or Kit or Nox or Tenny would have *ever* wanted you to go with that madman? I would rather have died that day, knowing how you suffered, knowing what he did to you."

"And I would rather have suffered a thousand times than lose you again!"

And despite all her earlier efforts, despite her desire to fall right back into their old dynamic—her, aloof; him, bumbling—Elyria could not stop the sob that burst from her, like the first drop of rain descending from a storm-filled sky.

First there was the one: a single sob, a shuddering intake of breath.

And then came the rest, all at once.

The dam broke.

Whatever scraps of a lid had remained there, tamping down her rattling box of emotions, shredded into nothing. Every feeling she had tried so very hard to bury, to keep down, burst free. Elyria felt it all. Every minute of their separation. Every cut that Malakar had scored on her body. Worse still, the final threats he had sliced into her soul.

Tears spilled from her eyes, rolled over her cheeks, dripped onto the neckline of her tunic. Her chest heaved, her shoulders shaking as she strained to take in breath fast enough.

Like he had been born from speed itself, Cedric hoisted her back into his lap, cradling her to his chest.

"Shh," he whispered against her ear, one hand gently holding her at the small of her back, the other rubbing soothing strokes down her arm. Then, mind-to-mind and soul-to-soul, he said, *"I'm sorry. I have you. You are safe and you are home."*

And though Cedric's arms were wrapped around her and she could once again nestle herself in the warmth of his body, though the bond between them vibrated with their closeness, it wasn't close enough. He wasn't *near* enough. She needed to feel him everywhere, to have the weight of him over her, securing her, lighting up the bond between them over and over.

Never again.

Never would he be taken from her again.

And she needed him to know that, to *understand* that.

Needed to make herself believe it.

Elyria drew a shaky breath, wiping at her eyes with the backs of her hands before twisting in Cedric's lap. She shifted her legs so they fell to either side of his waist, then threw her arms around his neck. There was a question in his eyes as she stared into their gold-ringed depths, taking note of the dark circles under them, like he hadn't slept a full night in weeks.

It was actually somewhat ironic, she thought, that he was the one showing the signs of just how deep a toll their separation had taken.

"There are different kinds of injuries," Zephyr had said during the Crucible. *"Not all of them are so easily healed."*

Some instinct inside had Elyria immediately wanting to soothe her knight, to comfort him, to help *him* heal. It helped clear away some of her

sadness, replacing it with *purpose*. She wanted to lay his head in her lap and stroke those silky chestnut waves until sleep returned to claim him.

But they could rest later.

Because here, right now, Elyria felt like being selfish. And there was something she needed more in this moment.

It was soft, at first. A gentle, cautious kiss as she pressed her lips to his scar.

And then it wasn't.

Cedric groaned as Elyria crushed her mouth against his, his hands immediately moving to her waist, fingers digging into her sides.

It wasn't tight enough.

He kissed her hard, his tongue slipping between her lips as she parted them on a sigh.

It wasn't hard enough.

She ground her hips against him, desperate for the friction of him, the pulsing feel of his *want.*

It still wasn't enough.

Elyria trailed a line of kisses up Cedric's jaw, then gently pressed her lips to both of his closed eyelids, and it was his turn to shiver.

"Are you sure?" he whispered.

"I've never been more sure of anything," she replied, rolling her hips against him and eliciting another groan. "I need you. I need you so much."

"Stars a-fucking-bove, I need you more." And then his lips were on hers again, his tongue sweeping into her mouth as she opened for him.

Her hands skimmed up the sides of his chest as she lifted his tunic over his head and discarded it somewhere behind him. He did the same to her, planting a soft kiss to her bondmark as soon as it was bare, and Elyria's entire body lit up.

This. This was what she needed. Just the feel of him, his lips on her lips, his skin on her skin, his love vibrating down the bond, erasing every bad thing that had happened, that would ever happen.

The corners of Elyria's eyes pricked as she kissed him once more, lingering for an extra moment on his scar. She continued down the side of his neck, over his collarbone, until she reached the twin crescents she'd left on him.

Her own mark pulsed encouragingly as she lifted her face to meet Cedric's awestruck gaze.

“I love you,” she said down the bond, and then, because she wanted him to hear the words as much as feel them, she repeated them aloud. “I love you. I should have told you a hundred times before. I thought it every moment we were apart. And I’m so sor—”

He devoured her apology, kissing it away, letting it dissipate into the ether where it belonged. It was stupid to have even tried to say it. In her heart of hearts, Elyria knew he’d had to have known the depths of her feelings this whole time, knew that he had *felt* them just as much as she did. But that didn’t stop her desire to speak them aloud, like doing so would solidify their existence, their permanence.

She had spent so much time living in the regret of not saying it sooner. Of worrying she had missed her chance.

She would not make that fucking mistake again.

“I love you,” she said again.

“I love you,” he replied, the words simple and honest and earnest. “I am in love with you. And I couldn’t even tell you exactly when it happened, because it feels like I always have been. Even when I thought I hated you, or hated who I thought you were, there was still something inside me that knew.”

Elyria let out a sound that was half laugh, half sob, but the tears that spilled from her eyes this time were not born of grief or sadness. “I knew you would come for me.” She took his face in her hands, one palm gently cupped around each side of his jaw. “Even without being able to hear you or feel you. Even in my darkest moments—and I would be lying if I said there hadn’t been many—I knew.”

Her thumb brushed against his scarred lip, and he pressed a kiss to the pad of it.

“Nothing in all four quarters of hell could have kept me away,” he said.

She dipped her head to graze his jaw with the tip of her nose, taking a deep, drugging inhale, letting his charred sandalwood scent fill her soul. Then she was traversing the muscled column of his neck again, lower and lower, until she was back at his bondmark. And when she planted a sweet kiss there before grazing the edge of her teeth against the mark, something within her knight shifted. A feral sort of growl rumbled from his chest as he threw his head back, lifting his hips so the hard edge of him ground against her core, and she shuddered with delight.

Cedric ran his hands up Elyria's back—lovingly, reverently, his hands hot, desire pulsing down the bond between them. His fingertips brushed against her shoulder blades, against her slivered scars, against the *nothingness* there . . .

. . . and Elyria froze.

Every muscle in her body seized, her nerves lighting up with a conflicting mess of emotions she couldn't pin down. Despair and desire and anger and adoration and loss and love and shame and shame and shame and sh—

"What's the mat—" Realization seemed to dawn on Cedric just as quickly as Elyria's reaction had caused her to seize. He yanked his hands back to his sides like they'd been burned, then let them hover in the air between them, as though he couldn't decide if touching her again would make things better or worse.

She didn't know either.

Those warm brown, gold-ringed eyes roved across Elyria's face, indecision furrowing his brow. Finally, he settled on laying one hand loosely over her knee and used the other to tilt her chin.

She let out a shaky breath.

"I am so, so sorry, Elle." Their bond flooded with the proof of the words, a cutting burst of sorrow that wrapped itself around Elyria's ribs.

She'd thought she would hate it. She'd spent not a small number of hours over the past few weeks preparing herself for the possibility of freedom and what that would mean. The inevitable pity, the stares, the concern. But somehow, now that it was here, now that it was coming from him, she found it was less humiliating than she'd thought it would be.

Having something—anything—touch her scars after months of nothing but pain, nothing but the grief of loss, had shocked Elyria momentarily. But these quiet moments after, when Cedric said nothing else, when he gave her space to sort through her feelings . . . it helped.

"We have to stop with all these apologies," she said after a moment, blinking back the wetness lining her eyes. "They're starting to outweigh all the other words we've said to each other, and I don't particularly care for that."

Cedric let out a low laugh. "You're right, as always."

She grinned. "Well, those are certainly words I'll never tire of hearing. But not quite what I was getting at."

“I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you. Is that better?”

“It’s a start. But you do have quite an attachment to saying sorry. I imagine we probably have a few . . . hundred . . . thousand . . . to go before you’ve eclipsed your previous apologies.”

He seized her by the waist, hauling her against him once more, and Elyria squealed in delight.

Cedric dipped his head, dotting a quick kiss over her bondmark that left her skin tingling. Grinning into her neck, he said, “An endeavor I will happily undertake, Trouble.”

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17

BLOODLINES

KIT



THE KING'S SEAL STARED UP AT HER FROM WHERE THE EDGES OF THE parchment met. Dark wax, immaculately stamped with Aerithia's royal crest —a winged heart, pierced with a longsword. Kit broke it with her thumbnail, already bracing herself for the message she knew would lie within.

My dear niece,

I am truly relieved to hear of the Revenant's safe rescue, and your additional concerns about the Cult of Malakar have been noted. However, the crown still cannot justify committing our men to supposition and rumor. At present, any threat that may exist appears to be directed solely at the human kingdom, and I will not risk our people further.

My duty must first be to Nyrundelle, always. I trust you understand.

–L.

Well, at least he'd kept it short. Still, there was enough passive aggression laced between each neatly scripted letter to have Kit's blood boiling.

"Supposition and rumor? Any threat that *may* exist?" she grumbled, crumpling the letter in her fist. No, Kit did *not* understand. Or, rather, she understood entirely too well.

Her uncle was a coward, simple as that.

She'd naively thought it would be an easier sell, now that needing to locate Elyria was no longer a paramount concern. Suddenly the situation really was only about stopping Malakar. Malakar, who had a known vendetta against Arcanians, who had hidden his followers in who knew how many villages across the continent. Kit would've thought those things would certainly be well within the limits of the king's *duty to Nyrundelle*.

Evidently, she was wrong.

And that was how she found herself sitting at a sticky booth in the back of the Gilded Gryphon, nursing her wounds, along with the mug of ale that had sat idle in front of her for entirely too long.

Where the fuck was Sephone? Kit had called to meet with the fae the instant her uncle's letter had arrived. She hadn't needed to open it at home in order to know what it said. His face when she'd delivered the news about Elyria had told her everything she needed to know, even without the official decree.

Truly relieved, he'd said. That, Kit believed. But it was less for Elyria's well-being and safety and more for the fact that he now had a clear path to saying no.

It was touching, in a strange sort of way, Kit supposed, that he had dillydallied on making his final decision because of Elyria. Because what that really meant was that he'd waffled because of Kit. Because he hadn't wanted to have to tell her no, he would not help save her friend, her sister. He wouldn't have to ostracize his own flesh and blood in the name of cowardice.

Little did he know, he'd done so all the same.

Kit smoothed the parchment on top of the wood-slatted table before neatly refolding it. She slid it into the inside pocket of the leather satchel

that rested beside her on the bench. Then, from the same pocket, she withdrew a different letter.

Kit inhaled the faintest whiff of citrus and ink as she opened it and saw Tenny's looping script filling the page. Kit didn't have to read it again; she'd memorized it a hundred times over. The words were sketched onto her bones, along with the visceral wave of relief that had blasted through her when she'd first read them. It had been so strong that her knees had almost given out. Her vision had gone blurry, and for one awful, dizzying moment, she'd thought she might've been sick right then and there.

Thankfully, both for Kit's dignity and for the sake of the messenger who'd delivered the missive's boots, she managed to avoid that particular outcome. Still, she would never, ever, ever forget the way it had felt to read those words.

Ric found her. Elle is safe. They make for the sanctuary.

Safe, safe, safe. She was safe and she was alive and he had *found* her.

And by now she had to be safe in Elderglade, sleeping in a sylvan-crafted bed, with the knightling undoubtedly fretting over every breath she took.

The image made Kit want to laugh and cry at the same time. Because she wanted to be there too, cataloging every wince, tending to her sister's recovery.

She had almost done it. The moment she'd finished reading Tenny's letter, Kit had been a blur of motion—digging through drawers and trunks, pulling out her traveling cloak, lacing up her best boots, tossing a neat roll of underclothes and a spare tunic into her satchel. She imagined the look on Elyria's face when she arrived, imagined sitting beneath the silveroaks and talking about everything and nothing, and how, for the first time in months, the world might not feel like it was tilted at some impossible angle.

But despite wanting to immediately fly for the Midlands, despite desperately needing to throw her arms around Elyria and then spend a full hour scolding her, Kit still had work to do here.

And so she had requested another audience with her uncle to update him on this blessed news and reiterate her request that he divert resources to help flush out Malakar and his cultists. And two days later, she had his response, and she was almost as mad at herself for having bothered to wait.

She should've known better. Should have known after that first conversation—if one could even call it that—that her uncle's grief over

Dentarius's death had calcified into something hard and useless. Should have known that family meant nothing in the face of fear, and the king was a man ruled by fear now, even if he didn't know to name it as such.

If there was one thing that Kit had learned in the past year, it was that family, one's bloodline, was a chain as much as anything else. Her loyalty to Evander had sent her into the Crucible. Her uncle's blood tied her to Aerithia and all the messy politics she'd never wanted anything to do with.

Elyria's blood tied her to a man who had built a whole different kind of empire.

And Cedric's blood . . . Well, that was a different issue entirely. One that Kit didn't feel particularly well equipped to speak on. But as the door to the Gilded Gryphon swung open and late-afternoon sunlight streamed in from outside, it was one that she suspected would be coming up sooner rather than later.

Sephone grinned at Kit from the tavern entrance but did not approach, instead heading directly to the stairs next to the bar and gesturing for Kit to follow.

Kit rolled her eyes as she slid out of the booth, looped her satchel over her shoulder, and followed the fae upstairs to a small, sparsely appointed room at the end of the short second-floor hallway.

"Nice digs," said Kit, closing the door behind her and leaning a shoulder against it.

Sephone crossed the room and took a seat in a chair set against the back wall, propping her boots up on the table in front of it. Her dark hair was braided back from her face today, showing off the line of piercings that ran up the edge of her pointed ear. They were capped off, of course, with that telltale beaded golden hoop.

"It's about stars-damned time," said Kit, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Cute. I appreciate the callback."

"You're late. Less cute."

"My apologies, Princess. What's the rush?"

Kit gestured to her bag. "I'm on my way out. Just wanted to let you know before I go."

"Aww, you wanted to say goodbye. See, we *are* cute." Sephone smirked. "But let me go ahead and take a wild guess as to the reason for

your imminent departure. You finally got an official response from your uncle?”

Kit tapped her forefinger to the tip of her nose. “He ‘cannot justify committing our men to supposition and rumor.’ Always thinking of Nyrundelle, didn’t you know?”

“Mmm, of course he is. Well, I can’t say I’m surprised. We know the man is scared, content to sit in his grief and pretend like the problem will go away so long as he continues to ignore it.”

Kit pinched the bridge of her nose. “That about sums it up.”

“I’m sorry,” Sephone added, and for once there was no hint of teasing in her tone. “I know you’d hoped—”

“We all hope. Sometimes we are left . . . disappointed.”

Sephone clucked her tongue. “‘Supposition and rumor,’ huh? As though Elyria’s rescue from within Malakar’s stronghold, right in the heart of fucking Luminaria, is some tall tale.”

Kit blinked. “How did you—wait, why am I even bothering to ask how you know that. Of course you know. You hear everything, right?”

“I do,” Sephone said proudly. “But this time I actually received my information from a very specific source.”

“What source?” And it was only then that Kit’s eyes registered the door on the wall behind where Sephone sat.

The fae pounded her fist against it—once, twice—before it creaked open to reveal someone new standing in the doorway.

Well, not someone *new*, exactly.

Surprise had Kit’s eyebrows shooting up her forehead, but she managed to keep her voice level when she said, “Raefe?”

His blond hair was shorter than when she’d last seen him, the ends uneven. His rust-colored wings were folded tight against his back, and Kit nearly did a double take when she noticed the light gauzy bandage wrapped around one of them. He limped slightly as he strode into the room, and she was immediately irritated with herself for her curiosity.

Granted, she was no stranger to seeing the fae wounded. If not by Elyria’s own hand the first time she’d met him and Sephone at King’s Keep, then by Cedric’s when he laid into the bastard before the group had departed to Dawnspire. Still, there was something different about it this time. Raefe looked . . . tired. Weary. Older, somehow.

Frankly, he looked like he’d seen some shit.

“It’s been a while, Duchess.”

“Noctis take me. Princess, this. Duchess, that.” Kit threw her hands into the air. “Is being this annoying something Tartanis actively *requires*, or am I just lucky?”

“Is that really the question you want to ask right now?” Sephone said.

“No,” Kit said sullenly, folding her arms over her chest. “So, what, he’s your source? How does he know about Ellie?”

“You might ask me directly,” he muttered. “Since I’m the one who helped Cedric get her out. Helped her escape.”

Kit blinked at him. “Say again?”

“Paid for it dearly too.” Raefe scratched at his torn ear. “But I suppose I had amends to make.”

“I still don’t understand.”

Sephone rose from her seat with a sigh. “As I told you before, after Dawnspire Raefe went back to the Lost City to keep an eye on things. Ended up being pretty useful that he was there, given that Cedric showed up out of the blue a few nights ago, ready to go on the warpath to find Elle.”

“He blazed our way through the wards that had kept the castle off-limits to me prior,” continued Raefe. “We fought our way through a healthy number of *sanguinagi*, then fought off the dark sorcerer himself. With a little extra help in the end from the Revenant’s shadowbeast.” Raefe shuddered, and Kit’s mouth gaped open.

“Sid was there?”

Raefe nodded. “And all blessings to Lunara she was, because your friend was in bad shape. I’m not sure Cedric would have been able to get her out of there alone.”

Kit swallowed. “But he did—they did.” She cocked her head, eyes darting to Raefe’s injuries. “And it was . . . thanks to you?”

Sephone clapped Raefe on the shoulder, and he winced. “In part,” she said proudly.

Raefe bit his lip. “I stayed behind precisely long enough to make sure they could get a solid head start, that was all.”

“So modest.” Sephone clucked her tongue, and though Raefe tried to shrug off her hold, Kit could see the sliver of pride beaming from him.

Feels good to do the right thing for once, doesn’t it? she wanted to say. But she didn’t think that would be particularly helpful at present, so instead she asked, “How did you get out?”

“A lot of fire, a bit of luck. And the ability to fly was pretty necessary, as it turned out. Hurt like a son of a bitch with the way a few of the *sanguinagi* bastards clipped me, but I was able to get back here within a couple of days and report on what happened to Master Tartanis.”

“Ahh, right, of course. Had to run back to tell Daddy. He must be thrilled to know that his daughter is, at the very least, not being held prisoner anymore. Then again, perhaps he is less happy over the fact that he had little to do with her emancipation and thus has nothing to lord over her now.”

Sephone gestured to the open doorway behind Raefe—to the hallway that stretched beyond it. “And that’s precisely why he’d like to talk to you.”



THE CONNECTING corridor was surprisingly long. It was also very quiet. Kit’s, Sephone’s, and Raefe’s footsteps were muffled by thick carpet. Spurts of soft chatter could be heard as they passed a few other rooms, but the trio only came to a stop once they’d reached the end of the hallway. A large man with short-cropped hair and a scar bisecting one eyebrow stood in front of the final door. He nodded at Sephone and Raefe, then opened the door without a word, the ruby bead hanging from his ear glinting in the light.

The room they stepped into was part office, part salon. A large window looked out over the canal, light glinting off the water and pooling in the glass decanters on a sideboard. Maps of Arcanis—Nyrundelle, the Midlands, Havensreach—covered one wall, marked with neat pins in red and gold and black. Two armchairs flanked a low table set with an elegant-looking tea service.

And in one of those chairs sat Master Tartanis, who rose as they entered.

Kit hated that her first response was a reluctant acknowledgment that he looked just like Elyria. Or, rather, she supposed Elyria looked like him.

They had the same wide-set cheekbones, the same naturally wry set to their lips. And though his long, straight hair was a blue so dark it looked black, though his face was lined with the evidence of his years in this world, his eyes . . .

Kit’s breath actually stuttered as she took in the emerald hue. They were Elyria’s eyes. And they were looking Kit up and down from head to toe.

She couldn’t call it leering. There wasn’t anything lecherous about his gaze. But it was . . . assessing. Calculating.

And there was something disturbingly familiar about that, too.

“Lady Ravenswing,” Tartanis said, inclining his head. “At last. I was beginning to think we would never be properly introduced.”

“And here I was, hoping for that very same thing.”

His smile didn’t slip. “In that case, I’m sorry to disappoint.” He gestured to the opposite chair, then took his seat once more. “May I offer you some tea? Or maybe you’d prefer something stronger?”

“You could offer me Malakar’s severed head,” Kit replied, stubbornly staying on her feet. “That would be a decent start.”

“Alas, I am fresh out of severed heads. The dark sorcerer has been proving inconveniently resilient. But perhaps we can discuss ways to change that.”

“Not sure exactly how you propose doing so. The king seems rather firmly set on a course of no action.”

“Ah. So he has given the answer we expected.” Tartanis pursed his lips.

“Unfortunately,” confirmed Sephone, who had drifted to the sideboard and began pouring herself a drink.

Kit dipped her chin in confirmation. “He won’t even assign men to sniff out the cultists hiding in Nyrundelle, let alone send troops to Luminaria. And should more cultist attacks occur in Havensreach . . . Well, I hope King Callum has had enough time to regroup.”

“I see.” Tartanis considered Kit for a moment, then inclined his head again, as if she’d just passed some invisible test. “I appreciate frankness,” he said, “so allow me to be equally frank. Our goals, Lady Ravenswing, are aligned. I want Malakar stopped. I want his followers scattered. I want my daughter safe.”

“My *sister* is already safe,” Kit snapped. “Thanks to Cedric and everyone else who put their lives on the line to get her out. You can have credit for your man being in the right place at the right time”—she waved a hand in Raefe’s direction, who let out a snort—“but you don’t get to pretend her rescue is the result of some noble crusade on your part.”

“Of course not,” Tartanis said mildly. “I would never presume to present myself as a noble crusader. I am a businessman, plain and simple. I deal in leverage, in information, in possibilities. And I’ve spent a very long time establishing myself, building my operation to be able to be in this exact

place, at this exact time. Malakar and his cultists threaten to disrupt all my careful planning, and we cannot have that." He sucked on a tooth. "It would be . . . bad for business."

Kit's gaze flicked to the map on the wall. At the pins clustered around the jagged Chasms that carved through the continent. Then the ones marking the Sacred Mountain, Luminaria, and dotted throughout the Midlands. Each one indicating—

"You know about the mana springs," Kit said slowly, finally taking a seat in the armchair opposite Tartanis.

"I've been putting the pieces together. Based on the cultist activity we have been able to sniff out over the past couple of weeks, it's clear that he has people watching the springs."

"Why?"

Tartanis exchanged a look with Raefe. "Tell her."

Raefe's mouth tightened. He moved closer to the map, lifting a finger to trace the edge of the pin placed just outside Luminaria—over the massive mana spring there.

"It was all a bit of a blur, to be honest, but at Castle Lumin, Malakar and his cultists kept yelling about forges and 'the Line.' He was fixated on it. 'The Line will be pierced,' he said. 'The world rewritten.' We think . . . That is, Master Tartanis thinks—"

"I think he may have been talking about the Line of Origin," Tartanis finished.

Kit's forehead creased. "The what?"

"It is the seam of power that runs beneath the world. From where all magic stems. Legend says it is where Aurelia first pulled mana to the surface, first gave humans the ability to wield magic."

"That's a bedtime story," Kit said slowly. "A fairy tale. It cannot possibly be real." Even as she spoke the words though, she knew they were pointless. There was no limit to the number of things she'd once thought impossible that had turned out to be, in fact, *very* possible.

"This is all speculation, of course," said Tartanis. "But if it *is* true, if the Line of Origin exists, and if Malakar's goal is to pierce it, to use the power at the very heart of Arcanis, there is no telling the kind of havoc he might wreak."

"Not to mention the fucking forges the blood mages kept screaming about," added Raefe. "'Protect the forges! Get to the forges!'" He threw his

arms in the air. “Incessant.”

“Mana forges?” asked Kit. “Inside Castle Lumin?”

Raefe shrugged. “I don’t know. It wasn’t as though I had time to take a tour.”

“Whether for mana or for weapons, the fact that they’re forging anything at all does not sit well with me,” said Tartanis. “Especially given what the dark sorcerer is *already* capable of doing to his followers.”

Kit grimaced. “You’ve experienced the result of Malakar’s twisted blood oath too, then.”

Raefe’s expression darkened. “Unfortunately.”

A moment of unsettling silence passed between them, the only sounds coming from Sephone as she helped herself to another drink. That was when Kit realized another air barrier had been put in place, blocking out any of the lingering noises occurring from elsewhere within the Gryphon—if that’s even where they were anymore.

“Well? Wasn’t there something you wanted to ask me?” Kit said after a few moments. “You might as well get it over with. That way, I can get on with telling you no and being on my way.”

Tartanis’s mouth tipped up on one side, and Kit couldn’t help noting the familiarity of the movement. “Must I spell it out for you? I want to see my daughter.”

Kit scoffed. “We all want things we cannot have.”

“There she goes, being cute again,” Sephone piped in, raising her glass in cheers.

“But what if you could have it?” Tartanis narrowed his emerald eyes. “What if I told you I could help you get everything it is you seek, everything your uncle refuses, if only you help me in return?”

Protestation was right there on the tip of Kit’s tongue, but something kept her from speaking it aloud. And when she didn’t say anything, Tartanis continued.

“You want to smoke out the cultists hiding across Arcanis. You want to unseat Malakar from his position of power, want to figure out his end goal, and want him to pay for what he has done. You want to protect the peoples of Arcanis. You need soldiers to do that.”

“And you may be a powerful man yourself, sir, but if you’re trying to tell me you have an army at your disposal—”

“Not *my* army.”

Kit blinked at him. Raefe shifted on his feet. Sephone took another sip of her drink.

“Your uncle is hesitant, but hesitance can be overcome with the appropriate motivation.” Tartanis lifted a small silver teapot from the tray sitting beside him and filled two cups. He slid one closer to Kit, who pointedly ignored it, then drank from the other. “And I am nothing if not an *excellent* motivator.”

“If he wouldn’t listen to me, what makes you think he’ll listen to you?” *What is more motivating than family?* Kit wanted to add, but even she knew how naive it would sound.

Like he heard it anyway, Tartanis said, “Because I will not appeal to his heart, nor some misplaced sense of familial duty. I will simply appeal to his interests.”

“Meaning?”

“No need to concern yourself with the particulars.” He waved his hand, then took another sip of tea. “Just be confident that I have my ways of persuading the king, and while I would never abuse this privilege”—he ignored the way Kit immediately snorted—“I would be willing to call in certain debts for this.”

“For an audience with Elyria,” Kit said skeptically. “That’s it? That’s your price?”

“For now,” he said with a nod.

Kit wanted to laugh. Wanted to jump up, spit in his tea, then in his face. She wanted to turn on her heel and fly straight to Elderglade. But in her mind’s eye, she saw Ignatius and Tyrren, with their reddening eyes and twisting bones. She saw Evander, eyes black and wings shredded. And she saw Elyria, the agony on her face, the shadowy restraints wrapped around her limbs, her wings being sliced from her back.

Kit could not pass up this chance, no matter how slim, to protect the rest of Arcanis from Malakar’s evil, could she?

That isn’t what Elyria would want, was it?

Fucking bloodlines, she thought.

She sucked in a breath. “Unfortunately, your request isn’t something that is within my power to grant. Elyria is not a bargaining chip to trade for doing what is right.” Kit paused. Tilted her head to one side, then the other. Considered. “But . . . I can ask.”

Tartanis set down his teacup. “That is all I want.”

“And if she says no? Or, if she says yes but only so she can tell you to fuck right back off to Coralith? What happens to your promise?”

“I am a man of my word, Lady Ravenswing. I will hold up my end. And anyway, I have no desire to live in the world Malakar wants to rewrite. The opportunity to finally reconnect with my dark star would be a blessing, but it is not my only motivation.”

Kit narrowed her eyes. “I’ll tell her,” she said after a moment, pulling the words off her tongue like she was pulling teeth. “I’ll tell her what you’ve offered and that you want to see her. But don’t be surprised if I also tell her I think you’re a manipulative asshole and she doesn’t owe you a stars-damned thing.”

“I’d expect nothing less,” he replied, a glint in his emerald eyes. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet.” Kit stood. “Let’s see if she tries to murder you first.”

“I would be disappointed if she didn’t.”

Sephone snorted into her drink.

Raefe cleared his throat as Kit moved toward the door. “Give the Revenant and her prince my regards.”

She gave a hesitant nod and reached for the door handle, then paused. “Thank you. For helping her. For getting her out.”

Raefe pressed his lips together and issued a nod of his own.

“Anything else before I go?” Kit said over her shoulder.

“Safe travels.” Sephone’s voice was wry as a gust of wind ruffled Kit’s hair, the air barrier around the room dissipating. “Come back to visit anytime.”



THE SUN HAD ALMOST SET by the time Kit made her way back down that long, winding hall and out of the Gilded Gryphon. She grumbled as she pulled her cloak around her shoulders, inwardly lamenting the fact that she’d have to delay her departure until morning. It was just as well, she supposed. She hadn’t even said goodbye to her mother yet. She was just so desperate to leave, to get away from these people who knew too much and not enough all at once.

When she landed on her balcony at the Ravenswing estate, she braced her hands on the railing one last time, watched the sunset shimmer on the canals that bisected the city, took in the way the colors of the sky reflected off the gold-domed roofs.

It was a beautiful city. Kit had always loved it here. Loved the bustle and noise, the merchants who hawked their wares in the town square each week, the music that wafted from the open windows of the conservatory. She loved the joy that spread through the streets every time the king's procession left the palace. Loved being a part of that procession.

Now it felt strange. Foreign. And Kit wanted nothing more than to be gone from this place, gone from this city, with its idle king and people who were more than content ignoring the atrocities happening elsewhere in the world just because they weren't happening to them.

She flexed her fingers against the railing, relishing the cool bite of the metal against her skin, how it made her feel just slightly more awake.

Her uncle would not help, so she'd found someone else who would.

She hoped.

Because just like she'd told Ric all those weeks ago, it was *not* a foolish thing to have hope.

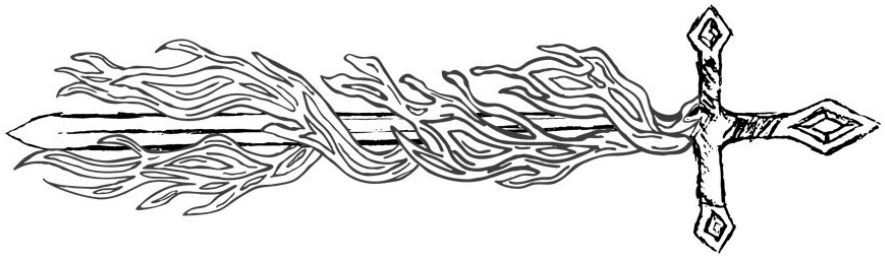
And that's what Kit would keep telling herself until she had her arms wrapped around Elyria once more and the proof that she was safe and real and rescued was undeniable.

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SANCTUARY

CEDRIC



HER HEAD WAS ON HIS CHEST.

Moonlight spilled through the latticework of silveroak branches above, casting faint shadows over Elyria's bare shoulders. Her breath rose and fell in slow, even pulls as she lay against him, one hand next to her cheek, her fingers curled into the fabric of his tunic like she was afraid he might disappear if she let go.

As if he would ever go anywhere again.

Cedric held his breath and shifted, just an inch, lifting his head to place the arm that wasn't currently pinned under Elyria's resting form behind his head. He did not bother to chase sleep. He knew it would not come even if he did. Knew he did not want it to. Not while he had been given this miraculous gift of *time*. Not while he had the ability to watch the tiny movements of her face—the faint twitch of her lashes when she slipped further into sleep, the little furrow between her brows smoothing, then returning, then smoothing again.

He counted each of her inhales like he was hoarding each breath. And with each of her sighed exhales, he, too, felt like he could breathe a little easier.

Safe.

Safe.

Safe.

He hadn't quite let himself believe it at first. Not really.

Even after they'd crashed back together in a tangle of limbs and apologies and desperate, shaking hands. Even after her mouth on his had burned away the last of the chill that had lodged in his bones since Castle Lumin. His relief had been so big, so sharp, it was almost painful.

She was safe and she was here and she was with him again.

He tried not to dwell on everything that lived between those facts.

He failed.

Throat tight, Cedric pressed his lips together, like doing so might contain the well of emotion threatening to spill forth. How close had he come to never having this again? To never feeling her against him, never hearing her voice in his ears or in his mind, never seeing the specific smirk she seemed to reserve just for him?

Cedric thought he knew what it was to have his power ignite, to have the furnace in his chest spark uncontrollably. But nothing could have prepared him for the way it had surged through him the moment he'd locked eyes with Elyria in Castle Lumin, bound in Malakar's sick shadows.

Cedric Thorne was a knight of the realm. He was trained to do good, to be steadfast and honorable and just. He had pursued all things in his life with this in mind—he was always inclined to offer the benefit of the doubt, even when duty dictated otherwise. It was one of the reasons it hadn't been such a terribly hard thing, in retrospect, to come to grips with the fact that the truths he'd been told about Arcanians—about Elyria, the Revenant, herself—were not actual truth.

He had long prided himself on being the sort of man who moved with care and consideration, who did not allow his emotions to control him, who did not act without thinking.

But when it came to Elyria, there was no need for thought. Cedric ran on nothing but instinct. And there was no controlling the power spearing through his veins as he'd watched her being dragged behind those doors.

The instant he'd seen his *solimaeus* being taken from him again, any semblance of mercy he might have been otherwise inclined to show had disappeared with her. Whatever restraint he might have possessed had burned away the moment they touched her.

Light had erupted from him, a detonation that started behind his ribs and tore outward, flowing through his blood, fracturing the air around him. Ashrender was the blazing personification of his wrath, cutting and burning

through flesh and sinew, hacking through bone. *Sanguinagi* weapons shattered against it—against *him.* And Cedric killed.

He killed and killed and killed.

He remembered little of the specific deaths. The way their faces lit up with fear as their bodies lit on fire. Hands that reached for him before being sliced clean off. Screams that were silenced mid-word. Raefe was there too, Cedric knew, fighting alongside him. But he didn't remember much of that either, aside from the way the fae had hurled balls of flame at the doors the bastards were hiding behind.

What he did remember was the hollow in his chest where remorse should have been.

Where he might have considered whether the rush of cultists coming at them had been otherwise coerced into their servitude, like Ignatius and Tyrren. Where he might have seen that girl's severed body lying in the middle of the hall as he ran by and felt pity or, at the very least, curiosity.

But Cedric didn't care.

He couldn't.

They had kept her from him. They had chained her, and they had suppressed her power, and they had *hurt* her—even one singular glimpse of her, bloodied and terrified, had told him that. And if the only way to reach her, to free her, was to burn a path through every last one of them, that was what Cedric would've done.

If there had been a thousand cultists in the castle, he would have cut down a thousand.

If there had been ten thousand, he would have found a way.

He did not feel bad about a single one.

No one would keep him from his *solimaeus* again.

"Is it like a soulmate?" he had asked Kit right after their group had set off for Nyrundelle, all those weeks ago.

"Pretty much," she'd answered. "The direct translation would be closer to 'light of my life.' But the meaning is about right. Where did you hear that term?"

Cedric had only blinked at her before answering, "Elle."

And Kit's mismatched blue and green eyes had widened, but she'd simply nodded and said, "I see."

With a contented sigh, Elyria shifted, rolling herself off Cedric's chest, drawing his attention back. She was curled up on her side now, tucked

against him, a gauzy blanket draped over her waist. The neckline of her sleeping dress had fallen down her shoulder, and with the long sheet of her hair pinned beneath her, the beautiful column of her neck was exposed.

Cedric's gaze dropped to the mark he had left there, the faint crescent shape of their bond nearly iridescent in the cool light of the moon. Or was that just Cedric's eyes playing tricks on him? The mark almost looked like it was shimmering, pulsing.

Like it was beckoning him, summoning him.

Mine.

He wanted to touch it. Wanted to trace it with the pads of his fingers. Wanted to run his tongue across it. And if he weren't so determined not to wake her after the day she'd had, he would have. His teeth ached with the sudden deep, roaring need to do much more than that—to clamp down on it, reclaiming her, piercing every part of her.

But no.

She deserved to rest.

As slowly as possible, careful not to jostle her, Cedric eased himself off the bed. He held his breath as she rolled over again, her fingers twitching, reaching instinctively for him, though her eyes didn't open. He caught her hand and pressed a gentle kiss to her knuckles before draping her arm over the pillow he'd been lying on, giving her something to hold. Then he tucked the blanket around her and stepped away.

The little guesthouse they'd been given in Elderglade was simple enough—smooth planked floors that were cool beneath Cedric's bare feet, the bed, a small dresser and smaller table. Instead of windows along the walls, there were two cut into the slanted ceiling, letting soft light filter down from a starlit sky.

When Cedric pushed the door open and stepped onto the porch attached to the front of their hut, he was met with a rush of cool, midnight air. He inhaled deeply through his nose, his eyes following the trails of bioluminescent ferns growing along the paths that crisscrossed through the glade. Between those, the stars and moon above, and the glow-tailed sundryflies flitting about near the stream, there was still so much light. So much light and so much life, even at this late hour. He hadn't paid much attention before, given how concerned he'd been about Elyria finally waking, but now that he had ascertained she was well—or, as well as he could have hoped—he had to wonder: Did Elderglade not sleep?

Down by the stream, a mixedborn teenager washed clothes. Three huts over and across the path, an elderly sylvan couple sat on their porch, playing a game of cards.

Perhaps things would change when winter finally caught up to this place. But whether due to the ancient magic protecting the sanctuary, or some other phenomenon, the cold had yet to arrive.

Cedric was glad for it. Anything to make Elyria's transition back to normalcy a little easier. It had been autumn when she was taken. Here, in Elderglade, it felt like autumn still.

He laid his hands on the railing and let his gaze drift over the glade. There was something in the air here—it reminded Cedric of the skies after a rain, the scent of freshly shorn grass. It felt . . . clean. Untouched.

Precious.

No wonder Zephyr had betrayed them all for the sake of the sanctuary. She'd stood against her friends in the Crucible, she'd lied, she'd manipulated them . . . and she'd been willing to die in the Sanctum, if that's what it would've taken, to keep Varyth Malchior from destroying this place.

What did it mean for Elderglade now that it was Malakar standing in his stead?

Cedric didn't understand the magic protecting the sanctuary. He wasn't even sure Elder Larkess or the rest of the sylvan council truly did either, so long had it been in place. He only knew what he'd seen—the way the archway had sealed itself when Elyria had approached it that first time, the bursts of light that had knocked her clear off Fjaethe's back.

Cedric grinned into the moonlight at the memory.

And then that grin fell into a worried purse of his lips as he remembered what happened next. How, after what could only be summed up as the singular best night of his existence, after their bond had been forged, after his light had braided with Elyria's shadow—a wisp of her darkness burying itself behind his ribs, something bright threading into her in return—the archway had opened.

Had accepted them both.

Was it supposed to? he wondered now, the thought poking him uncomfortably in the back of his mind.

He thought of the way Elyria's sparrow had been unable to get close to the archway, how it had been blasted back into the ether. Thought of the way her shadows had spilled from her during her confrontation with Zephyr

after they'd gotten inside. Thought of Nox's shadow-message cutting through from the in-between with the warning that they needed to return to King's Keep.

And he thought of how the trees had seemed to shudder, the very air almost groaning at each use of shadow magic—a subtle recoiling. Elderglade had not liked it very much.

And yet . . .

When Sid had flown Cedric and Elyria back to the forest after their escape from Castle Lumin, hopping in and out of the shadows with the two of them seated on her back, Cedric had been prepared. He had commanded the shadowcat to drop them off a good twenty feet back from the gate, not wanting to tempt another burst of magic, another attack meant to wipe out the shadows that approached.

Sid, of course, hadn't felt like listening.

She had carried them right up to the very gate, the tips of her wings brushing the curved trees that made up Elderglade's entrance.

And nothing had happened.

No winding of vines closing them off and shutting them out. No bolts of magic lunging for them. If Cedric hadn't already started dismounting, hadn't already begun pulling the unconscious Elyria from between Sid's shoulder blades, would the shadowcat have been able to carry them straight through? Would the sanctuary have stopped her at all?

Cedric would never have dared test it. He hadn't even noticed at the time, too busy holding Elyria together and not falling apart himself.

But now . . .

Something gnawed at him, like his own magic was trying to speak to him. He just couldn't quite put his finger on what it meant to say.

Zephyr's betrayal made a different kind of sense now. She had been willing to pay the ultimate price to protect a place that was already protected. But if Elderglade was bending its rules now—for Elyria, and for Cedric, too—who else might it bend for? How far could its magic be twisted before something broke? Before Malakar found a crack and slipped something poisonous through?

The thought of the dark sorcerer turning his attention to the sacredness kept safe here was a horror that made Cedric's stomach turn.

No, he admonished himself. *Elderglade is safe. The sanctuary is safe, the mixedborns who live here are safe.*

She is safe.

Perhaps if he repeated it enough times, he could will it true.

Cedric's grip tightened on the railing as he took another breath, inhaling more of Elderglade's clean scent. But there was something else there now too—a whisper of tart cherry and almond and the faintest hint of blossoming merryleaf.

He turned.

Elyria stood in the doorway, wrapped in one of the soft green blankets from their bed. Her hair was braided down one shoulder, the damp ends curling against the simple shift she wore, leaving a wet circle that clung to the delicate ridge of her collarbone. She'd clearly washed up while Cedric had been brooding.

She looked good. There was still exhaustion in her jewel-toned gaze, a sluggishness to the way her bare feet shuffled across the porch. But there was color in her cheeks and a mischievous half-tipped grin playing at her lips.

The sight of her made his chest ache.

Soft white linen fell to her knees, the neckline loose, slouching off her other shoulder. Cedric's eyes widened at the sight of her bondmark, once again looking like it was nearly gleaming in the pale moonlight.

Elyria came up beside him, bumping his shoulder with hers and taking in the picturesque nighttime scene. The girl by the stream had finished her washing and was walking away with her basket balanced on her head, short green wings fluttering behind her. The elderly woman three houses down laid out her cards with a victorious *whoop*. Her partner simply shook his head, smiling all the while.

"Beautiful," Elyria said.

"Yes," he replied, his eyes never leaving her face. "It really is."

"Now, less beautiful was waking up in that bed alone." She turned, lifting a single finger to wag it back and forth in his face. "Not very knightly of you, Sir Thorne." She paused. "Then again, you have a bit of a different role to fill now, don't you?"

"Stars above," Cedric muttered, but it came out sounding more like a groan.

"Am I wrong, Your Highness?"

He wanted to say how much he hated it when she called him that, but the rush of blood that went directly south at the sound of her voice in his

head begged to differ.

The smile that graced her perfect face was all too knowing.

"Couldn't sleep," he managed to say back down the bond. He straightened, suddenly self-conscious about what she might have heard while he was out here lost in his thoughts. He didn't think that speaking mind-to-mind worked that way. He did remember Elyria telling him it was the same as conversing with someone, it just so happened that they were the only two able to participate in the conversation. But then, it wasn't as though he'd been able to test it too thoroughly. They hadn't exactly had long to get used to it. They'd had so little time together after their bonding, really. So little time before they were separated.

Before she was taken.

That primal rage stirred in Cedric's chest again at the thought, at the unbidden memories. And before he knew it, her cherry-almond scent was replaced with that of burning wood.

"Hey." Elyria covered Cedric's hand with hers, prying it away from the singed railing. She placed it over her heart instead, and the gentle *thump* of her heartbeat beneath his palm provided Cedric with a whole new kind of peace.

Safe.

Safe.

Safe.

"I'm fine. Everything's going to be fine," she said, and from the way her own uncertainty flickered across their bond, Cedric could tell she didn't know if she believed that. But she was trying, for him. And he would try for her too.

He shifted so he faced her, his foot brushing against the blanket that was now pooled at their feet. Elyria must have dropped it when she reached for him. He stooped down to pick it up, then draped it around her shoulders when he stood, drawing her into his arms.

Everything in him sighed at the feel of her body lined up against his—his hands going to her waist, his chin resting in the hair on the side of her head. For a few moments, they simply stood like that, breathing in sync, their bond humming with contentment.

"I didn't mean to wake you," he finally said, offering a sheepish smile. "Tried extra hard to be quiet."

She tipped her head back to look at him. “Hard to be quiet when it’s so loud in here.” She tapped her fingers gently against the center of his chest. “And here.” The pad of her thumb swept over his temple.

“Sorry,” he said automatically.

Her lips curved. “There’s that word again. Didn’t we already talk about this?”

“I’m . . . still working on it.”

She studied him, moonlight catching the flecks of silver in her emerald eyes. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” Cedric winced as the bond flared with amused disbelief. There would be no getting anything past her anymore. If there ever was. “Fine,” he said. “Everything. Some things. I don’t know. Regardless, it’s nothing for *you* to fret about. You just focus on resting, healing. Let me do all the worrying.”

“I would never dare try to steal your favorite pastime from you, Sir Worrywart,” she said with a wink, stepping back from him to gesture at herself. “But I’ve *been* resting. And healing. And evidently being fed magical sylvan soups that have me feeling better than I had even before—” She chewed on her bottom lip for a second. Then, with a minuscule shake of her head, she plastered on a new smile and continued. “Not to mention being given regular baths by overly attentive knights. I’m practically a new woman.”

“Well, isn’t that a shame? I rather like the old one.”

“Ah, still quick with that wit, I see.” She rose onto her toes and brushed a light kiss against his scar.

“I am serious though, Elle. You’ve been through so much. It’s perfectly natural that your body—that you—would need time to recover.”

She narrowed her eyes. “I’m serious too. Do you think you know my body better than I do?”

He choked on about six wholly inappropriate answers. *Not the time, Thorne.* “Of course not. I’m sor—” He bit his tongue.

Her gaze softened. “I just want to be with you.”

And Cedric’s heart broke a little bit more.

He tried to stifle the way his breath hitched, reaching for her again, drawing her back into his embrace. “All right,” he said into her hair. “In that case, I suppose there is something we should talk about.”

She released a muffled-sounding snort into his tunic. “Should I be alarmed?”

He peeled back to look at her, take in the simultaneous contentment and consternation in her gaze. “No, not at all. It isn’t—” He broke off. Reconsidered. “Well, I’m actually not sure. But we can’t avoid it any longer.”

She waited, one eyebrow arched in question.

“It’s about your wings.”

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OPTIONS

ELYRIA



By the time the sun had climbed past the treetops, the clearing at the center of Elderglade was already bustling.

Elyria could feel the magic of this place humming through the soles of her feet—the grass and the trees and the *life* here, all braided together into something that echoed deep in her bones.

She reveled in it.

After all those weeks without her wild magic, all that time without even a trickle in her blood, she couldn't get enough of it now. Couldn't seem to *stop* wielding it, without purpose or reason. Tiny sprays of wild blooms sprouted where her bare feet parted the grass—she hadn't wanted to wear boots—as she and Cedric strode through the glade. The sprig of merryleaf she'd tucked behind her ear wound itself into her braid, twisting with the strands of periwinkle.

Her knight watched her with an awestruck expression—one of her favorite ways he tended to arrange his face, she decided—as they approached the dining hut, hands laced together. She smiled at him, twirling the ring on his finger in playful circles with her thumb.

It would be so fucking easy to get used to this, she thought. And though she had, once again, not really meant to say it *to* Cedric, the way his grip on her hand tightened and the slow sigh he released told her he'd heard it anyway. Told her he agreed.

Elyria could not imagine anything better, in fact, than getting to endlessly stroll through this magical place with him at her side. Here, where there was no dark sorcerer hellsbent on cutting her power from her, no blood runes making her skin crawl. Here, where joy and magic and light were everywhere. Here, where it was just him and her and—

Not just him and her, she realized as a green-haired, green-skinned figure emerged from the dining hut with a tray balanced on one hand and a pitcher in the other.

Elyria darted forward so quickly that Cedric was like a toy on a string being pulled behind her. Young Shep barely had time to put down the tray and pitcher before she had barreled into him, scooping the sylvan into a one-armed hug.

“M-my lady,” Shep said with a nervous laugh, patting her awkwardly on the shoulder. He looked pleadingly at Cedric, whose hand Elyria had still not released, but her knight only smiled.

“It’s *so good* to see you, Shep,” Elyria said earnestly before releasing him.

His cheeks had turned a darker shade of green at her sudden and, granted, somewhat uncharacteristic show of affection, but his voice was bright when he said, “And you, my lady. Truly. It cannot be overstated how good it is to see you well.”

“I thought we had moved past ‘my lady’ long ago. Please, it’s just—”

“Elyria. Of course.” His vine-tattooed cheeks dimpled with his smile, and something in her chest wobbled.

Cedric squeezed her hand, and she knew he felt it too.

“Some applecake while we wait for the others?” Shep offered, gesturing to the table.

The growl that came from Elyria’s stomach could not have been more perfectly timed.

“That’s a yes,” said Cedric, swinging a leg over the bench and taking a seat before pulling Elyria directly onto his lap.

Shep darted back inside the hut to grab some plates and cups, then returned to serve them both. Cedric tore a piece of applecake from his own plate and offered it to Elyria, who accepted it with a grin. She couldn’t help but chuckle when Shep averted his eyes as Cedric fed her.

Elyria had never been one to lean into open displays of affection, really. Not that she minded seeing it from others—within reason, of course. But it

had never held much appeal for her, to be so public about it.

There was so much time, after all, for that sort of thing. Later. In private. Where she didn't have to worry about interruption or judgment, when she could stay focused on her partner and not have to think of other things. It was easier, keeping it separate like that.

But that was before.

And now the thought of not touching Cedric seemed actively ludicrous. Elyria wanted to burst out laughing at the very notion, and if she did, she was sure she'd laugh so hard she'd end up crying.

She did have the fleeting thought that this wasn't an altogether reasonable reaction. That, perhaps, the way she was feeling wasn't entirely normal. Just as it didn't seem normal that her bondmark consistently pulsed now, nor that the tether in her chest felt like it was constantly twanging—being plucked like it was strung on a lute.

It made Elyria feel restless, antsy. And the only thing that calmed that feeling, that settled her when she felt like she was likely to jump out of her own skin, was being with him.

But surely this was all temporary. Her psyche probably just needed a little extra reassurance after the events of the past few months, and her knight was nothing if not reassuring.

Besides, it wasn't as though Cedric seemed to mind. If the strength with which his fingertips dug into her side was any indication, with the way their other hands were *still* linked, she didn't even need their bond to know he felt the same.

Something to discuss later, perhaps.

It took Elyria a moment to realize that Cedric and Shep had been chatting the entire time she was lost in thought.

"—but if there have been any instances like what you speak of, I haven't noticed." Shep shrugged. "The glade has been quiet since you left for Nyrundelle. Peaceful. I really do love it here."

"Is that your way of saying you plan on staying?"

Elyria spun in Cedric's lap, following the sound of the familiar voice, her heart hammering in her chest. Jocelyn was walking toward them from the edge of the clearing, her ash-brown hair disheveled, pieces falling out of her braided coronet. The traveling cloak she wore was covered with bits of leaves, as if she'd just torn through a bush—or several—to get here.

Jocelyn's bootsteps faltered as her gaze fell on Elyria, something deeper than relief beaming from those hazel eyes. Something more akin to understanding. *Knowing.* And it had Elyria's throat suddenly feeling tight.

The fae was, perhaps, the *only* one who could remotely understand what Elyria had gone through—what she was still going through. And though Elyria hated the fact that Jocelyn, too, had experienced the soul-breaking agony of losing her wings, hated that she lived with the loss that followed, Elyria couldn't help but feel bolstered by her presence. Couldn't help but feel a little less alone in this.

It was, after all, what they were gathering to discuss.

"You're here!" Shep said excitedly when Jocelyn reached the table. "The council will be so pleased to know you're back. They took quite a shine to you last time you were here."

Jocelyn clapped the sylvan on the shoulder, then slid onto the bench beside him. "Did they, now? Enough of one to be willing to release you from the pleasure of their company, do you think?"

Shep huffed a laugh. "Fear not. They are well aware of my intention to return to . . ." He looked at Cedric and Elyria with a crease between his forest-green brows. "Well, to wherever it is we end up returning to."

"I suppose we'll have to sort that out here soon. But first things first," said Cedric, squeezing Elyria's hip. "As soon as Elder Larkess arrives, she'll be able to explain your options far better than I could, Elle."

The inner corners of Elyria's eyes pricked, and it took her a second to realize why. Took a second to register Jocelyn's arm stretched across the table, her hand covering Elyria's.

"And whatever you decide, whatever decision feels right to you, we are with you," said Jocelyn.

Elyria swallowed past the lump in her throat. "So Larkess is who we're waiting for? When can we expect her?"

As though asking the question willed her into existence, there she was. The sylvan elder's long gray robes swept over the grass as she shuffled across the glade, hands clasped neatly in front of her. Her head was turned slightly, a gentle smile on her wizened face as she spoke to the companion at her side. The uncanny timing of the elder's appearance took Elyria by such surprise that it took another few moments before it registered that said companion was, in fact—

“Thraigg!” She leapt off Cedric’s lap, finally dropping his hand and racing toward the dwarf as he ambled merrily next to Elder Larkess.

“There ye are, lass.” Thraigg’s voice was thick, even as he smiled wide and his shoulders bounced with a quiet laugh, making the silver beads in his braided beard jangle.

Elyria skidded to a stop in front of the pair, a little uncertain as to what her goal had been. Had she intended to . . . hug him? She didn’t think they’d ever done that before. Aside from occasionally indulging a far more demonstrative Kit and, granted, with Shep earlier, Elyria wasn’t much of a hugger. But so much joy and relief flooded through her at the sight of the dwarf that she ended up bending down to wrap her arms around his broad shoulders anyway.

Thraigg gave the small of her back a few awkward pats, clearing his throat once Elyria finally released him. “Missed me that much, did ye?” His cheeks were red, his eyes glassier than they had been a minute ago.

Elyria wanted to crack a joke. Wanted to say something about how she’d been knee-deep in piss-poor drinking companions lately and what she wouldn’t give to be able to hit up the Cracked Keg with him right this second. But the words dried up in her mouth.

What could she really say?

The last time she’d seen Thraigg had been right here, in Elderglade, on the tail of finding out that he had entered the Crucible in order to protect Cedric at Elder Larkess’s behest. He, too, was inexorably linked to all that had occurred within the Sanctum. Linked, for whatever reason, to Cedric himself. Another person, another force, working with secret agendas and hidden intentions. And regardless of the fact that they’d been part of a *good* agenda and *well-meaning* intentions, Elyria was getting pretty fucking tired of it all.

There was so little she felt in control of lately. Like her entire life had already been prescribed, written out, and she was, at this point, simply following along—a puppet on a string.

Daughter. Soldier. Revenant.

Champion. Victor. Prisoner.

And whatever she was now.

Things kept being *taken* from her.

Her faith in her father.

Her life, during the war’s final battle.

Control over her own power.

Her reputation in the years that followed.

Evander.

Her wings.

And Cedric.

The universe kept trying to take him from her too. It almost succeeded, a few times.

The prophecy loomed overhead like it was the conductor of her very fate, and Elyria was sick of it.

A choice will be offered, an offer then made:

Heal the realm or cast it into night.

That was what it said. That was how the prophecy ended. But where were her choices? What were these *options* Cedric had spoken of?

Elyria stood back up, tearing her gaze from Thraigg's face, which had fallen into a perplexed sort of frown in the time since she failed to speak. She looked at the sylvan elder standing beside him.

"I am relieved to see you awake and right-minded, Elyria," Elder Larkess said, her lilting sylvan accent adding a musical quality to the words. "I can only imagine what you've been through these past—"

"I'm fine." Elyria hadn't meant to sound curt, wasn't trying to be rude—for once. But she really, really, really did *not* want anyone's pity right now. If she let it come from one of them, it would come from all of them, and that was a wave Elyria did not have the fortitude to fend off at present.

"Of course," said Elder Larkess with a slow nod. "I would never mean to suggest you are anything but." Her milky eyes drifted to where Cedric, Young Shep, and Jocelyn still sat at the table several yards back. With a slow nod, the elder began moving forward again.

Thraigg cleared his throat, though it seemed less due to emotion and more to fill the lingering silence as the three of them shuffled back to the group. "I have a travel tip for ye, Rev."

Elyria couldn't help the way her mouth quirked. "Oh?"

"Aye. If anyone ever tries to suggest to ye that traveling with three bloody horses across half the bloody continent is a bloody good idea, tell them to fuck right off, will ye?"

"Am I to take it that Polonius has arrived unharmed, then?" Cedric's hand was warm on the side of Elyria's waist as he drew her against him the instant she sat down.

Thraigg offered a sardonic smile and a rude gesture to the knight as he took a seat opposite him. “Yer horse is fine. It’s Noxie’s fusspot of a steed that caused all the problems. At least Polonius followed Hops and me without issue. Getting Vespyr to do the same was a right pain in my arse.”

Cedric tilted his head. “But why would—”

“She’s a beautiful horse but not the smartest. I mean, thinking she could canter right off into the shadows to follow her rider?”

Elyria blinked. “Follow them where? Where did Nox go?”

Thraigg didn’t seem to hear her, too lost was he in his ranting. “A one-dwarf traveling circus, I was. Juggler of reins. Tamer of beasts. Toter of everyone’s stars-damned baggage.” He barked a single, sharp laugh, then pointed a finger at Cedric. “Ye, I don’t blame. Had more important places to be, understandably.” With a wink at Elyria, he swiped Cedric’s cup from the tabletop and took a swig, frowning into the glass when he presumably realized there was only water inside.

“Focus, my friend,” said Cedric with a good-natured roll of his eyes.

“It was supposed to be an easy trip back, mind ye. Not much happened after you left. Noxie exchanged a few words with the Dark Warden that I hadn’t a chance in all four quarters of understandin’. Then we bowed, we prayed, we carried on. Tiptoed past that blasted dragon again, traipsed back down the mountain. And that, I’d thought, was that. Sid had popped off to Gaia knows where. And with a certain nocterrian by my side, toting Polonius along was no skin off my back.” He thumped his fist on the table. “But then that shadowy arsehole had to go and fuck off to somewhere else.”

“Nox isn’t here with you?” Elyria asked.

“Well, they wouldn’t be *here* regardless, would they?” Cedric said. “Not inside the sanctuary, I mean. The last time we visited, they waited for the rest of us out in the woods with Sid.”

Elyria’s brow furrowed at the sudden wave of unease pulsing down the bond from him. She wanted to ask him more about that, but Thraigg was carrying on again.

“No, the right bastard isn’t here. Said they’d meet up with us as soon as possible and slid right off Vespyr’s back into a shadow before I had the chance to raise a single question.” He sighed. “Whether Noctis summoned them back or they needed to take a detour for some other stars-damned reason, ye’ve got me.”

Elyria swallowed. Cedric had explained Nox's ties to the Warden of Shadows, had caught her up on everything he'd learned about their mysterious nocterrian friend, but she was still having trouble wrapping her head around it all. "Well, at any rate, if Nox isn't here, why are we even bothering to discuss—"

"They will be here," said Elder Larkess softly. "We have someone stationed at the entrance, keeping an eye out. As soon as the nocterrian arrives, we will know, and you can retrieve your wings."

"If that's what you want," Cedric added quickly.

"Well, o' course that's what she wants." Thraigg's expression was disbelieving as his gaze bounced between Elyria and Cedric.

"Thraigg." Cedric's voice was low, warning.

"What? Why wouldn't it be? Ye've a chance to *fly again*, lass. Ye'll take it, won't ye?"

"Thraigg." This time it was Jocelyn issuing the reprimand, and Thraigg made a face like he wanted to say something else but managed to hold it in.

Elyria bit her bottom lip. Her eyes drifted over all those present—first Cedric beside her, then Young Shep and Jocelyn, their faces creased with concern. She skated over Thraigg, who looked mildly perplexed, before meeting Elder Larkess's assessing gaze once more.

The elder stood at the head of the table now, her palms braced against the smooth wood. Cedric rose from his seat, offering it to her, but she shook her head with a soft laugh. "Very considerate, my boy, but these limbs no longer climb on and off benches. Should I take your seat there, I fear it's where I'll live out the rest of my days."

A mix of chuckles and gentle protests rang around the table, and despite herself, Elyria found she wanted to join in. More than that though, that surge of wild in her veins was pulsing again. It had been since the instant she had returned to Cedric's side, as though her power was amplified by his very touch.

She lifted her hand, curling each of her fingers in toward her palm, one by one. A breeze swept across the table, the ground shaking gently as vines and brambles broke through the grass directly behind the elder. There was a surprised yelp and an awed whisper, though Elyria didn't know who either came from as she wove the plants together—creating four sturdy legs, a tall back, a flattened seat.

Elder Larkess let out a delighted hum when the chair was complete, a throne of branches and vines. Cedric pressed his lips to Elyria's temple, and pride unfurled in her chest. It banished some of the cold that had snaked its way into her mind when it came to her power. She'd gone months without touching her wild magic. She'd had her shadows turned against her. Perhaps this was part of the reason she felt so at ease here, so free. Her shadows were quiet, and thus it was so easy not to think about them. Not to think about what they meant, what could happen—what *had* happened—with them, should she face Malakar again.

For a little while, at least.

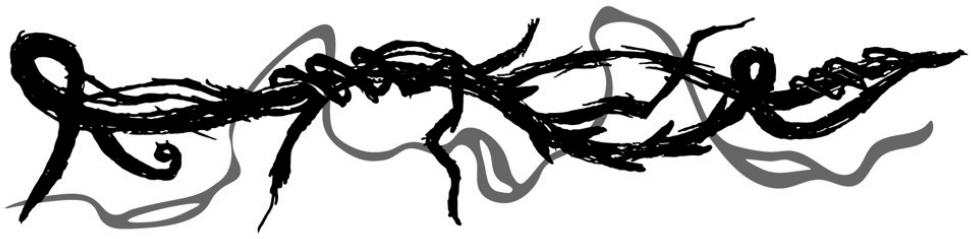
And so, for a little while longer, Elyria would revel in her magic, in this fragile grace, and let the future wait.

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WHAT REMAINS

ELYRIA



“Now that everyone’s comfortable, can we backtrack for just a moment? Cedric told me about my w—” Elyria coughed. “I know my wings are safe. And he said you think there’s a chance you can . . . restore them.” Her eyes flicked across the table to Jocelyn, whose throat bobbed.

Larkess inclined her head. “I do. We do.” She gestured to the surrounding glade. “We are fortunate to have many gifted healers here, and they are all eager to try.”

“They truly are the best, my la—Elyria,” offered Young Shep. “I have learned so much in the past few weeks.”

“Granted, the circumstances of your severing are unique,” continued Elder Larkess. “Time has passed since the incident. Your body has already had time to heal, to scar, to . . .”

“Move on.” Elyria blew out a breath, and Cedric began moving his thumb in slow, calming circles on the gap of skin below the edge of her blouse.

The elder’s mouth softened with sympathy. “Yes. It may complicate things. But it doesn’t make it impossible, just unknown.”

“The theme of my life lately, it seems,” Elyria said with a scoff.

“What are the risks?” Cedric asked.

“Also unknown,” Larkess admitted. “As with any procedure of this nature, there is potential for complication. The overall risk should be low, but there is the chance her body will reject the intrusion. The chance her

magic will, too." She ran her gaze over Elyria. "You have already been through much."

Cedric's breath hitched, concern flowing down the bond, but he held his tongue. Several moments passed, the silence thick.

"I'm sorry, but what's the holdup here, exactly?" Thraigg finally said, voice gruff. "I know ye all will think me some insensitive brute, but I don't understand. They're yer *wings*, Rev. Why wouldn't ye at least want to try? Why wouldn't ye want to fix it?"

Indignation rippled in Elyria's chest, but it wasn't coming from her.

"She doesn't need fixing," said Cedric, at the exact same time Jocelyn hissed, "She isn't broken."

"And you don't have to understand," Cedric continued curtly. "It is *her* decision to make."

Jocelyn nodded, reaching across the table to lay her hand atop Elyria's. "She has already grieved them. Maybe she wants to look forward, *move* forward." She squeezed Elyria's hand. "I know better than anyone that the answer doesn't come easy."

Elyria bit the inside of her cheek. "What would you do, Joss? If it were you?"

"I . . . I wish I'd had the choice to make. By the time I was pulled from the battlefield on the day I lost my own wings, there was no chance of recovering them." Jocelyn paused. Drew a long breath, her hazel eyes warm and unbearably steady. "I do think I would have tried."

Elyria's chin dipped. "Thraigg has a point. It seems like it should be an easy thing. I don't know why I'm so . . ."

"Scared?"

"That's not the right word for it, not exactly." Something twisted sharply behind Elyria's ribs. Of course she wanted her wings back. The very idea that they'd been saved, that Kit had protected them, that Nox had been keeping watch over them, had sparked a fierce, impossible joy the instant Cedric told her.

It was immediately followed by a heartbreaking wave of sadness.

Would she be able to look at them again without remembering the pain? The helplessness? The way her own magic had been turned against her?

Would they even feel like hers anymore?

Perhaps it would be better to let the memory of them remain untouched. Untainted. A perfect preservation of everything that happened—and

everything she was—*before*.

At least that way they'd never be able to be taken from her again.

A pulse of warmth slid down the bond—it felt like understanding.

Of course Cedric understood. Was his entire life not the same? Everything he had learned—about himself, his family, his lineage, his upbringing—had been irrevocably tainted by Varyth Malchior's treachery.

He'd had something severed too, when the truth came out.

Would he go back, Elyria wondered, *if he could? To blissful ignorance? To the way it was before?*

She didn't need to ask to know the answer. He would never. Cedric took what happened in the past and used it to forge a stronger, braver version of himself.

Maybe she could be brave too.

"Do I need to decide right now?" Elyria asked Elder Larkess.

"Take all the time you need. As your nocterrian friend has not returned yet, and your wings remain safely ensconced in their shadowy safe, there is no rush. And giving your body more time to continue recovering certainly cannot hurt." Larkess folded her hands on the table. "If it is worth anything, I would *like* to try to do this for you. You may very well have saved his life that day"—her gaze flicked to Cedric—"and that is not something I take lightly."

Elyria's eyes burned. "Don't make it sound so noble. I only—"

"It *was* noble. I honor the courage your sacrifice required and want to do all that is in my power to help."

"A sacrifice you should never have had to make," Cedric said sullenly into her mind.

"You're one to talk," Elyria shot back, but already she felt lighter.

She lifted her eyes from her companions at the table to the greater glade surrounding them. A group of healers was heading into the eastern woods, empty baskets looped on each of their arms. Off to harvest healing herbs and plants, perhaps. One of the sylvan tutors escorted a group of younger mixedborn children to the schoolhouse, waving at Shep as she passed.

"I do need just a little time to think about it," Elyria declared, "but while I do so, is there any news with regard to Malakar I might have missed while I was, er . . . ?"

"Convalescing?" Jocelyn offered.

Elyria's upper lip curled under her nose, but she gave a short nod.

Thraigg bounced his fist on the table. “Yes, speaking of things that are in yer power, Lark, shouldn’t we all be a wee bit more worried about the one thing that’s *supposed* to be?”

Elyria blinked. It took a second for her to piece together what the dwarf was referring to. The answer came to her just as Cedric’s reminder drifted down the thread between them.

“The crown—the locket,” he said, and each word was tight, guarded, even in Elyria’s mind. The state of his mother’s locket, the crown in disguise, was another thing Cedric had updated her on in the time since she’d fully awoken the previous day. But the reality was that there was simply so much she had missed in her months of captivity. Too much. It would take time to fully digest it all.

“Ah, that’s right,” she said, tilting her head to look at Elder Larkess again. “Have you figured out what’s preventing you from transfiguring the locket back?”

“The council and I have continued to convene on it but have yet to confidently arrive at a conclusion. We suspect that due to the immense power contained within the crown and the length of time it has been concealed, the weavings of verdancy keeping it transformed have simply become that much more complicated to unwind.”

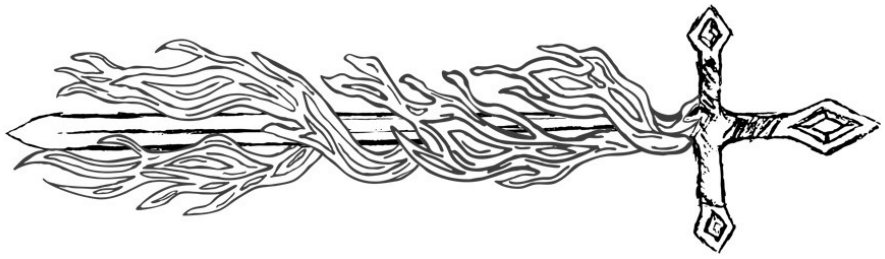
Cedric let out a surprisingly derisive snort, frustration pulsing down the bond. “Maybe if you hadn’t spent my entire life working in secret, if you’d been honest with me from the beginning, we could have figured this out long ago.” He slammed his palm on the table, rattling the cups and plates that still lay upon it. “Before you let the man who murdered my parents raise me for twenty fucking years.”

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21

MISDIRECTED ANGER

CEDRIC



THE TABLE WAS SILENT. THE ENTIRE GLADE WAS SILENT. IT WAS AS THOUGH the very air had gone still, like the birds had stopped chirping, so in awe was everyone at the rage emanating from the typically composed knight.

Cedric had held his tongue. Tried physically biting it, in fact, the entire time the group had discussed Elyria's wings. That was *her* time to listen, to learn, to figure out whatever she needed to in order to aid her eventual decision.

But now that the conversation had shifted to the crown, Cedric could hold himself back no longer. He didn't want to. Didn't want to be composed, didn't want to be noble and honorable and deferential. He didn't want to live in the dark anymore, only ever knowing what he was told by the ones who controlled the truth.

The past few months had been filled with nothing but his desperate desire to get Elyria back. Now that she was, now that he felt less like half of himself was missing, Cedric was determined to never again be a passenger in his own life. The fact that he had gone so long without that agency only served to fuel the angry fire smoldering inside him.

Granted, had he been of a clearer mind and more rested body, he might have been able to identify the fact that said anger was somewhat misplaced at present.

"Well?" he spat, and he could feel Elyria's concern ripple down the bond between them, just as he felt her fingers curl over his wrist. His

heartbeat slowed at the contact, and he leaned into her beside him on the bench.

Hurt flashed across Elder Larkess's face, but it was Thraigg who responded in a low voice. "Ye can't blame her, Ric. Lark explained when last we were here how gravely she was injured the night of the attack on yer family, and how she—"

Elder Larkess interrupted Thraigg with the gentle shake of her head, smiling at the dwarf before straightening in her wild-woven chair and meeting Cedric's eye. "You are right, dear boy. My long, long life is full of many regrets, not the least of which is letting you go that night, injured or not. But you must understand too. To you, I was simply your nanny, the human housemaid who had been with your family since before you were born. You did not know who I really was. Who your mother was. With your parents gone, I had nowhere to go but back to Elderglade. And to take you not only from the only home you'd ever known, but the only land you'd known? The *life* you'd known? Your very identity?

"You thought yourself human, had been raised human, and . . ." She sighed. "And along came this powerful, wealthy *human* benefactor who was ready to take you in, to raise you, to give you the steady, normal life you so deserved. The life you deserve still. There was no way for me to know then who he would end up being—who he was all along." She paused, a slow breath hissing through pursed lips. "No way for me to know the very man who came to your rescue was the same one responsible for killing your parents."

Cedric shifted on the bench, running his tongue across his teeth. He was loath to admit it because being angry felt good, felt more productive, than being sad, but he did understand.

To an extent.

"You're right. You didn't know. You didn't know anything about Leviathan Church when he took Cedric in. Shouldn't that have been reason enough *not* to let him go?" Elyria said, and Cedric realized that some of the anger still pulsing inside him was coming from her. "Even if the bastard had not turned out to be the evil piece of pond scum he was, he was a human, and Cedric is not. You alone knew he was part of Daephinia's legacy, that he had magic—a sunbringer's power, for fuck's sake. And you left him to navigate all of that alone."

Elder Larkess bristled. “You say that as though I had not kept as close an eye on him as I could, that I was not looking out for him. I have *always* had his best interests at heart. I would have found a way to tell him the truth when the time came, should it have come. But when it became clear that his magic was locked the night his parents were killed, I saw no need to intervene. Not until . . .” Her gaze drifted from Cedric back to Thraigg.

“Not until the Crucible,” Cedric finished for her.

“Aye, and we all know how that turned out,” said Thraigg with a sniff.

Larkess nodded. “As I said, I have regrets, though asking my friend to protect you inside the Sanctum is not one of them. Everything up to that point, though . . .” She interlaced her hands on the table with a shake of her head. “I did what I could from afar, doing my best to keep from puncturing the new peace you had found. I thought that as long as you were cared for and as long as you had your mother’s locket in your possession, still safely transformed, all else was moot. I knew where you were, and you were safe. That was enough.”

Cedric’s brow furrowed. “But I *didn’t* have her locket.”

“I understand that now. But back then, all I knew was that by the time I had healed, by the time I was able to return to your former home, Leviathan Church had already gone through and retrieved your family’s keepsakes for you. I’d assumed he gave you the locket when he passed along your father’s sword and ring. I was wrong, but I suppose it didn’t really matter. It *was* safe all these years, just not in the way I had thought.”

Cedric drew the locket out from beneath his tunic, running it back and forth along its chain. “At least he never knew,” he said satisfactorily. “All the years of manipulation, of longing for power, and he never knew half the crown was in his possession all along.” He looked to Elder Larkess. “I suppose it is a testament to your power that its true nature was so deeply concealed. Nothing but an ordinary locket, until . . .”

He willed a spark of sunfyre to the tip of his pointer finger, letting it glow for a moment before touching the locket’s smooth casing. The hidden runes etched into its surface revealed themselves the instant his magic brushed across it.

And then it was Elyria’s brow that was creasing. “Was it, though? *That* deeply concealed? I distinctly remember the first time I saw the locket—Tenny was wearing it at the welcome ball when we first arrived in

Kingshelm. I'd asked her if it was normal for humans to have multiple mana tokens, because that's what I thought it was."

"What do you mean?" Elder Larkess looked taken aback, but Elyria only shrugged.

"It was like it was humming. Singing to me, just for a second. But I wrote it off—there were so many tokens in the room that night. And *just a few* other distractions." She gave Cedric's arm a final squeeze before releasing it.

"And now?" Larkess asked eagerly, leaning forward. "Can you still sense it? Is it still singing to you?"

Elyria frowned, pivoting her body to look at Cedric head-on. She reached for the locket, now resting against his clavicle. He suppressed a delighted shiver when her fingers grazed the skin over his collarbone.

"Maybe?" she said after a beat. "It's difficult to tell. My wild magic is very loud here"—she dropped the locket and gestured to the surrounding glade—"while my . . . my shadows are quiet."

"What does that mean?" asked Shep, turning to Elder Larkess.

"What're ye thinking, Lark?" asked Thraigg at nearly the same time.

"I am not sure," Larkess replied. "It feels like something, though. I want to discuss this with the rest of the council." She refocused her attention on Cedric. "If you wish to be angry with me, I will not try to dissuade you. I did what I thought best with what I knew. I would make many different choices, if I could go back. I *will* make different choices moving forward, so long as time allots me the ability to do so. And one of those choices is to focus on restoring the crown so you can fulfill your destiny, Dawnbringer."

Cedric wanted to snort at the mention of destiny, but he simply gave the elder a tight nod. The conversation, in combination with Elyria's proximity, had already settled some of his rage. He knew it was unfair to hold Larkess responsible for Varyth Malchior's past evils.

Besides, there was a much worse, much more pressing target that deserved his wrath.

Like she could tell exactly where his mind was going, or perhaps because it was where hers went too, Elyria leaned into him. "Has there been any news of Malakar's movements since the night I escaped?"

Larkess shook her head sadly. "I could not say—we do not know. We have seen no signs nor heard anything of him or his followers over the past few days. But that, of course, means little."

“It wasn’t exactly like the streets had been buzzing with talk of the dark sorcerer’s plans even before we got Elle back,” said Jocelyn.

Cedric pinched the bridge of his nose. “Exactly. If there’s one thing Malakar and Varyth Malchior share—”

“Aside from the same fucking body,” Elyria griped.

“—it’s that they clearly excel at working in secrecy.”

“Last I heard from Tenny is that Castle Lumin has been re-warded—sealed once more,” Jocelyn offered. “So there’s no way for us to know what goes on within its walls. Operating without the official sanctions of either Nyrundelle or Havensreach as we are, there are simply not enough of us to run patrols, to provide proper reports.”

“So, Malakar has either fled somewhere new, or he remains inside the castle, still working on whatever he needed his precious forges for, still forcing his followers to keep digging for fuck knows what.” Elyria folded her arms over her chest. “Knowing our luck, I can guess what’s more likely.”

There was a moment of heavy silence. Everyone present stared at Elyria.

And then they exploded into a flurry of questions all at once.

“Forges?”

“What do you mean?”

“Digging?”

“Do you know his plan?”

Elyria leaned back, blinking rapidly. The storm of conflicting emotions barreling down the bond—surprise and anger and apprehension—had Cedric moving his hand to the small of her back in a show of support.

“I—I don’t know much,” she said. “He was so fixated on getting his power back from me. I didn’t think much about *why* he was so determined, at least not in the beginning. But eventually, you know, you kind of get used to the torture, so . . .” She huffed a dark laugh, and Cedric’s blood boiled. “I started piecing a few things together—things he would say, things other people”—she swallowed, drawing her crossed arms tighter against her body—“let slip. I never officially heard exactly what it is he hopes to achieve in the end, but I think it’s fair to assume it has to do with crushing us disgusting, power-greedy Arcanians and lifting himself up. I mean, some things never change, right?”

The way Larkess pursed her lips and exhaled sharply from her nose made it seem like she agreed with that sentiment.

“He was clear enough about wanting his power back from me,” Elyria continued, “because he needed to be at full strength in order to accomplish whatever it is he *does* want. In order to pierce a line of some sort.”

This time it was Shep’s sharp breath cutting through the silence. “*A* line? Or *the* Line?”

Elyria briefly lifted a hand to the back of her head, then looked at her fingers as though she expected to still see blood staining them. “I’m . . . not sure. It was all a bit muddy there at the end.”

“*The*,” said Cedric, his voice low, dark. “‘The Line will be pierced. The world rewritten.’ That’s what he said.”

“Impossible,” breathed Larkess. “Well, not impossible, clearly, but . . . Where would he mean to . . . ? And how would he . . . ?” The elder’s eyes were cast down, her voice trailing off every time she spoke. It was obvious she was not talking to anybody but herself.

Elyria had a far-off look in her eyes, like she, too, was puzzling out the meaning of the words. Something sparked down their bond—a glimmer of understanding, a key being slotted into a lock. It was quickly followed by contrition and a flurry of self-flagellating thoughts. She was berating herself for not having realized something sooner.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid,” she said, the words bouncing around the inside of Cedric’s skull.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” he asked her, mind-to-mind. But she was lost in her own thoughts, and when she didn’t answer, he asked aloud, too. “What is the Line? What does this mean?”

“The Line of Origin,” Shep whispered.

Jocelyn’s mouth popped open. “Just a myth . . . isn’t it?”

Elder Larkess shook her head. “Not a myth. Not a legend. The very real source of all mana—all magic.”

“I’m so stupid,” Elyria said simply, barking out a laugh. “I’m a stars-damned motherfucking idiot.”

“Hey, now,” Cedric responded reflexively.

Elyria waved off his protestation. “I don’t know why I didn’t piece it together before. He wants access to the source. He intends to corrupt the mana that flows throughout all Arcanis.”

“Corrupt it, or claim it,” said Larkess wearily.

“Who says the mad bastard intends on picking one or the other?” added Thraigg.

“Where *is* the Line? How would he reach it?” Cedric asked. “Is that even possible?”

“Once, I might have said no,” Larkess replied. “But you yourself have seen him do things with his power beyond what I would have thought conceivable. Beyond even the wildest ambition. He can twist blood and bone into monstrosities that obey his will. He has cheated death at least once. We would be fools to underestimate him.”

Cedric thought of what happened in Daeglen and at Castle Lumin. He thought of Ignatius and Tyrren, their bodies contorting under invisible hands, eyes bleeding red, limbs cracking at all the wrong angles. He thought of Evander’s corrupted form as they’d battled him during the Crucible, of Elyria with her power strangled, leashed by the dark sorcerer’s shadows.

How many other forms could his power take? How many other ways could he hurt and maim and kill? How much more of a monster would he become with access to the very magic of the world?

“Is that what his followers could be digging for?” Cedric asked, stomach lurching. “Are they digging a path down to the Line?”

Shep shook his head. “Now, *that* would be impossible. They would have to dig for a decade. The Line is said to run so deep under Arcanis that even the Chasms do not touch it. That said, it isn’t as though anyone has ever flown down into the rift and returned to tell the tale. One can assume that, at the very least, barriers are . . . thinner there.”

“And he has forges, so we can assume that he’s forging *something* with them,” said Elyria. “A way to get to the Line? A means to pierce it once he does? He is still without his full power, after all, since I wasn’t generous enough to give it back.”

Pride bloomed in the center of Cedric’s chest, even as that tiny, thin wisp of shadow that was wrapped around his own ribs had him wondering what “full power” meant. Even if Elyria had been able to concede the shadows back to the dark sorcerer, what did it mean that Cedric had this minuscule thread of that same magic bound within himself?

He supposed it didn’t matter. “We have to assume the worst,” he said. “That Malakar can reach the Line and that he can pierce it, even with a chunk of his power still missing.”

“Or that he will eventually go looking for Elle again, if he does still need his power back,” said Jocelyn quietly, and Elyria stiffened.

Cedric tensed. “Either way, we have to stop him before any of that can happen,” he said—the words solemn, a vow.

“All the more reason for me to meet once more with the other elders—immediately.” Elder Larkess rose from her seat, the edges of her eyes downturned, exhaustion embedded in every line of her face. “May I take the locket for us to examine again, my boy? It is clear that figuring out how to unweave my magic is of utmost importance. The power of the Crown of Concord is what stopped Malakar before. After all you’ve told us—what he is capable of, the way he has twisted the oaths of his followers, and the number of followers he has—I fear he may be unstoppable without it.”

Cedric nodded, unclasping the locket from around the back of his neck and handing it to the elder. She, in turn, fastened the chain behind her head and, with a nod of thanks, made to leave. She only made it a few shuffled footsteps before her gait faltered, though, and both Young Shep and Thraigg leapt up from the table to help her.

Elyria hissed out a breath from between clenched teeth as the three of them walked away, her hands fisted on the tabletop.

Jocelyn looked from Elyria to Cedric and back again before swinging her legs out from under the table and rising from the bench with an awkward chuckle. “Think I’ll go see if I can swing a room to rinse off and rest before sending an update to Tenny. I’ve been on the move for a while. You’ll come find me if there’s any news, yes? Or if there are any . . . decisions made.”

“Of course,” said Cedric, and Jocelyn turned to follow the path that the rest of their group had just trod across the glade.

“Wait.” Elyria stood and walked around the side of the table, then pulled the fae into a fierce hug. “Thank you. For coming. For being here.”

Jocelyn didn’t quite seem to know what to do with the open affection pouring onto her from the Revenant. There was a long moment wherein she locked gazes with Cedric, her hazel eyes glassy. He could only smile. And finally, she lifted her arms and wrapped them around Elyria.

“There is nowhere else I could fathom being,” she said softly. And with a sad smile that crinkled her nose, she, too, was gone.

Elyria sat back down, opposite Cedric this time, and took his hand in hers before loosing a humorless laugh. “What a day.”

“You took the words right out of my mouth. Wishing you were still sleeping?”

“Don’t think the thought hadn’t crossed my mind,” she replied wistfully. “But no, of course not. There’s too much to do. Too much to learn, to decide. And I’m just so . . .” She took a breath. “We have to stop him. We have to stop them all, before they hurt anybody else.”

Cedric almost didn’t want to vocalize the thought now crossing his mind. But for the sake of truth . . .

“There’s something else that presents a bit of a complication,” he said, jaw tight. “The cultists I fought in Castle Lumin were one thing, but not all members of the Cult are loyal zealots. In Daeglen, we learned that firsthand. That’s why Tristan and Zephyr are headed to Kinsgaith—to learn if the blood oaths can be undone. They should be arriving soon. Might be there already.”

“Perhaps they will be able to learn more than that, if there are cultists to be found and swayed there,” said Elyria. “I, too, had an . . . experience . . . with one of Malakar’s followers. It showed me not only that some of their reasons for following him are more complex than I might’ve thought, but also that they may know things—important things, things that they don’t even realize. Maybe we should go to Kinsgaith too.”

Cedric shook his head. *“You’re safe here,”* he said resolutely down their bond. *“And you get to take as much time as you need to recover and”*—his gaze flicked to her shoulders—*“decide what you want to do.”*

Elyria’s throat bobbed. *“Right. Of course.”* But there was no ignoring the sense of urgency he felt now pulsing from her.

He squeezed her hand. “Besides, we need to be here for when Larkess finally figures out how to unbind the crown’s true form. Once we reunite the two halves, we’ll have the Crown of Concord and can make good on our original promise. Do you remember?”

“Of course.” A soft smile overtook her face, though it fell a moment later. “Even if it does feel like that conversation happened in a dream at this point.”

“Sometimes the entire Crucible feels like it was a dream.”

“A dream and a nightmare.” She bit her lip. “But you’re right. With the crown, we can seal the Chasms. And maybe that alone will stop Malakar’s plan.”

“And if not, we will have the power of the crown to stop *him* too.”

“Sure would be nice if we had an army or two to back us up if we have to try,” she said with a scowl. “Imagine us with the might to flush him out of Castle Lumin instead of guessing at his goals. Instead of trying and hoping and praying to finally get a step ahead.”

Cedric couldn’t help the laugh that slipped out, despite the fact that there was really nothing funny about any part of this. “I could not possibly agree more,” he said, attempting to reel himself back in. “But the crowns of Havensreach and Nyrundelle both have to agree that there’s a problem in order to send aid. And while Tenny and Kit have been working on that very thing . . .”

“The latest updates from both of them do not inspire much confidence,” Elyria finished for him.

“I do believe King Callum is trying. King Lachlandris, on the other hand . . . We shall simply have to see.”

“Well, I’ve never relied on the aid of kings in the past. In fact, they’ve typically only ever proven to hold me back. Solaris knows I’m perfectly happy acting on my own.”

“On *our* own, but yes. Even if we assume minimal support from either crown, we are not powerless. Information is power too, and we’re getting better at gathering that, at least. It’s a start.”

Elyria’s answering laugh was soft, but it was real. It fluttered against Cedric’s ribs, easing some of the tightness there. He stared down at their joined hands before lifting his eyes to take in the beautiful sight of her before him.

There was still something slightly unbelievable in the fact that she was here, that he was touching her, speaking to her, looking at her. He felt his bondmark pulse—beckoning, *tugging*, as if the matching scar at the base of Elyria’s neck was calling to him. He tamped down the visceral urge he felt —in his hands, his chest, his *teeth*—to answer that call.

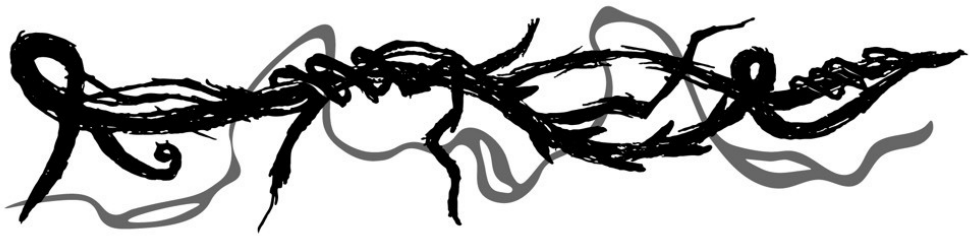
“Yes,” Elyria agreed. “It’s a start.”

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22

WANTS & NEEDS

ELYRIA



THE DARKNESS WAS SUFFOCATING—A BLANKET OF SMOKE SURROUNDING her, smothering her. There was nothing but the oppressive weight of *him*, of everything he had done to her, everything he wanted to do to her. It pushed down on Elyria, leveled her, made her feel small and fractured and *weak*.

"Bonds were made to be broken, regina. *I think I will enjoy finally seeing you break."*

Malakar's voice was sharper than any dagger as it sliced and sliced and sliced away at her, the whispers of horrible things caressing her, snaking over her skin along with his unwanted touch, his breath. Cutting pain lanced her back, scored her skin. Wet warmth trickled down her sides.

No, no, no, no, no.

This wasn't what she wanted. She couldn't breathe, couldn't fight, couldn't flee. She would be trapped here forever, unable to escape his sickly sweet scent, his icy hands roaming across her body.

"Do not fear, mi umbrae regina. *Soon you will forget all about him. I will snuff out whatever tiny, insignificant bit of himself he may have left with you. We will be so much more."*

And then his lips were on hers and his hands were roaming too far and—

Elyria screamed, her arms and legs thrashing against the shackles binding her. The restraints only tightened, holding her down, holding her back.

Not shackles, she realized with a start.

Arms.

Warm, strong arms cocooning her, while their owner spoke soothing words into her ear.

“It’s not real, Elle. You aren’t there. You’re here.” And then, a soft echo in her mind: *“With me.”*

Elyria took a breath, cracking her eyelids open to take in the dimly lit room, the woven-branch bedframe she and Cedric were lying upon.

Tears slipped from her eyes as she tried to shake the nightmare-free, tried to separate dream from reality, tried to erase the memory of the dark sorcerer’s touch. The fact that his assault had not quite progressed to that point in reality did dawn on her, but the seeds that had been planted in her mind—the threats he’d made when he discovered the evidence of her bondmark, his obvious intent—were proving difficult to remove.

It was still too fresh. Too real. And the day’s discussions, the speculation of what he was after, the reminders of what he had done, did nothing to quell the nauseous churning of Elyria’s stomach.

Malakar was still all over her, lingering. A stain.

And there was only one thing that could erase it.

Elyria rolled in Cedric’s arms, twisting so his chin was no longer nestled in her hair, his chest no longer at her back. Instead, they faced each other, the softest glow emanating from him despite the concern carved into every line of his handsome face.

“Tell me what I can—”

Cheeks still wet, she tipped her chin up until her lips met his, wiggling her body farther into his embrace, pressing herself against him. She felt his hands lock around her waist, a low moan sounding in the back of his throat as her lips parted and he swept his tongue inside. She sighed, one hand sliding up his bare chest and then around to the back of his neck. Her fingers entwined with the hair at his nape, curling into his locks and pulling slightly as she slanted her mouth against his.

Cedric’s hands slid to her hips, his fingers digging into her as he hauled her body closer against him, one leg slipping between hers. It was like he, too, couldn’t get close enough. Like he, too, needed to feel her, needed her under his skin, safe inside his bones.

Or maybe that was just her. For Elyria, there was no such thing as too close now. No such thing as too tight or too much.

She ground herself against his thigh, inhaling sharply at the delicious friction she found there. His grip was bruisingly tight, his lips staying on hers, consuming every sound she made. Like he wanted to consume *her.*

It still wasn't enough.

Elyria broke their needy kiss with a gasp. "I need you," she said. *Begged*. "Please."

Cedric's brow creased. "We don't have to—"

"I do." She shook her head. "I do have to. I need you to help me forget and help me remember all at once." Her grip on his hair tightened, and Cedric let out a groan.

"I just . . . I don't want to take advantage of you. We don't have to do anything that—"

In an instant, she rolled again, this time pinning Cedric beneath her, one leg falling to either side of his waist. "Always so considerate," she said, wiping the remaining tears from her face with the back of her hand. "Always such a gentleman. Some might even say *princely*. But you don't have to be so fucking precious with me, Your Highness. I'm not made of glass."

Cedric gazed up at her with an expression that seemed equal parts adoring and apprehensive. He clearly wasn't falling for her bait. "It will be a cold day in all four quarters of hell the moment I ever think of you as fragile, Trouble. I just don't want you thinking you have to do this—to do anything—for me. I would be content to spend the rest of our days doing nothing but holding you in my arms. All I care about is having you here with me—forever."

She rolled her hips, more friction sparking where her core rubbed against the hard proof of his lie. He could say he wanted nothing more than to cuddle for the rest of time, but his body clearly wanted more than that.

Moreover, so did Elyria.

"Are you sure about that? Forever is a long time," she teased, rolling against him once more, unable to contain the sound of pleasure that escaped her lips as she did.

"I would take a thousand forevers with you, Elle."

She smiled down at him, her throat suddenly tight. "How reassuring to know we are on the same page for once," she said with a soft laugh, then leaned down to press a gentle kiss to his lips.

“Will wonders never cease,” he said wryly. “But all the more reason there’s no need to rush anything now. I waited all my life for you. I’d happily wait as long as you need before—”

“And while your consideration and thoughtfulness are *never* lost on me, my enduring, patient knight, and I do want to be equally considerate to what *you* want . . .” She dropped her voice to barely more than a whisper. “What if this *is* what I need? What if I want you to rewrite every moment of misery from these past months? What if I want to make up for lost time? What if I need you to take me hard and fast, here and now, and force me to remember why I fought to stay alive?”

And then there were no more words to say, because Cedric had yanked her back down toward him, crushing his lips against hers. With a burst of strength that had that coiling sensation behind her navel tightening instantaneously, he flipped their positions so Elyria was on her back, his muscular forearms boxing in either side of her head as he braced against the mattress.

“Let us be straight about one thing, Trouble,” he said, lowering himself to ghost his lips against the line of her jaw, then traveling up to nip at her earlobe. “There was never any alternative to you being alive. I refuse to even think of it. I spent every day of our separation holding back from unleashing my fury on the entire stars-damned world for allowing you to be taken from me. Even now, I am fighting my baser nature, restraining myself from storming right back to Castle Lumin, from tearing down every stone that dared stand between us.”

The low murmur of Cedric’s voice set Elyria’s skin on fire. She writhed beneath him, bucking her hips against his, searching for *more*. But her knight merely released a breathy laugh as he lowered more of his weight upon her, the length of his body pinning hers in place.

Yes, she thought. *This.* This was what she wanted. What she needed. For him to cover every inch of her, for his heat to wash over her skin, for it to be *him* bearing down on her instead of—

“I want to set that entire fucking city ablaze for merely being the site of his crimes against you,” Cedric continued darkly. “And had you been hurt worse when I found you or, stars forbid, had I not found you”—the air around him began refracting—“alive, not a single corner of Arcanis would have been safe from my wrath.”

She'd never heard him speak like this. Had never seen him like this. Heat spilled off him, ribbons of sunfyre dancing along his skin, then along hers. Not too hot, not burning. It was like the very rays of the sun were wrapping around her, embracing her, chasing away every last ounce of lingering cold.

Cedric licked a line down the column of her throat, stopping to trace the faint crescent shape of her soul-bonded mark with his tongue, and Elyria released a whimper.

"I went insane without you," he growled, the hard length of him grinding into her thigh, just shy of where she wanted it. "I think I'm insane still. And it won't go away until I have made Malakar suffer for every ounce of hurt he inflicted upon you. I will carve it all from his flesh before I lay him at your feet to do with what you will." His gaze was locked on the side of her neck with a feral sort of fixation. "So please know that when I offer to be patient, when I tell you we don't need to rush, I'm *not* saying it for me."

Elyria grabbed the sides of his face, forcing him to meet her eye. His warm brown irises were nearly eclipsed with their rings of gold again, the sunfyre inside him illuminating his veins.

He looked like a stars-damned star god.

And it was the most breathtakingly beautiful sight Elyria had ever seen.

She let one of her hands fall from his cheek, sweeping down the line of his jaw, his neck, until her fingertips fell over the mark she'd left on him. The moonlight made it look like it was shimmering, and Elyria's teeth ached to clamp down on the spot again. To do more than just bite.

To pierce.

She was so fixated on the sight that she barely noticed Cedric shifting to the side, laying his weight on one arm so he could free the other to fist the hem of her nightdress. But when he began dragging it up her body, excruciatingly slowly, exposing her flesh inch by inch . . . *That,* she noticed.

Cedric's golden eyes were pinned to her face right up until the moment the hem—and his hand—brushed over the fabric of her undergarment, the front of which was already embarrassingly wet with need. His attention immediately snapped to the area, and the sound that rumbled from his chest at the sight had Elyria clenching her thighs together.

"No," he grunted, grabbing one of her legs at the knee and throwing it aside like he was throwing open a cupboard door. And then her

undergarment was tossed aside too—had he just *ripped* it off her?—and his fingers were wading through soft curls in search of that little bundle of nerves, that gateway to pleasure, that—

Elyria gasped. Let out a pitiful cry. Arched her back clear off the bed as the pad of Cedric's finger found her center. *Solaris bless those talented fingers,* she thought, and she swore Cedric chuckled in response.

"Is this what you wanted?" he breathed, lowering his head back down so that his lips once again grazed the sensitive point of her ear. "What you needed?"

"Yes. No. Yes. *Fuck.*" Elyria's head was spinning, sensation shooting through her body from where his fingers were expertly swirling, swirling, swirling. It was everything she wanted and nothing like it at all. Because she wanted this, yes, but she wanted more, too. Wanted all of him—inside her, over her, under her, everywhere at once.

"You sound confused, Trouble," he murmured. "Perhaps what you *need* is a little help making up your mind?"

"Asshole," she breathed, then whimpered again as two of his fingers plunged into her molten core. They curled inside her, stroking her, while his thumb continued making lazy circles and that feeling behind her navel coiled tighter and tighter.

Once again, Elyria must have been lost to sensation, lost to the satisfied grunts coming from Cedric in response to each of her mewls of pleasure as he stroked, and stroked, and stroked. Because she didn't notice that she'd apparently lost the rest of her nightdress at some point. Didn't notice until he had already moved several inches down the bed to take one of her peaked pink nipples into his mouth, sucking gently. He repeated the act on her other breast, then returned to the first. And this time, it wasn't quite so gentle.

Elyria cried out as Cedric's teeth clamped down, not hard enough to break the skin, not hard enough to mark, but just hard enough to send sparks of pain mixing with her pleasure and—

"Cedric, please," she cried into his mind. *"I'm going to—"*

She couldn't even finish the thought before her orgasm ripped through her body, echoing up and down the bond, and feeling exactly what *he* was feeling in that moment only amplified it all.

"You're so fucking perfect," Cedric murmured into her mind. *"So fucking perfect and so fucking mine."* She watched him with wide eyes as

he leaned back, drew his fingers into his mouth, and cleaned them off with a sweep of his tongue, and it was so erotic that Elyria nearly came again just from the sight of it.

Or maybe that wasn't her. Pleasure bloomed down the bond threaded between them, Cedric's body shuddered, and he released the dreamiest little groan.

Elyria's face curved into a wry smile as she realized what happened. "Did you just . . . ?" It wasn't really a question. Neither was it a judgment. If anything, it only added to Elyria's overall satisfaction.

Cedric, to his credit, did not seem fazed in the slightest. "Can you blame me?" he said with a casualness that felt both wildly uncharacteristic and unbelievably sexy. "You taste like—Fuck it all. I couldn't even begin to describe it. I've dreamed about it every night for months, and still my witless mind never did it justice."

Elyria's smile morphed into something coy, coquettish. "Well, feel free to remind yourself *anytime* there. I remain at your leisure."

"You're going to regret making that offer, Trouble."

Elyria could only shrug, exhaustion already sweeping through her as she spun down from her high. Her bones felt loose, rubbery, and she wanted to melt into the mattress. "I highly doubt that, Your Highness," she said, stifling a yawn. She turned onto her side, watching Cedric as he sat up and drew the blanket up over her cooling, naked body and then got up from the bed.

"Where are you—"

"Just cleaning up," he said soothingly. "Go back to sleep. I'll return before you know it."

"I—" She bit her bottom lip, and he immediately sat back down.

"What is it?"

"What if I dream again?" she admitted.

He took her hand, lifted it to his lips, and brushed a featherlight kiss against each one of her knuckles. *"Then I will be here when you wake again."*

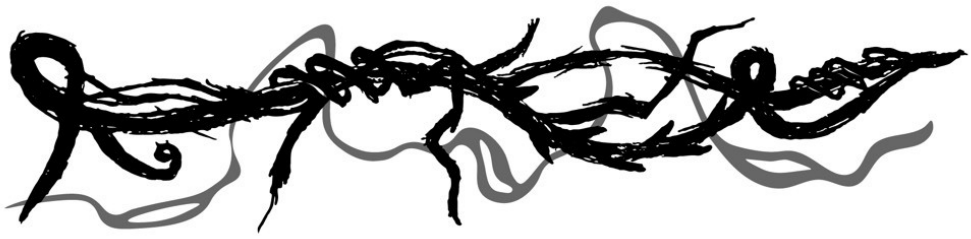
And the words were so simple, so heartfelt and earnest and *true*, that when Elyria closed her eyes, with Cedric still holding her hand, she instantly fell asleep.

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23

THE WEIGHT OF TWO WORLDS

ELYRIA



WHEN ELYRIA'S EYES OPENED AGAIN, IT WAS MORNING. THE SACRED silence of night had been banished by sunlight streaming in through the window above her, illuminating the room.

Just like when she'd awoken last night, and the day before, and, she suspected, every time she'd awoken since coming to Elderglade—whether she remembered it or not—Cedric was draped around her. His arms were wrapped around her midsection, his chest pressed close against her back, his long torso curving around her.

She wriggled against him, and he released a sleepy groan into her hair.

"Good morning," she said cheerily, pivoting on the bed to face him. The rest of her night had been blissfully nightmare-free, and it turned out that a pleasure-induced sleep really did do *wonders* for the soul, because Elyria felt better than she had in ages.

Well, she could calculate *exactly* how long it had been since she'd felt this good, down to the day—down to the hour, in fact—but after banishing Malakar from her dreams, she didn't particularly want to venture down that thought path again so soon.

Granted, she wasn't a total idiot. She knew she would have to think about it all again eventually. Sooner than eventually, really. There was still so much she was trying to piece together about Malakar's plan, all that she'd heard while in captivity. She needed to figure out what his followers

might be doing, needed to understand where she and Cedric and everyone else should go from here.

But first things first.

Elyria sat up and scooted back until she could lean against the bed's woven headboard, a thin blanket pinned under her arms, covering her. "What time did Elder Larkess say the council was convening?"

Cedric threw a forearm over his eyes. "I—uh . . . I don't recall." He yawned. "Give me a minute, would you?"

Elyria inhaled sharply—a mocking gasp. "Why, Sir Sleepyhead, whatever could have you so exhausted? Have your nights been fraught of late for some reason or another?"

He moved his arm enough so that he could crack open a bleary eye, just to immediately narrow it at her. She grinned at him.

Stars above, this felt good. Felt so *normal*. Something in the back of Elyria's head had her questioning these swings of her mood—ones that she realized were relatively wild, even for her. From the confusion that came with waking up in this place, to the horror of remembering what had happened right before she did, to the desperate closeness she needed from Cedric, to the pain and anger that arose from yesterday's discussions of her wings and Malakar, respectively, and now, to this contentment . . . Cognitively, she did recognize she was all over the place. And it wasn't that she didn't think that to be something that warranted exploration at *some* point, but she simply didn't want that point to be now.

Not when she had woken feeling more rested and whole than she had in months. Not when she could feel Cedric's love and devotion flowing down their bond, even as he grumbled about how at least *he'd* had the consideration not to actively try to wake *her* up yesterday.

So, no, Elyria didn't want to think about silly things like logic or reason at the moment.

Her eyes trailed down his resting body—bare-chested, a pair of linen pants slung around his hips and tented in a way that was honestly rather impressive given what happened in the middle of the night.

"*I can feel you staring, Trouble,*" he murmured into her mind, his eyes still closed, the slow, even rise of his chest indicating he was just on the cusp of falling back asleep.

"*Good,*" she replied, and then began tracing the line her gaze had drawn down his body with the tip of her finger.

Cedric’s skin pebbled under her touch, and the bulge in his pants twitched. Elyria’s grin widened. But just as she hooked a finger under the waistband of his pants, his hand closed around her wrist, halting it.

When she turned her head to look at his face again, his gold-ringed eyes were wide open.

“What?” she asked, dipping her chin with faux shyness. “Don’t you want my help with that?”

He released a shaky laugh and propped himself up on his elbows. “Want isn’t the right word to use. You *know* I want it. But we don’t have time for it at present.”

“I can be fast.” She winked at him. “And I’m pretty confident in my assessment that you can be too.”

“Elle.”

She arched an eyebrow. “You were five seconds from going back to sleep, but *now* you’re suddenly concerned about running late?”

He sat up with a sigh, lifting her hand to plant a quick kiss to her palm before releasing it, then leaning forward to plant an even quicker one on her lips. “I wasn’t falling asleep.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“It just took me a minute to gather my bearings and remember that we are, in fact, due to meet the others soon.” He pointed up to the windows in the ceiling, which showed that the sun was already high in the sky. “And lateness aside, you know very well that I do *not* want to be anything even close to ‘quick’ with you when it comes to that.”

“But last night—”

“Last night was an exception. A . . . lullaby. You needed comfort, and as if I wasn’t going to be the one to comfort you? Please.”

Elyria’s bottom lip jutted out in a pout as she swung her legs off the bed and padded across the room to the bathing chamber door. “Fine, but don’t think this is over, Sir Knight.”

“Oh, but how a man can dream,” he said tiredly, and Elyria was still grinning when she closed the door behind her.



ELDERGLADE WAS a flurry of bustling activity when Elyria and Cedric finally emerged. There was a surprising number of people out—sylvans carrying baskets of linens or foodstuffs from one house to another, a small group of giggling girls playing by the stream, folks darting to and fro as they carried about their daily lives. Quiet laughter and the occasional squeal drifted over from the schoolhouse. Steam curled from earthen mugs as the two of them passed the dining hut, which held far more of Elderglade's residents than it had the day before.

By the time they reached the massive, sprawling goldwood tree that housed the sylvan council chamber located on the far side of the glen, Elyria could no longer hold it in.

"Were folks avoiding me yesterday?" she asked.

"Why would they be avoiding you?" Cedric replied, a little too quickly.

She cast him a sidelong glance, her eyes narrowing on his suspiciously innocent face.

"Well, it wasn't my idea, but—"

Her eyes narrowed further.

"Okay, fine, it *was* my idea. But it's not that they were avoiding you. I just asked the council if it would be possible to provide a . . . quieter day for you. I didn't want you to be overwhelmed. You'd just awoken, had only just finished healing. And this place can be quite, er, boisterous."

Elyria smacked her tongue on the roof of her mouth. "You banished the people who live here to, what, stay in their houses all day while I frolicked around the glade? Stars a-fucking-bove, as if I needed to arm them with even more of a reason to hate me."

Cedric balked. "Hate you? What in the name of each of the Five would possibly make you think they would hate you?"

"It's just my default assumption, really. I am still the Revenant, you know. I've got quite the reputation."

"Among humans, maybe. And that was before. I think you forget that you are also the Victor of Nyrundelle, as well as my own personal savior. Elder Larkess has made it very clear to every resident here that you saved my life and—"

"Which time?" She grinned.

"—they owe you their gratitude." Before Elyria had a chance to vocalize the protest that immediately tried to dive off her tongue, Cedric had already raised his hands in placation. "I know, I know. I told her you

would hate that. But I've made little headway in convincing them of such. They are in *awe* of you, Elle. They've been treating your time healing here with a sort of reverence, and I just didn't want their fawning to make you feel like you—"

"I see. It's . . . It's fine," she said with a shrug that she hoped made her look more at ease than she felt. Now that she was paying closer attention, she saw the way heads kept turning in her direction, noticed the whispers being exchanged. One particularly brazen mixedborn young woman was outright staring, her finger outstretched as she pointed animatedly at Elyria and she batted the arm of the sylvan standing beside her.

Elyria sighed.

Cedric grimaced. "I can ask the elders to extend the orders to—"

"Don't be ridiculous. That will probably only make them more eager. And anyway, I'm sure it'll wear off before long. I'm bound to offend the wrong person sooner or later, so they may as well get back to their daily routine. I'd hate for them to hold my disruption of their usual rhythm against me in the future."

Cedric shook his head, even as amusement flitted down the bond between them. She was going to say more, but the arrival of a cheerful-looking dwarf, a serene-faced sylvan, and a fae whose brow was already creased with concern interrupted her.

"Well, ye're certainly looking more like yerself there, Rev," Thraigg declared, slapping Cedric on the arm in greeting as he sidled up beside the pair.

"Feeling more like myself too," Elyria said. *Mostly*, she added in her head.

"That's good," said Jocelyn earnestly. "That's really, really good."

Young Shep looked from Elyria and Cedric to the door set in the gnarled bark of the goldwood tree before them. "No sign of the council yet?"

"We've only just arrived, but no, nothing yet," Cedric replied.

"I'm sure it won't be long."

"Are they already inside? Or are we waiting for them to arrive?" Elyria asked.

A round of shrugs made its way through their little group. Elyria laughed. It was nice not feeling like she was the only one left out of the loop in this, at least.

"You were able to rest well, I take it?" asked Shep.

“Best sleep I’ve had in a very long time,” Elyria said with a nod. Then, in her mind, she added, “*Thanks to someone’s wonderfully talented fingers and the way he plunged them into my cu—*”

Cedric released a choking sort of sound, and she patted him on the back.

“All right there, Ric?” said Thraigg, brow arched.

“Of course,” said Cedric, giving Elyria a pointed look. “Just agreeing that Elle had a very good night, in the end.”

She served him an innocent smile. “Oh, the best.”

He flashed her one right back. “The proof was in how loudly she was snoring.”

She swatted his arm. “I do not snore.”

“Oh, you absolutely do, Ellie.”

Elyria whirled so quickly that her braid smacked Cedric square in the jaw. Disbelief had her vision going somewhat blurry. Or was that the immediate onset of wetness suddenly lining her lashes, making the inner corners prickle fiercely?

It didn’t matter. Bleary and blurred and wet, she was still there.

“Kit!” Elyria launched herself forward, closing the distance and leaping on her sister like some great mountain cat. Sid would be proud, she thought idly as she crashed into Kit, taking them both to the ground in a fit of tearful laughter. “You’re here.”

“And you’re much stronger than I remember,” Kit grumbled, though her mismatched eyes were glassy.

They both rose to their knees, then sat back on their ankles, hands remaining linked between them.

“Hi,” Elyria said, voice thick.

“Hi,” Kit replied.

And then they were colliding again, hands wrapping around shoulders and hooking behind necks, torsos drawn together in a shaking hug. It could have lasted a second or a minute or an hour—Elyria wouldn’t have known. All that mattered was that Kit was *here* and she was real, and yet another piece of herself seemed to anchor back into place inside her.

“If you ever do that again, I’m going to kill you,” Kit muttered into Elyria’s hair.

Elyria sniffed as she peeled back to look at her. “That seems fair.”

“’Fraid ye’d have to get in line, lass,” said Thraigg, wiping at his eyes.

“Yes,” Cedric agreed. “Lots of folks in front of you ready to lay waste to the Revenant should she ever dare pull that kind of—how did you put it, Elle?—self-sacrificing bullshit ever again.”

Elyria snorted as she got up from the ground, hauling Kit with her in one fluid pull. “The future king of Arcanis thinks himself a jester, does he?”

Cedric’s face immediately fell. “Now, *that* isn’t funny.”

“I thought it was funny,” offered Kit, dusting off the back of her laced leather breeches, then adjusting the sleeves of her blouse.

“See, she just gets me,” said Elyria. Then, turning to face her dearest friend once more, she blinked and said, “You’re really here.”

Kit reached out to tuck a lock of periwinkle hair behind Elyria’s ear. “Where else would I be?”

Elyria’s eyes stung. She swiped at them with the back of her hand as she took a more assessing look at Kit. Her moonlight-colored hair was longer, halfway to dusting her shoulders rather than being messily cropped around her chin. Still, it was mussed, sticking up in all directions. Her silver-and-gold wings were folded down, twitching somewhat listlessly against her back. How far had she flown to get here? How long? She had circles under her eyes and a sallowness to her skin that instantly made Elyria feel guilty for bragging about how well she’d slept last night.

Still, the sight of her made Elyria feel like a beam of sunshine was dancing straight across her soul.

Get ahold of yourself, Lightbreaker, she told herself.

Across their bond, Cedric’s mental voice held endless amusement. *“Yes, what will the world think of the mighty Revenant going soft?”*

“Oh, I’m not worried about that.” She threw him a smirk. *“I have no doubt they’ll assume it’s due to your influence, Sir Crybaby.”*

Cedric made a face.

Elyria laughed.

And Kit arched a brow as her gaze flicked from one of them to the other and back again. “Yep, still not used to that.”

“Tell us about it,” said Shep quietly, and the comment was so unlike the sylvan that everyone else burst out laughing too.

Eventually, the group settled into a cadence of amiable chatter among themselves, with Shep and Jocelyn exchanging greetings with Kit that were, granted, not *quite* as intense as Elyria’s but still laden with emotion. It had been some time since they’d last seen her too, it would appear. Something

settled deep inside Elyria at that knowledge, at the realization of how quickly everyone had leapt into action, to head off in different directions after she'd been taken—to figure out where she'd gone, to try to get her back.

The creak of wood broke through the noise both in and outside of her head, and the attention of the entire group was suddenly pinned to the council chamber door as it swung open.

"Ah," said Elder Larkess, a tone of surprise in her voice. She took a few steps out of the doorway, and a line of sylvan elders shuffled out behind her—four of them in total, not including Larkess. The elders all nodded in greeting—and in apparent farewell—as they immediately began walking away. The last one, a proud-looking sylvan man with a particularly intricate tattoo creeping across his sage-green cheekbones, shot Elder Larkess a pointed look before he turned to leave.

"I take it the meeting's concluded, then," said Elyria, tilting her head quizzically. "Were we not supposed to meet with the council?"

Larkess smoothed a wispy lock of faded green hair against her temple. "We have convened. They've shared their thoughts." She hesitated. "We are all in agreement that I will convey what the council thinks is the best course of action from here."

"I see," said Cedric, linking his fingers with Elyria's.

Elyria gave him an affectionate smile, then took one of Kit's hands with her free one and gave it a squeeze. "Well, what are we waiting for, then?" And with that, she strode into the council room, dragging both Cedric and Kit behind her.

It was like walking right into the heart of a tree. Warm light filtered down from a lattice of leafy branches woven across the low ceiling. Each leaf was luminescent, glowing soft and golden, as though the sun was streaming directly through.

Stars above, Elyria loved how *wild* it was here.

The branches spanned not only the ceiling, but the entirety of the room, the leaves disappearing but the wood itself thickening as they wove down the walls. They turned rootlike as they sprawled across the uneven floor, and Elyria's boot caught on one particularly gnarled knot. She stumbled forward, nearly face-planting into a large round table in front of her, but a quick yank from both Cedric and Kit had her standing straight again.

"Easy there, Ellie," Kit said, amusement evident in her tone.

“There’s a joke here somewhere about the literal support you two are providing me right now, but I just can’t quite seem to grasp it,” Elyria muttered before dropping both of their hands.

Elder Larkess was still by the door, ushering the rest of the group inside. “I’ve never known you to be the punctual sort, my friend,” she said to Thraigg as he lumbered past.

The dwarf barked a laugh. “Ye’ve got me there, Lark. But what can I say? It’s been a fair minute since we’ve all had this sort of . . .” He pursed his lips, as though searching for the right word.

“Hope?” Shep offered, trailing behind.

Thraigg gave a short nod. “Aye.”

Elyria’s brow creased at the smile that overtook Elder Larkess’s face—the way it was just the slightest bit sad. But before she had the chance to inspect it further, the sylvan was sweeping her white-robed arm out in a welcoming gesture. “Please, everyone, do take a seat.”

The table looked, fittingly, like it had been sliced straight from nature. The edges were raw, the tabletop ringed with seemingly infinite circles, as though the tree it had come from had a millennia’s worth of stories to tell.

Elyria slid into one of the high-backed chairs and ran her palm over the knots in the wood that made up each arm. “So, are you going to catch us up on what we missed or . . . ?”

The rest of the group took seats around the table—Cedric to Elyria’s right, Kit to her left, Thraigg and Jocelyn next to Kit. On Cedric’s other side, Shep slipped quietly into his seat, and then, beside him, was Elder Larkess.

The sylvan elder pressed her lips together as she surveyed each person present, as though contemplating very thoroughly what she wanted to say. Eventually, she turned to Cedric and held out her fist.

“Your mother’s locket,” she said, releasing her fingers so that the necklace dangled from her proffered hand.

Cedric blinked slowly at the locket, as if mesmerized by the slow swing—back and forth, back and forth. It took Elyria reaching under the table to lay a gentle hand on his knee before he seemed to realize he was being spoken to.

“Thank you,” he said stiffly, reaching to take the locket and hastily looping it around his neck.

“I take this to mean you still haven’t figured out how to undo the transfiguration then,” Elyria said sullenly.

“Not precisely. Although . . .” Larkess clasped her hands in front of her on the table, thumbs twisting around each other—a nervous tic.

“Although . . . ?” Kit prompted.

“The council has been discussing what it means that Elyria was able to sense some of the crown’s power even with its true nature hidden so thoroughly in this form. We think that the two of you are the key to unlocking it.”

“The two of us?” Cedric asked. “Why not just her? I never sensed anything back when I thought it was simply Tenny’s locket.” He paused. “At least, I don’t think I did?”

Thraigg leaned forward in his seat. “Do you sense anything from it now, boyo?”

“I . . .” Cedric placed his palm atop the locket, holding it to his clavicle. “Well, yes, but I already know what it is. I’ve already felt it activate under my power.”

“And that is exactly it, dear one.” Larkess gave an approving nod. “It activates under *your* power. It is *your* birthright. Your mother died protecting both it and you. But it is not just you in this world alone anymore.” The elder’s eyes were shiny when she looked from Cedric to Elyria and back again. “Two champions, two victors, two bloods—one soul-bonded pair. The council believes it is the two of you together who hold the key to unlocking, and uniting, the Crown of Concord.”

From bitterest rivals to heartbreaking ends, two bloods shall find their way.

The prophecy—the stars-damned motherfucking prophecy—continued to haunt Elyria’s thoughts, her memories. Celestial prophecy was muddy on the very best of days, and she was coming to realize just how many ways there were to interpret the ancient words. Still, she hoped and prayed they’d at least gotten that first bit over and done with. Hadn’t both she and Cedric experienced enough heartbreak to last multiple lifetimes at this point, after all?

“What would we have to do?” Cedric asked, interrupting Elyria’s spinning thoughts.

Elder Larkess steepled her thin green fingers under her chin. “Zephyr told me much about what happened during the Crucible.”

“I bet she did,” muttered Kit under her breath, and Elyria bit the inside of her lip to keep from chortling.

“She was particularly impressed with the way Elyria wielded the merged power of the champions during the Trial of Magic,” continued Larkess. “The council thinks that if you and Cedric were to merge your magic like that again—especially now, with your soul-bond established—it may provide the power necessary to reveal the crown’s true form.”

“Two bloods,” Elyria said, and Larkess nodded.

“It was a bloomin’ right sight, the way ye lit up and unsealed the entrance to the labyrinth, Rev.” Thraigg was nodding animatedly. “I think Lark might be onto something here.”

“All right, great. So all Cedric and I need to do is merge our magic again, like we did in the Sanctum, and we can get to putting the stars-damned crown back together.” Elyria placed her palms on the table, readying herself to rise from her seat, though something itched at the back of her mind. She tried to ignore it. “What are we waiting for, then? Let’s get the fuck to it.”

“The council said something similar, if less colorfully stated,” Larkess said, a sad sort of smile pulling at her mouth.

And there it was again, that itch. “You keep saying ‘the council.’ ‘The council thinks.’ ‘The council believes.’ But are you not including yourself?”

“I am sure that is not what the elder meant,” offered Shep, who had thus far been watching the conversation unfold with his typical calm, easy demeanor.

Elder Larkess, however, did not contest Elyria’s conjecture.

“Do you not think it will work?” asked Cedric, putting voice to Elyria’s thoughts.

The sylvan shook her head. “It is not that I don’t believe it will work. My brothers and sisters on the council and I are in alignment on this. The two of you are already halfway interwoven. Your powers . . . they already beat within one another, and I do believe you both to be the key to uniting the crown.”

“And uniting the crown is, in turn, the key to defeating Malakar,” Elyria said firmly. “So what exactly is your hesitation?”

A beat of silence.

Elyria folded her arms over her chest as though bracing herself against whatever the elder was about to say.

Larkess sighed. “I am not sure what further solidifying your bond may do to your . . . magical makeup, as it were. Already I sense the thread between you, the way your powers speak. The way you have each been remade, thanks to the other.”

“Is that a bad thing?” Cedric asked, something akin to distress floating down the bond between them. It was laced with a tinge of guilt, as though her knight was suddenly wondering if he had inadvertently done something to harm Elyria.

“Of course not,” Elyria said quickly, and she wanted nothing more than to kiss the crease that had formed between Cedric’s eyebrows, to smooth away his worry. “How could it be?”

Larkess gave a small shake of her head. “Not at all, my boy. There is no ‘bad.’ Neither is there ‘good’ here. What I mean is that the person you are—the people you both are—is simply different from who you were before.”

“Well, I could’ve told you that,” Elyria said down the bond, and the edge of Cedric’s frown quirked.

“The only reason for my hesitancy is . . .” Larkess drew in a deep breath, her eyes drifting to Elyria. Or, more specifically, to a spot directly above her shoulders—first one, then the other.

Elyria’s heartbeat picked up. “My wings.”

“They are part of your *before*. Part of who you were at the beginning. And I worry that if you meld powers again, or if you were to fully complete your life-bond—which I am sure is something you have discussed—it may impact your magic’s ability to accept your wings.”

Elyria felt a flicker of confusion dart down the bond as Cedric reacted to Larkess’s mention of the life-bond.

Absolutely not the time for that, she thought. Jocelyn’s voice cut through any further rumination she might have done, though.

“You think Elyria’s magic will reject her wings if she deepens her bond with Cedric.” The words were steady and matter-of-fact, even as Jocelyn wrung her hands in her lap.

Another stretch of silence fell over the group, ceasing only when the sound of stifled laughter skittered across the room.

It wasn’t until half a dozen pairs of eyes all shot to Elyria’s face that she realized she was the one laughing.

“That’s your hesitation?” she asked between snorted chuckles. “Please. It’s very kind of you to be concerned about me, but there is *nothing* more

important than stopping Malakar.”

Something deep in her mind seemed to protest that notion, but Elyria didn’t know if it was coming from her or from Cedric, and it didn’t matter either way. She could not allow the dark sorcerer to achieve his goals. Could not give him more time to desecrate the world with his darkness.

Could not let him *win*.

“Elle.” Cedric’s voice was bordering far too close to pity when he spoke her name into her mind, and it made Elyria shoot to her feet.

“This is an easy choice,” she said, slapping her palms onto the table. “If we have the power to unite the crown, we do so. My wings aren’t even *here*. Who knows when we will be able to retrieve them? Who knows when Nox will finally arrive? Or if they will at all?” Elyria tried to ignore the way Kit’s lip instantly curled under her nose. “Better not to waste any more time. We still don’t know exactly what Malakar is doing, don’t know where or when he plans to pierce the Line. We need to get ahead of his plans, or we risk failing to stop him in time.”

“Why are you fighting against this so hard, Ellie? You forget that Tenebris also has the other crown half locked away in the shadows,” Kit said. “So even if you were to unweave the magic of the locket, you’d still be short half a crown.”

“Yes, but we wouldn’t need to stay here, would we? Elder Larkess can walk us through unmaking the locket’s transfiguration, and then we can leave and meet Nox wherever they are. Cedric and I can unite the crown. We can seal the Chasm. *We can fucking stop him*.”

Elyria’s blood was pumping in her ears, the volume of her voice rising with every word. Why weren’t they getting this? Why did every single person sitting around the table have a melancholy expression on their face? Why couldn’t they understand how *easy* this could be?

“Ellie,” said Kit, and now she was the one looking at Elyria with the kind of sympathy in her blue and green eyes that made Elyria’s skin feel too tight. “Your wings are—”

“My wings are not more important than protecting all of Arcanis!” Elyria was yelling now. “They are not more important than making that son of a bitch pay for everything he did to m—for everything he did. And you are all fools if you don’t see that.”

And because she couldn’t stand to see the pity and concern stamped into every plane of the faces seated around the table for even one second longer,

Elyria turned and ran.

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LIKE MOTHER, LIKE DAUGHTER

ELYRIA



“Elle.”

Elyria was still running when she heard Cedric’s voice calling across the noise in her mind. How could they all be acting so fucking stupidly?

She could *sort of* understand where Cedric was coming from, she supposed. If their positions were reversed . . . She would want him to have everything. She would want to give him every chance, every opportunity to be whole again. That extended to Kit, of course, for whom Elyria had been willing to sacrifice her life by following her into the Crucible, and would readily do so again.

But the rest of them? Why did they *care*?

As if Elyria were worth putting the entire fate of Arcanis on hold for.

“Elle!” Cedric was calling aloud now, footsteps pounding on soft earth as he chased after her.

She slowed to a stop and looked around, realizing she was standing at the end of the long tree-lined walkway that led to Elderglade’s entrance.

What exactly had Elyria been hoping to accomplish? Where was she trying to go?

Four hells, she was a mess.

The rainbow leaves hanging overhead cast a beautiful array of colors on the ground as Elyria pawed at the dirt with her boot.

“Hey,” she said softly when Cedric finally caught up.

“Hey,” he replied breathlessly. Quarter-fae or not, she was still much, much faster than him, and that brought the tiniest modicum of joy to the forefront of her restless, racing thoughts.

“Do you feel like telling me what that was about?” he asked.

“I could ask you the same thing,” she shot back.

“Elle.” And this time, the word wasn’t laced with pity or sympathy. He just sounded tired.

Elyria was tired too. “I just think you’re all being nonsensical. We should be merging our magic right this instant”—she pointed to the locket hanging over Cedric’s tunic—“and taking our measly crown half to Nox in whatever quarter of hell they currently are in to unite it with the other. We are wasting *time*.”

“I can understand why it feels like that, but—”

“Four days, Cedric. Four fucking days, I was out of it. And today makes it five—or is it six? Either way, they’re days that Malakar has had to regroup, to plan. To figure out his next move, to activate his followers, to figure out where I am and—” The words were coming too fast, each one accompanied with horrifying vision after horrifying vision. Her breaths were too shallow. She couldn’t get enough air.

“Easy there, Trouble,” Cedric said, finally close enough to wrap his arms around her, to pull her against him. The contact helped, feeling his warmth against her body, the ghost of his breath against her skin.

But not enough.

“We can’t sit around, Cedric. You don’t—you don’t know what he is capable of. How far he is willing to go. All he’s done, all he’s tried to do—” She swallowed hard, and though she could feel Cedric’s building rage pulsing down the bond, it was still nothing compared to her own panic.

She was unmoored, flailing. Even in her *solimaeus’s* arms, even with Kit here in Elderglade, even knowing so many of her friends were safe . . . Those little pieces of herself were slowly being anchored back in place inside . . . but it wasn’t all of them.

There was still something missing.

“I do want them back,” she said, her voice low, her pulse pounding in her ears. It felt like her most selfish confession yet.

“Of course you do, my love. And we all want you to have them back, too. Don’t you see?”

“Don’t *you*? I want them back, and I *am* willing to push off uniting the crown and sealing the Chasms and foiling Malakar’s plans because of it. But if—”

She choked on the words.

He waited.

“If it *doesn’t* work, if it ends up all being for nothing, if whatever time we lose to my recovery ends up being time *he* uses to get another step ahead . . . I’ll never forgive myself.”

“Elle . . .”

“Hells, even if it *does* work but the rest remains the same, it’s simply not a trade worth making. Our priority should be stopping him. Saving Arcanis from the dark future he wants to rewrite for us. Everything else is inconsequential.”

Cedric shook his head. “How many people have you already saved? How many lives have you already changed for the better? You discount your worth so easily. And I thought we had already been through this. You *are* worth more. You are worth *everything*. And I will always choose to do all that is in my power to give you what you want, what you need, and most importantly, what you *deserve.*”

Elyria blinked at him, and it was only when she felt the first tear trail down her cheek that she realized she was crying.

“We aren’t talking about waiting forever,” he continued. “I’m sure that Nox will be here soon and—”

A yell pierced the tree line, and Elyria immediately whirled toward the source of the noise. That’s when she noticed the sound of rushing bootsteps, soft against the forest floor.

Too soft.

Not bootsteps. The cadence was off. It was something more like a gallop, a canter . . . but also too soft for that. Someone was still yelling, but it took another moment for the sound to solidify into discernible words and for Elyria to realize what was happening all at once.

“Stop it!” shouted one voice.

“It’s too fast!” yelled another.

And then a blurred shape broke through the trees to Elyria and Cedric’s left, coming to a stop right at their feet, and Elyria’s heart suddenly felt like it might burst.

Sid let out a noise that was somewhere between a purr and a yowl as she nuzzled her face against Elyria's hand, then sat back on her haunches and tilted her head at the pair.

"Fuck me over both Chasms," Elyria said softly, falling to her knees and wrapping both arms around the massive shadowcat's neck.

Cedric let out a chuckle, then seemed to cut himself off, the warm amusement that had flitted down the bond suddenly replaced with gnawing concern.

Elyria peeled back from Sid and gave Cedric a bemused look, but before she had a chance to ask him what was behind that reaction, two panting sylvans—clearly the guards that Elder Larkess had stationed outside the gate to keep an eye out for Nox—had caught up to the wily shadowcat.

"Forgive us, my lady. It slipped right past us," said one, a particularly petite-looking woman with her forest-green hair twisted into long, braid-like wefts.

"She," said Elyria, getting back to her feet.

"Pardon?" said the other sylvan, a boy who couldn't have been more than two hundred, given the distinct lack of tattoos gracing his skin. He was barely more than a teenager by sylvan standards if he hadn't earned his marks yet.

"She," Elyria repeated. "Sid is a girl."

Sid let out a proud "*mrow*" as if to confirm that fact.

"And don't feel bad. She *is* fast. Be glad you were even able to follow her at all. Under normal circumstances, she likely would have slipped into the shadows and been completely untraceable."

"Well, of course she isn't able to do that here," said the boy. "Shadow magic is suppressed in the glade."

"Don't I know it," replied Elyria, and she realized as she said it that she hadn't particularly minded that fact. Since the moment she'd awoken in Elderglade, in fact, she'd barely thought about her shadows at all, and it had been a glorious reprieve. She wasn't sure she was ready to face dissecting everything that had happened to them—*because* of them—since that fateful day at Seastone. The way they'd been used against her. What it meant that they were still hers.

That they'd been quiet, subdued—though, granted, in a wholly different way than they had been at Castle Lumin under Malakar's captivity—had

been a blessing.

Elyria cleared her throat. “Right, as I said then.”

“But that she is here at all . . . ,” Cedric said under his breath, and Elyria didn’t think he was talking to anybody but himself. His tone was ominous though, and Elyria wanted to ask him about that but found herself distracted by the way Sid’s wings were folded oddly over her back.

Rather than lying flush at her sides or having disappeared from sight altogether, masked by shadows or magic, her wings were partially raised. One overlapped with the other, covering the space between Sid’s shoulders.

Elyria frowned. Was she injured?

“What’s going on there, girl?” she said, moving forward to run a hand along the half-shadowy, half-feathery length of the wing lying on top.

Sid rose back onto all fours, stretching her front paws in front of her and lowering her head to the ground. Almost like she was . . . bowing.

And then, with slowness and care and unabashed grace, the volacarnii opened her wings.

“Noctis take me,” Cedric breathed.

Elyria stumbled backward and collided with Cedric’s chest. He lifted his hands to her upper arms, bracing her, steadying her.

And she was grateful for the support—literal and otherwise.

Because there, nestled between Sid’s shoulder blades, nearly glittering as the sunlight caught on the delicate spiderwebs of frost spread across them, were Elyria’s wings.



“WHERE IS NOX?” Kit asked.

Sid only tilted her head, and Elyria swore that the cat’s eyebrow was arching in judgment of the fact that Kit really seemed like she expected an answer.

“She isn’t going to be able to tell you, Kitty Kat.”

“Shut up. I know that. I—shut up.”

Elyria’s answering smile was short-lived as her eyes returned to the sight of the frost-encased purple-and-green wings staring back at her from the center of the council room table. Sid brushed against Elyria’s legs, butting her head between them to force Elyria into a wider stance, then

settled on the floor between her boots. As soon as Cedric had lifted Elyria's wings from Sid's back—delicately, reverently—the shadowcat had immediately begun shrinking in size. She was now something more akin to a large dog, rather than the oversized panther she had entered Elderglade as.

Elyria had so many questions. Cedric had made it sound like Sid's size was tied to Elyria's waning power, but here she was, her magic restored—prospering, even. Could the shadowcat grow and shrink at will? She certainly seemed content enough at her current size—she'd almost been too big to fit in the council room when they first arrived. Or was this the effect of Elderglade's protections at play?

Kit was still staring at Sid, as though doing so might unlock some new information about where Tenebris Nox had gone, why the nocterrian had chosen to deliver Elyria's wings but not come themself. The crown half, it would seem, was still locked away wherever they kept it hidden in the in-between.

"This is exactly what I was afraid of," Cedric was saying to Young Shep, with whom he'd been conversing for several minutes now.

"It could be an exception. Just as Elyria herself is an exception. Sid is an extension of her, after all, so—"

Cedric shook his head. "I fear this is only the latest in proving my theory."

"Your bond extended some of your power to Elyria, giving her just enough of your light to be accepted by this place. So, too, must your bond extend to the shadowcat. But just because Elderglade made allowances for the two of them doesn't mean it will do so for all shadow-touched."

Elyria's gaze flicked between Cedric and Shep. Unfortunately, as unsettling as the idea was, she agreed with her *solimaeus*. "If you hear hoofbeats, you think horses, not unicorns, Shep."

Shep scoffed. "Unicorns have not been seen in Arcanis since before—"

"So not the point she was trying to make," said Kit with a roll of her eyes.

"And somehow, also, exactly the point," continued Cedric. "You all would rather think this to be some grand exception to the rules governing the sanctuary than consider that the rules may no longer be in place at all."

"Elderglade has stood for centuries, dear boy." Elder Larkess's voice cut across the room, immediately quieting the chatter. The entire group had still been here when Cedric and Elyria returned with Sid—and her wings—in

tow. Had simply been waiting for her to return, as though they hadn't had any doubt she would. And that had been both supremely touching and mildly insulting, both for reasons that Elyria didn't quite fully grasp.

"Ye can't continue to rely on protections established eons ago by celestials who no longer have any dog in this fight, Lark." Thraigg gave Elder Larkess's arm a gentle squeeze.

"This is also exactly why I didn't want us to bother waiting around for my wings, to try to *repair* me, when it's clear there are far more important things at stake," Elyria said stubbornly.

"But your wings *are* here now, Ellie," said Kit, the annoying voice of reason, and the knowing feeling vibrating across the bond from Cedric only served to irritate Elyria more.

Of course she was going to undergo the procedure. Of course she was going to try. Her tragically beautiful wings were right fucking there, staring at her from the stars-damned table before her. It was like her back was tingling with the very knowledge they were close. And more than once, Elyria would've sworn she saw her wings twitch on the table, as if they knew it too.

But it had to be a trick of the light—a hallucination. The result of the leaflight flowing from the canopy overhead and dancing with the beautiful fractals of Kit's everfrost.

"What happens now?" Elyria asked.

"We should station patrols at the entrance," said Cedric. "We need to be proactive about protecting this place, especially if it's going to take Elle several days to recover from the procedure."

Larkess huffed out a tired laugh. "Elderglade is in the business of teaching, of building up those who would heal the world, dear boy, not those who work to cut it down. Guards and soldiers are in short supply here, I'm afraid."

"It is not cutting down; it is *protecting*," Cedric said sharply.

That's not actually what I meant, Elyria wanted to say. She'd meant "What happens now?" in terms of her wings—reattaching them, healing them. But she wasn't about to interrupt. She knew Cedric would never say it, that he probably wasn't even thinking it, but she couldn't help but feel nonetheless that all of this was her fault to begin with. If the magic protecting this place was faltering, if it was leaving the sanctuary open to attack, then surely it was because it had accepted her in the first place.

“Then we’ll do it,” Cedric said, looking at Thraigg, Jocelyn, Shep, and Kit in turn.

“O’ course, Ric,” said Thraigg.

Kit and Shep nodded simultaneously.

“Whatever we can do,” said Jocelyn.

Elyria slipped her hand into Cedric’s. “We will do everything we can to protect this place.” She left her final thought unsaid. *Even if that means leaving it.*

But in order to do that, she needed to get on with this wing business as soon as possible. She refused to dwell on all the heart-wrenching what-ifs any longer: What if it didn’t work? What if it took too long? What if she was getting her hopes up for nothing?

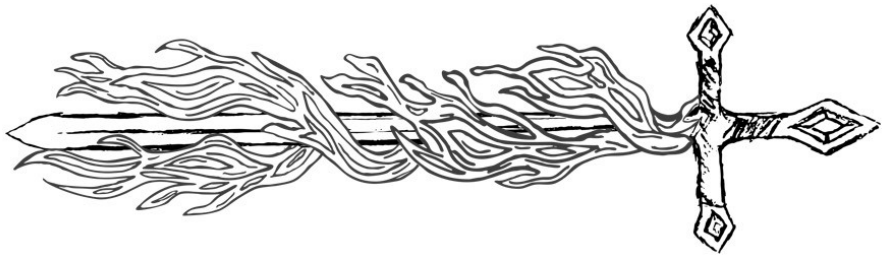
Elyria turned to Elder Larkess, still firmly clinging to Cedric’s hand, and said, “All right, then. I’ll try.”

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25

THINKING OUT LOUD

CEDRIC



"I'M PROUD OF YOU, YOU KNOW." THE MOON AND STARS WERE HIDDEN behind cottony gray clouds as Cedric stared up through the skylight cut into the ceiling of their hut. Upon receiving Elyria's consent, Larkess had swept away with Young Shep to make preparations. They would attempt to repair her wings first thing in the morning.

From her position on the bed next to him, her head lying against his bare chest, Elyria peered up at him. "For what?"

"I know it's not an easy thing to allow them to try to reattach your wings. And while I also know you to be beyond capable of doing hard things"—he ignored her smirk—"it doesn't make it any less admirable that you're willing to try anyway."

Elyria huffed out a breath through her nose. "I don't know about that. Feels pretty cowardly, actually, the way I've been acting. I just . . . It's not like I was lying, you know? About feeling like this shouldn't be the priority. About not wanting to risk anything for something as selfish or self-serving as this."

"It's not self—"

"It *is*. But . . . maybe it's okay to be a little bit selfish? Just for a minute? Especially if it—and stars a-fucking-bove, it's scary as all four hells to admit this aloud, but if it works . . . I mean, let's look at the best-case scenario, right? I get my wings back, they heal up fine and dandy, and then I get to face the one who's been whining about needing to be 'at full power'

while being at *actual* full power myself. There's just something deliciously poetic about that, isn't there?"

"Oh, undeniably." Cedric smiled into her cherry-almond-scented hair.

"And I suppose that even if it—" Elyria swallowed. "If it doesn't work, at least I'll be able to say I tried. And it'll eliminate the not knowing. There's little I hate more than the nebulous unknown, you know?"

He pressed a kiss to the crown of her head. "Oh, how I know."

She lifted herself off him slightly, propping herself up on one elbow, her jewel-toned eyes meeting his. "Thank you," she said, lips curved into a gentle smile.

Cedric's forehead creased. "Thank me? For what?"

She shrugged. "For letting me think out loud to you. For providing the space and the support to decide on my own, even if I know you had . . . opinions . . . on what I should do."

"I would *never* presume to tell you—"

"I know. Thus, the thank you. Because it's a rare thing indeed to find a man so willing to let a woman come to her own conclusions these days." She laughed, but the furrow of Cedric's brow only deepened.

"You're talking about your father."

"I'm talking about all men. But sure. Fine. Maybe." She released a sigh. "I was surprised when Kit told me she met with him, but I don't begrudge her for doing so, honestly. It makes sense. Her uncle is being a royal ass. There is still so much about Malakar's influence, the pieces he has put into play, that we don't know. And shockingly, it's not like Tartanis is asking for much in exchange for helping. I just . . ."

"You just still don't know how you want to reply," he offered, "and that's perfectly reasonable."

"Is it?" Elyria bit her lip, and Cedric did his very best not to let the feral instinct that flared within him at the sight burst to the surface. Four hells, with the amount of energy he was expelling to tamp down the regular surges of possessive, horny fury, it was no wonder he was constantly exhausted.

"He's only asking to meet," Elyria continued. "I should say yes, right? Especially if he really is willing to exert his influence on the king in order to help. It would be foolish of me to decline."

"Kit made him no promises other than to relay his message. He is the one who said he would help in exchange for merely the chance to get you to

hear him out. And frankly . . .”

“Frankly, what?”

Cedric inhaled through his nose. “I have my doubts as to whether or not that is true. From what you’ve told me about him, and what I’ve learned from others, it does not exactly paint the picture of a trustworthy man.”

She sighed again—wearier, deeper this time. “Unfortunately, that is one thing you’re wrong about. It would be easier, frankly, if he were a lying lowlife. But while a lowlife he may be, he is a man of his word. Trust is like currency to men like him. He doesn’t squander it easily.”

“Even better, then. You are not beholden to him. If he is a man of honor”—he considered—“or at least of a certain type of honor, then you do not owe him anything other than your consideration of his offer.”

“And if by meeting with him, we could secure an even greater advantage? If I could somehow convince him to help *more*?”

“I would still never ask you to do something you are not comfortable with, would never want you to—”

“And thus we circle right on back to ‘thank you,’” she said, grinning.

Cedric scooted into a more upright position, pulling Elyria up with him so he could lean against the headboard. Sid let out an irritated noise from the foot of their bed as he jostled her sleeping form. With a grumble, she leapt off the mattress and sauntered into the bathing chamber. Cedric watched with rapt fascination as she tore a towel from its hook on the wall, padded in a circle, and then settled atop it—before shutting the door with a shadowy flick of her tail.

Elyria snorted. “I think she’s a little pissy over not being able to step back into the shadows while she’s in here.”

“Evidently.” He cocked his head. “Is that the limitation of shadow magic in this place, then? A nightwielder can exist here but cannot ride the shadows as one is normally wont to do?”

“I wouldn’t know. I haven’t been trying.”

Elyria said the words casually, but Cedric could feel the lingering sense of unease belying her tone. He laid his hand over hers, his next question lingering unspoken in the silence: *Why not?*

She answered anyway.

“It’s been a wholly separate sort of blessing, having my shadows be so quiet here. It isn’t the same as when I was *there*, when they were choked, cut off.”

Cedric swallowed down the bubble of anger that suddenly had his inner furnace simmering.

“They’re just, well, like I said: quiet. And it has given me the freedom to . . . I don’t know. Not feel the burden of them, the gift of them. To not have to think about them at all.”

He didn’t need her to elaborate further. Flickers of fear bounced down the bond between them, interlaced with sadness and gratitude and wonder and relief. How must it feel, he wondered, to have finally come to grips with her greatest source of strength . . . only for it to be turned against her, to become her greatest weakness?

“It isn’t,” she said down the bond, her voice firm, almost scolding. Cedric blushed, unaware he had been thinking so loudly.

“What isn’t?” he said, chagrin softening his voice.

“My shadows. My power. It isn’t my greatest weakness.”

“Fuck. No, Elle, that’s not what—I didn’t mean to insinuate—I wasn’t—”

“You are.”

Cedric blinked. “What?”

“*You* are my greatest weakness. And my greatest source of strength. There was much that frightened me during my time with him—I’m not so foolish as to try to deny that. But there was really only one thing that truly tore into me, made me *fear*. And that was the thought of him discovering you. Who you are. Who you are *to me*. It’s what kept me going through countless sessions of him trying to cut his power out of me, what got me through the hopelessness of the nights that followed. It’s what caused me to go with him in the first place, without hesitation and without regret.”

She was sitting up now, her knees drawn to her chest, her arms wrapped around them, hugging them against her body.

“Elle, I—” He didn’t know what to say. What *could* he say to that? Guilt was a leaden blanket pressing down on Cedric’s shoulders. He certainly understood what she was saying—he felt the exact same way about her. But to hear it spoken, to have it voiced . . .

“I’m sorry.” And there was no joke to be made about unnecessary apologies this time. It *was* necessary. He was sorry she had ever been forced to make the choices she had. He was sorry for the experiences she’d been forced into and the burden she carried still.

He was sorry he could not carry it for her.

“I know,” she said sadly. “I am too. But not sorry for you.” She leaned over and pressed her forehead to his shoulder. “I’ll never, ever be sorry for loving you.”

Cedric shivered, and it certainly wasn’t because it was cold. He wrapped one arm around Elyria, pulling her entire body closer into him. With his other hand, he placed his thumb under her chin, tilting it up. He looked at her, at the beautiful planes of her perfect face, just barely lit by the stars twinkling through the silent night. He took in the glossy gleam of her emerald eyes, the slight quiver of her full bottom lip. His fingers moved up the side of her jaw, then swept a few stray strands of periwinkle off her cheek, tucking them behind her ear.

Elyria leaned into his touch with a contented sigh, and Cedric’s heart swelled. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he thought maybe it was strange that he could see her so perfectly, so fully in the darkness. But he couldn’t really think about that now. Not when that glassy look in her eyes had been replaced with an intensity, a sudden heat, that had something sparking up the column of Cedric’s spine.

The neckline of her sleeping dress had fallen over her shoulder once more, highlighting the mark at the base of her neck—glittering, gleaming.

Beckoning.

Beaming.

Cedric’s groan was poorly suppressed, and Elyria immediately sat up straight. “What’s wrong?”

“Absolutely nothing.” He paused. “I just . . . Noctis take me, my eyes must be playing tricks on me.” He ran his tongue over his teeth, over the ache he felt pulsing there.

Elyria narrowed her eyes on Cedric’s face. “What makes you say that?”

He hesitated before answering. “I’m sure it’s just a trick of the light.” Then he winced inwardly. The light . . . of which there was currently none.

“Try again,” she said into his mind, the words soothing and accusing all at once.

Cedric sucked on one of his teeth. *“Not for the first time, the mark I left . . . your bondmark . . . It feels like it’s playing with me? Winking at me, calling me to it? Most of the time it looks just the same as always, the barely there souvenir of the time I . . .”*

“Of the time you bit me, yes.” The sense of smug satisfaction that came down the bond with her words was enough to make Cedric groan again for

an entirely different reason.

“Right.” He cleared his throat. “But then there are other times, like right now, when it looks, um, different.”

Elyria’s gaze dropped to the twin mark Cedric bore at the side of his own neck, above his collarbone. “It’s like it’s shimmering, right? As though it’s suddenly become luminescent or someone’s shining a light right over it?”

Cedric blinked at her. “Yes, that’s *exactly* what it’s like.”

She nodded slowly. “And your teeth? Do they . . . ?”

“Ache? Like a motherfucker.”

“Language, Your Highness,” she said with a cluck of her tongue.

Cedric huffed a quiet laugh. But his voice was serious when he asked, “Do you know what it means?”

“What, in all our time apart, you never thought to do a little research on soul-bonds?” she teased, though there was a hint of sadness in her tone.

“I had other priorities. The first and foremost being getting my soul-bonded *back*. And why would I have wanted to do research anyway? I was ready to pledge my entire being to you long before you branded me as yours. I was already yours—forever. Everything before and after and beyond the moment in that tent when you allowed me to claim you in return is just”—he waved his hand loosely in the air—“details.”

Warmth flooded Cedric’s chest, contentment and love and desire pulsing across the thread between them, making it very difficult for him to focus on what Elyria was saying.

“Important details though,” she said, “given that you don’t seem to realize that there is a difference between the way our soul-bond is now”—she touched her palm to her mark, then moved it to cover Cedric’s—“and the *life*-bond we have yet to form.”

Cedric was still recovering from the jolt that shot through his body at the feeling of Elyria’s hand over his mark, so it took a few moments for her words to settle in his mind. “Life-bond? But aren’t we already—”

“That’s where your ‘forever’ comes in, Sir Knight. Strictly speaking, our bond is only partially complete. And it can remain that way—we don’t have to do anything else. Despite what our bodies and minds may be trying to push us to do.”

“I’m . . . confused. This thing between us seems plenty complete to me. It’s so strong. You feel it too, don’t you?”

She smiled. “Of course. And it is. What Elder Larkess told us before still rings true—despite how sappy it sounds to actually say aloud. We have a *true* soul-bond.”

Cedric laughed at the way Elyria’s voice pitched up in an inelegant imitation of the sylvan elder’s accent, like she just couldn’t handle how serious the conversation was.

“Celestially fated or whatever bullshit you want to ascribe it to,” she continued. “But it is still technically incomplete, because we haven’t tied our lives together fully.”

“Why haven’t we?” he said, the words tumbling out before he took even a single second to consider how they sounded. Oh, he truly was pathetically in love, wasn’t he?

He thought Elyria would tease him about that, that she might even throw those very words back at him. But her expression was completely serious, her voice even more so, that moment of levity nowhere to be seen when she said, “It’s nothing I would ever expect from you, my love.”

Cedric’s confusion must have been fully evident on his face, because she blew out a long breath before dropping her hand from his collarbone to wrap both arms around her knees once more. “It’s a monumental decision, Cedric. Life-bonding means tying your lifespan to mine. It means *changing*. You’d outlive your friends, outlive the life you know, the life you thought you’d have. It means tying yourself so fully to me that even death would not be enough to unweave it. Were one of us to die, the other would go mad and likely follow soon after. Look at what happened to your grandmother. I would never ask you to make that sacrifice.”

Cedric let her words sink in . . . for roughly three seconds, then asked, “What do I need to do?”

Elyria gave a disbelieving shake of her head, though there was a soft smile on her lips as she did. “*If* we were to do it, there’s a bit of an . . . order to things. A ceremony and vows and—”

“So, it’s like a wedding?”

She chuckled. “Not exactly. That ache in your teeth? The shimmer of our bond? It’s calling us to pierce each other’s marks. We’d drink in each other’s essence—our blood. And then there’s”—she smirked—“another sort of piercing that needs to happen simultaneously.”

“Done.”

Elyria squealed as Cedric leapt on her, quickly flipping her onto her back and caging her in with his arms on either side of her head.

"I appreciate the enthusiasm," she said, her chest vibrating with laughter. "But again, this is not anything I'd ever ask from—"

"Yes, yes, you've established that. But I don't need you to ask. If it means being closer to you, if it means more time with you—forever with you—then I was already in, before I even knew what it meant to be."

Something akin to pride swelled down the bond, but Elyria cut it off a second later. "You still aren't thinking through the considerations here, Cedric. The consequences. You would become, for all intents and purposes, fully fae. Live for nearly a thousand years, celestials willing. Witness generations of your friends and their families live and die. Think about Tristan and Tenny and the children of the Walk and—"

"And there are no guarantees I wouldn't outlive them already." He gestured to the room around them—to Elderglade itself. "I am mixedborn, with my mother's and grandmother's influence becoming more and more apparent every day. And even if that weren't a factor, if I hadn't already been considering the implications of my heritage since the moment I found out the truth about my family . . . How could you think for a single second I wouldn't choose you?"

Elyria's throat bobbed.

"I told you this once, but clearly you need to hear it again. I would choose you in every life—in any life. I *do* choose you in this one. There will never be another. You're it for me, Trouble. Let us satisfy fate and the universe and the celestials all by sealing it in blood."

And then he lowered his head to press a kiss to her bondmark, and the sound she released in response—a low kind of whimper clawing its way up her throat, making her whole body vibrate beneath him—had Cedric's teeth aching once more.

"Tell me I can," he whispered down the bond, trying very hard not to immediately clamp down on that glorious soft divot between her neck and shoulder, to feel her skin against his teeth, to taste her blood on his tongue. But the way she was shaking her head, even as her body trembled under him, made him glad he still possessed at least a singular speck of self-control.

Of course, he thought. All this protestation, all this making sure he knew she wasn't asking him to bond his life to hers. Perhaps it was because she

didn’t *want* to ask. It was perfectly within her right not to want him even more interwoven with her. What would it do to her, to her power? he wondered. Would it weaken her, to share some of her near-immortality? She’d already named him her greatest weakness. In no way did he want to contribute to that further.

She lifted her hand to his face and smoothed the crease between his brows with her thumb. “*My Sir Worrywart is at it again. Whatever it is that’s going on in your head, you can put it to rest right now. I’m not saying no by any stretch of the imagination. Stars above, I want it so bad, it feels like my teeth are ready to jump out of my skull. But . . .*” Her hand dropped to the locket dangling between them, pinching the golden oval between her fingers and twisting it in the air.

“Oh, fuck me. I’m an idiot, aren’t I?” Cedric rolled over, slumping onto his back. “If we are waiting to simply merge power until after your wing procedure, of course we can’t fucking tie the very threads of our lives together before then, too.” He pulled a pillow over his face in a poor attempt to hide the flush of embarrassment coloring his face.

Elyria’s laugh was a joyous, ringing sound. “Not an idiot. *My* idiot. But yes, that was sort of my thought. If in a few days though, when I’ve recovered, hopefully—”

“Assuredly.”

“—and if you still want to—”

“I’ll want to.”

She plucked the pillow from his face and replaced it with her lips at his cheek. “Then believe me, nothing would bring me greater pleasure or greater joy.”

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26

CHALLENGE ACCEPTED

ELYRIA



"NO GREATER PLEASURE, HMM? IS THAT A CHALLENGE, LIGHTBREAKER?"

The sudden shift in Cedric's tone had heat blooming behind Elyria's navel instantaneously. Frankly, there had been something warm coiling there since the onset of this conversation. There was no way to properly express how *unbelievably* sexy it was to have this man profess his love and devotion so openly, to be willing to commit to her so fully. How many nights had she dreamed of her teeth piercing the skin of his bondmark? How many times had she imagined how he would taste, how sweet his blood would be washing across her tongue? Just the thought of it now had desire pulsing through her, and she knew that if she were to slip a finger into her core, she would be dripping.

As though he could sense that very thing, as though he could smell her arousal, Cedric suddenly shot up, his pupils wide, that adorable flush in his cheeks taking on new meaning.

Elyria bit her bottom lip, and a growl rumbled in his chest.

"If you want to discourage me from biting you, you are really going to need to stop doing that."

"Doing what? This?" Her tongue swept across her bottom lip before she made a deliberate show of scraping her teeth against it once more.

"Yes," Cedric growled, snagging her chin between his thumb and forefinger. "Exactly that."

“For the record, I never said biting was off the table,” she said with an innocent shrug. “Just bonding. You know the difference, don’t you, Your Highness? You’re such a smart boy. Surely you can figure it out.”

The feral snarl that ripped from Cedric had Elyria clenching her thighs together. Oh, yes, this was going to be fun.

She yelped as he nipped at her ear. “You’re playing a dangerous game here, Trouble.”

“And what would be the point of this long, long, long life of ours without a little danger?” And then her teeth were closing around his biceps, just a graze. Fine, slightly more than a graze, but still nothing deep enough to constitute another claiming. She had to be careful, because as worked up as she was, as much as she *wanted* him, she knew that it would be all too easy to bite too hard, to get that rush of pure, unfiltered *him*—in every sense of the word.

And she did really want to give her wings their best shot. She wanted to be *whole* when he took her fully, when they made their bond, their lives, their tie to each other irrevocable.

There had been a moment just now, when he’d been so eager, so unquestionably ready to fulfill their life-bond, that Elyria had wanted to cry. Because he would so easily, so happily take her now, like this. And there had been the tiniest, stupidest kernel of doubt in her mind that he might not want her if she wasn’t the same as she was before. In her head, she knew he wouldn’t care. Or, at least, she knew he would say he wouldn’t care. But the head and the heart are so rarely in sync, and it was one thing to know and another thing entirely to *know*.

Cedric’s pleasured moan and the feel of his strong hands gripping her thighs drew her back to the matter at hand.

Elyria squealed as she felt a quick moment of weightlessness. Cedric had lifted her straight up in the air above him—stars above, when had he gotten *so* strong?—simultaneously sliding down onto his back once more. And when she felt the mattress under her again, her knees digging into its plush surface, she was sitting on her knight’s face.

The shock of it pushed the breath clean from Elyria’s lungs.

She braced her hands against the woven-branch headboard that lay against the wall, staring down at him with wide eyes.

Cedric, for his part, looked . . . pleased.

A slow, dangerous smile curved his mouth as his hands slid up her thighs, reverently brushing over her scars. Then they moved to the top of her ass, digging in just enough to make her gasp.

“Comfortable?” he asked mildly.

A laugh burst from her lips. “Are *you*?”

His answering chuckle vibrated straight through her. “Oh, don’t you dare worry about me, Trouble. I’m exactly where I want to be.”

Elyria’s laugh turned breathless, disbelieving, as Cedric tilted his head to nip at the sensitive skin on the inside of her thigh. The thin fabric of her nightdress was pushed up around her hips, baring all of her to him.

“You didn’t bother with undergarments tonight, I see,” he murmured.

“What can I say? I had high hopes.” She grinned down at him. “Plus, I thought I’d save the poor Elderglade seamstresses the embarrassment of me having to explain why yet another pair of my underthings had been torn entirely to shreds.”

“So considerate of you,” he said, turning his head and placing a kiss right over the bundle of nerves at the top of her cunt.

The contact sent a jolt straight through Elyria’s spine. Her head tipped back, and she inhaled sharply when Cedric ran his tongue straight up her center. He groaned against her heat, and the combination of the sound in her ears and the vibration against her core was nearly as orgasmic as each one of his long, torturous licks.

Elyria’s fingers curled around the woven branches of the headboard. The wood creaked under the pressure of her grip, just as Cedric’s own grip dug into her ass, pulling her down and centering her fully over his wicked mouth.

“Stars above,” she murmured into the ether. Her hips moved involuntarily, the light dusting of morning stubble on his jaw scraping deliciously against her inner thighs as she rode his face.

She was relatively certain that air had to be an elusive commodity for him like this, but, hey, if this was how the man wanted to perish, who was she to deny him? Her knight devoured her like he had been starving his entire life. He *feasted*.

Elyria rocked against him, unable to stop herself, chasing the sensation as his grip flexed, holding her exactly where he wanted her. Exactly where she needed to be. And it wasn’t long before she was racing up, up, up that

cliff, pleasure sparking hot and bright at the base of her spine, behind her belly button, spearing through her nerves.

She cried out, his name falling from her lips in a way that only made him moan deeper, more possessively. His grip—and his tongue—did not relent as she fell over the edge, spinning down, down, down into endless pleasure. Her body seized, tightened, and her breath caught in her chest. Then slowly—so slowly—she relaxed, until she thought she might melt right into him.

Cedric pulled his face back, adjusting her slightly so that he could look up at her. And when she gazed down, when his gold-ringed eyes met hers, Elyria's breath was stolen for an entirely different reason.

There was just so much love there.

There was hunger still, yes—a dark, desirous want. But there was also fathomless adoration beaming back at her from him, from this man who had *chosen* her. Time and time again, he chose her. And every lingering doubt that had lodged itself in Elyria's chest—every unspoken thought that she had somehow become less than she had been without her wings, that she was broken or incomplete—crumbled at the edges.

Cedric kept one hand on her hip and lodged the other under her thigh to lift her off him, setting her next to him on the bed. She was still panting, still trying to catch her breath, when he sat up and swiped his thumb over his bottom lip, then sucked the evidence of her pleasure from it.

"Cedric . . . ," she warned, the sight making her core pulse. She leaned forward, catching his mouth in a bruising kiss. He met her instantly, his tongue sweeping inside her mouth, letting her taste herself on his tongue. She moaned into him, moving to wrap her arms around his neck, but his arms were faster. In an instant, she was flipped around, her knees still on the mattress, while one of Cedric's hands gripped her breasts, pinning her back to his chest, his hard length pressing into her ass.

"Do you feel that?" he asked softly, dotting a series of kisses along her shoulders. He loosened his hold to peel her sleeping dress over her head and discard it on the floor.

"Is that a real question?" she asked breathlessly, utter relief soaring through her bones at the meeting of skin against skin when she leaned back again. "I don't think it's possible *not* to feel that." She wiggled her hips for effect.

He huffed a whispered laugh against the shell of her ear, and she shivered. “Not *that*.” His kisses were a searing brand as they trailed across Elyria’s spine, then moved down, as though he meant to paint every inch of her back with his touch.

She tensed as he passed her shoulder blades.

Well, he didn’t pass them.

He *lingered*.

His lips moved slowly over each one, as if he might imbue his love into the void where her wings used to be.

“What you’re feeling right now,” he murmured against her skin, “is me loving you. Not your wings. Not your power or your prowess. Not your reputation or your bloodline or anything other than *you*.”

Something inside Elyria gave way.

She twisted to look at him, her hands going to either side of his face, pulling him up so their lips could meet in a desperate clash of tongues and teeth. She darted one hand down between them, reaching into Cedric’s pants to wrap her fingers around his pulsing length. His intake of breath was sharp as he rose to his knees and shimmied his waistband down, freeing his cock.

His panting breaths turned needy as she pumped him hard and fast, then slow and gentle, alternating the pace of her strokes and the pressure of her grip. Her other hand was at the back of his head, her fingers twisted in his hair.

Elyria soaked in the sheen of sweat beading on Cedric’s temples, the crease between his brows as he attempted to hold himself together. One side of her mouth tipped up as a particularly rough stroke had him stuttering a curse and trying to throw his head back. She kept him in place with a tug of his hair, and he cursed again.

“A dangerous game, Trouble,” he eked out between heaves of his chest, though the warning was belied by the desperate grunt that came soon after. “If you don’t slow down, I’m going to—”

She immediately withdrew her hand. *“Well, we can’t have that yet, can we?”* she said into his mind, delighting in the pitiful whimper that came from him at the loss of contact.

It only lasted a second. Because before Elyria had even decided how she wanted him to take her, he was flipping her around again, pressing her upper body into the soft, cool bedding.

“All right?” His voice in her mind was nothing but *want* as it filtered down the bond, his cock already notched at her entrance, his body shaking with barely controlled restraint.

She grinned into the sheets. *“Better than all right. Necessary.”*

And that was all he needed to hear before he thrust into her.

Elyria’s pleasure-filled cry was muffled by the mattress as Cedric sheathed himself entirely in one stroke, one hand gripping her hip, the other smoothing down her spine.

The stretch of him inside her was glorious. She didn’t need time to adjust, to accommodate his girth, despite how deep it was like this, how thoroughly *inside* he was.

“You’re so wet,” he panted, the thread between them alight with their combined pleasure as he thrust again. “So tight.” *Thrust.* “So stars-damned”—*thrust*—“motherfucking”—*thrust*—“perfect.”

“Flatterer.” Elyria had never been more grateful for the ability to speak directly into his mind. She didn’t think her tongue was capable of forming actual words at that moment, so consumed was she by the heat of him, his familiar, grounding weight behind her, the slap of his balls against her cunt as he set a deliciously punishing pace.

Her hands fisted in the sheets by her head, Elyria was overcome by the rightness of it all—of him inside her, of her surrounding him, of them being woven within each other. The speck of Cedric’s light held within her chest flared, warmth flooding her veins, spreading through her body. When Elyria looked at her hands, the thin veins on the underside of her wrists were illuminated.

It was only the coiling spring of pleasure deep in Elyria’s core that pulled her awestruck gaze away from it. Thoughts unspooled in her mind as Cedric hit a spot inside her *just right*, and her head snapped back.

Here.

Together.

Alive.

Mine.

Ours.

“Fuck, I’m so cl—” she cried in her mind, unable to even finish the thought before one of Cedric’s hands slid around her front. His palm splayed flat against her belly, pressing into her just under her navel, even as

he continued pumping. The added pressure sent Elyria careening over the edge in an instant, screaming his name in her head and outside of it.

A growled shout tore from Cedric's throat moments later as, with one final thrust, he spilled inside her with a shudder.

"Noctis light my *fucking* funeral pyre, Elle," he breathed after he withdrew, collapsed onto the bed, and immediately pulled her into him. "That was . . ."

"I know," she said, equally breathless. She clenched her thighs together as she lay on her side, face-to-face with her *solimaeus*, like it might help keep him inside longer. She buried her face in his chest, mildly embarrassed at the instinctual reaction. It was silly—the annual contraceptive tonic she took still had more than half a year left before she needed to dose herself again, and Solaris knew the two of them had never even had the chance to talk about *that*. Did Cedric want children of his own? Did she? Elyria had never really thought she did, even if the celestials decided they would bestow one upon her. It was still a rare enough thing for the fae, after all.

Still, if it was *his* child, Elyria couldn't say she necessarily despised the idea. She was convinced she'd make an absolutely atrocious mother, of course, but Cedric would be a wonderful father. The best, in fact.

"I can feel you grinning. What has you so delighted?" Cedric's voice was amused as it bounced around Elyria's mind, and she only wriggled farther into him.

"Don't worry about it. Well, actually, who am I talking to. Of course you're going to worry about it. But there's nothing to *worry about. I'm just . . . happy."* She shrugged against his chest, and his arms tightened around her.

"I'm happy too," he replied.

Elyria exhaled. Tomorrow still loomed at the edge of her thoughts, of course—the healers, the elders, the uncertainty, the possibility of pain or disappointment or, most likely, both.

But it didn't terrify her.

Because whatever fate awaited her wings, awaited *herself*, she knew one thing with absolute certainty:

He would be there.

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PART III

DESCENT

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27

CHANGING OF THE GUARD

KIT



THE WOODS WERE QUIET AS KIT STROLLED THROUGH THE RAINBOW-LEAFED trees. The final dregs of sunlight filtering through the leaves painted the ground in shades of red and green, purple and gold.

She smiled.

It was easy to forget that outside the sanctuary, winter was arriving across Arcanis. Not while she was here, where things seemed caught in a state of perpetual autumn. Like summer had barely tucked itself in for the season.

And as much as Kit loved the cold, this was nice too.

Especially for Ellie, she thought, running her palm along the rough striped bark of a nearby silveroak tree. She deserved some warmth. Deserved some time in the sun after spending so long in the dark.

It had been three days since Elyria underwent the procedure to reattach her wings. Three long, quiet days of enforced rest, whispered consultations, and careful optimism from the sylvan healers who attended her. They all moved with a tenuous kind of calm, as though afraid the wrong move might cause hope itself to crumble at the edges.

Elyria, unsurprisingly to literally anyone who had ever met her, was going rather stir-crazy. She had probably spent more time in bed over the past week than she had in all two and a half centuries of her life combined. Her restlessness was understandable, to be fair. There was only so much to

entertain in this place and only so far one could push aside the looming threat of Malakar and his followers.

Cedric rarely left Elyria's side, and when he did, it was primarily to confer with the council of elders. Kit wasn't sure exactly about what. More safety concerns about the glade, she supposed. Was the council taking him seriously? Or were they simply placating their golden prince? The elders met on their own far more often, issuing orders among themselves in low voices, but Kit had no idea what their meetings were about. She didn't think it was her place to know.

The only other reason Cedric left Elyria was when it was his turn to pace through these very woods, keeping vigil at Elderglade's entrance, guarding the sanctuary like a stalwart hound. And occasionally like a rabid one, with the way he barked orders, making sure the group kept a rigid patrol schedule—someone inside the gate, someone outside it.

Kit couldn't blame the knightling.

She understood all too well how much it helped to have *purpose*. It was why she, too, had been more than happy to volunteer for guard duty. Why she had been so eager to throw herself into her Aerithian mission, into the audiences with her uncle, into trying to secure all avenues for aid . . . even if it did result in the less-than-ideal outcome of putting Elyria back into contact with her father.

So, yes, while Kit couldn't deny feeling like Cedric was being *slightly overprotective*, she did understand it.

Still, his concerns about the faltering protections of the sanctuary did seem overblown. After all, why would Nox have sent Sid with Elyria's wings if the protections of the sanctuary had been compromised? Surely it must have been because the nocterrian still could not enter themself. Because Young Shep was right, and Sid was, just like Elyria herself, exempt from the rules because of her bond with Cedric.

Nox probably had simply not been interested in spending days camped in the woods outside the entrance, waiting for Elyria to heal, waiting for the rest of their party to be ready, to move out. It would be perfectly understandable if that was the case.

It just also would have been nice to hear that from them directly.

Kit pursed her lips. Daeglen—and her last exchange with the nocterrian—felt like eons ago, and she hadn't heard from Nox since they parted ways. Why hadn't the right bastard sent at least some kind of message, some kind

of letter? She knew they were perfectly capable of doing so. Their gifts—celestially given, as it turned out—outfitted them perfectly for being able to communicate despite distance and differing paths.

Made them the perfect spy for the Warden of Shadows too, she reminded herself bitterly. She hadn't precisely been surprised to hear of Nox's ties to the dark star god, but she would admit that she was less than pleased at not having heard it from the nocterrian's own mouth.

Something that felt suspiciously like concern prickled the back of Kit's neck. Is that where they were now? Running more of Noctis's errands? Fulfilling more of the celestial's tasks as part of their thousand-year-long contract?

Kit sighed and pulled a folded piece of paper from her pocket—Tenny's most recent missive. At least *someone* was keeping Kit in the loop. And what a revelation it was to know exactly what a person was thinking, to know exactly how they felt, because they actually *told* you as much.

Tenny's elation at knowing Elyria was safe, awake, and lucid had been a joy to read, though even if the words themselves hadn't said as much, Kit would have been able to tell. Tenny's excitement radiated through the page, embedded in the way her normally tidy script had become slanted, the way the elegant, patient loops in her *O*'s and *L*'s had gone slightly wild in this latest letter.

"What is that face for?" Young Shep's lilting sylvan accent drifted into Kit's ears, and she realized her mouth had curved into a smile. "Or perhaps it would be more accurate to ask *who* is that face for?"

Kit tucked the letter away, then plucked a small leaf from an overhanging branch and flicked it at Shep just as he came to a stop beside her. "Wouldn't you like to know? On your way to take over for Thraigg outside the entrance?"

"Yes indeed." Shep grinned. "It's nice to see somebody smiling, at least. A break in all the humdrummery." He pursed his lips to one side. "Not that I don't recognize there's been good reason to be humdrum lately, of course," he added hastily.

"It feels a little bit dangerous to be so content, doesn't it? Like we're tempting fate?"

"Exactly." He exhaled. "With so many of us together again, and now that the Lady Lightbreaker—"

Kit arched a curious brow.

“Now that *Elyria* is back, it is indeed as though a weight has been lifted. Like it feels safe to hope again. But at the same time . . .”

“At the same time, it’s like we’re waiting for the other boot to drop.” Kit fell into step next to Shep as they roamed through the twilight woods, their soles making soft crunching noises against the leaf-strewn ground. “Ric is right to be concerned about whether Malakar will come after her here. Ellie is right to want to get ahead of the dark sorcerer, to want to stop his plans before he can enact them. I feel their urgency too, I really do. I just don’t . . .”

Shep laid his hand on Kit’s shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. “You don’t want to rush things. Don’t want this tiny reprieve, this moment of *hope*, to end. Don’t want to move forward for fear of the bad things happening again once they do?”

Kit swallowed. And that was the crux of the matter, wasn’t it?

She’d survived losing Elyria once.

Losing her a second time had nearly broken her.

Kit wiped at her eye with the back of her knuckle. “You’re very wise, Shep. Has anyone ever told you that?”

He huffed a quiet laugh. “Well, they don’t call me ‘Young Shep’ for nothing, you know.”

“Stars above. He jokes! May Lunara freeze this moment in time so I can revel in it forever.”

“My lady, please . . .” Shep’s cheeks turned a darker shade of green, still visible even in the dimming light. His soft smile turned serious once more as they approached the gate at the end of the path. “Do you think he is looking for Elyria? Malakar, I mean.”

Kit blew a rogue lock of silver-white hair out of her eyes. “Maybe. Or maybe he’s doing something worse. All the more reason I suppose we really don’t have endless time. Alas, that’s really up to Ellie now, isn’t it? At least she’s still resting.”

Shep’s green-eyed gaze danced down the path they’d just walked, looking back toward the main part of the glade. “I spoke with some of the healers earlier. They’ve removed Elyria’s bandages and want to move away from her resting regimen.”

Kit’s heartbeat picked up. “Really? Ellie will be thrilled! That seems . . . fast? Or is it slow? What’s normal? I know the actual wounds from the procedure sealed up pretty much immediately, but the healers insisted that

she leave them wrapped and resting. So this is a great sign, right? Does it mean her wings are healed? Has she already tried flying or . . . ?" She knew she was babbling, but there was no containing the excitement she felt bubbling up from her gut. At least, not until she registered the concerned expression on Shep's face, the way the corners of his mouth had turned down. Any thought she'd had of immediately soaring back to see Elyria faded at the sight. "What is it?"

Shep hesitated.

"What. Is. It?" Kit pressed.

"It's not *not* normal. Her body has healed physically, as you've seen. But she won't . . . Her wings won't . . ."

"Spit it out, Shep."

"There's . . . there's no movement. No flutter. And they can't seem to identify why that would be, because there doesn't seem to be anything amiss with her body's acceptance of the wings, so—"

"What are you saying?"

His hesitation felt like it lasted an entire lifetime. "They think it might be an issue with her magic. And they do not know if Elyria will be able to fly again."

The silent woods were suddenly too silent, the trees on either side of her making Kit feel claustrophobic. Her own silver-and-gold wings fluttered with agitation where they rested against her back, like they could not stand the thought of never again feeling the breeze beneath them.

Kit's heart cracked a little.

"They don't know," she said slowly, each word tasting bitter as it fell off her tongue. "But Elder Larkess said this was all unprecedented, didn't she? Not knowing is the baseline. Any number of things could be happening here. Maybe it's just taking a little bit of extra time for Ellie's body and magic to catch up to each other."

"Maybe," Shep said softly, but the sympathy in his voice made Kit's skin crawl.

"They don't know," she repeated, and Shep gave a sad nod. "But they also don't know Ellie." She squared her shoulders, set her jaw. Because if anyone in Arcanis could defy the odds, could defy fate and physiology altogether, Elyria Lightbreaker could.

"Your faith in her is not misplaced. Perhaps it will simply take more time. Perhaps the celestials have other plans in store for her."

“I wouldn’t say that,” Kit said with a huff. “The more entangled we seem to get with the star gods, the more I doubt their plans and promises.”

Shep inhaled sharply through his nose at Kit’s words, but she found herself surprisingly unfazed by her casual blasphemy. Still, to appease the sylvan, she added, “But none of that is either here nor there now.”

A moment of silence passed between them, with Shep shifting awkwardly on his toes. Kit knew he was waiting for her to dismiss him, to encourage him to go through the gate and relieve Thraigg from patrol duty, as intended.

Instead, she said, “What do you think, Shep? Is there a chance she will fly again?”

He took a moment before answering. “Even if she were not fate-blessed, I would think it foolish to bet against Elyria Lightbreaker.”

“She really is too stubborn to fail, isn’t she?”

“A trait the two of you share, I think.”

Kit smiled. “Your time spent with the council of elders here has left you quite enlightened, hasn’t it?”

“There is much I’ve learned in my time here, true. But it’s not just because of the elders. It’s this whole place, its people. My sylvan kin and the mixedborn children being raised here. As well as the ones who are children no longer.”

“How many mixedborns are there, do you think?”

Shep tilted his head. “Living here currently? Dozens. Including those who grew up in the safety of the sanctuary before leaving to make their own way in the world? Who knows.”

“It’s still somewhat inconceivable that I never knew this place existed. Or, rather, we all knew Elderglade existed, just not what it truly was. Not that it was this . . . this haven.” Kit waved to their general surroundings.

“What reason does the average person have to wander into the Midlands? If one were seeking the skills or tutelage of sylvan healers, Verdentia is much closer, much larger, and much more accessible. Elderglade has always kept to itself, right on the edge of the world. It was the perfect place to provide refuge.”

“Does it ever make you wonder? How many people we may have met in our daily lives who might’ve been mixedborn, and we simply never knew?”

“Would it have mattered to know?”

“No,” Kit said, voice firm. “Of course it doesn’t matter to me. Though I’m sure it would matter to many on the human side of the Chasm. I’m simply curious. I mean, just look at Ric. You’d never know, unless you *knew*, you know?”

Shep nodded. “Right. Most can pass as either human or Arcanian, depending on the gifts they may or may not have been born with. And it’s a blessing they can, too. As you said, those who want to find their footing in Havensreach must do so . . . delicately.”

Kit’s brow creased. That was certainly putting it lightly. The very reason this sanctuary existed was because Malakar had so thoroughly poisoned the peoples of Havensreach against Arcanians and mixedborn alike. Dwarves got more of a pass than others due to the highly sought-after nature of their weapons and armors, but outside of the traders, being found to be *un*human had been a jailable offense, if not an outright death sentence, for centuries.

But that was before, Kit reminded herself. Before the delegation. Before the accords. Before Cedric and Elyria became victors of the Crucible together. Before Kit herself had been the impetus for the latter going through the Gate in the first place and kicking off this entire string of events. And *that* was entirely too heavy a thought for her to be having right now, what with the status of Elyria’s wings still up in the air, as it were.

“If only we all were granted the power of the Verdant Veil like you sylvans, Shep,” Kit teased. She pulled at the frayed edges of her silver hair, twisting a lock around her finger. “I wouldn’t mind the ability to change forms, that’s for sure. I wonder how different it feels, to fly with feathers rather than fae wings.”

“Not all of us can shapeshift,” he reminded her with a smile.

“To glamour myself, then. Maybe it would prevent me from making . . . hasty decisions whenever I get bored with my hair.”

Shep laughed. “That is certainly one advantage. As is, admittedly, this.” He rubbed his sage hands together, and when he pulled them apart, a soft ball of light was suspended between them. Kit watched, transfixed, as Shep tossed the ball onto the ground before them. It rolled in a spiraling circle, leaving a starlit trail in its wake, before disappearing through the entrance gate.

“See, now, *that’s* neat,” Kit said with an impressed dip of her chin. Then she laughed. “I’m surprised Thraigg hasn’t come running back through the

gate after that—must've been quite the surprise." Shep grinned and shrugged, and Kit added, "Your magic is strong here."

"It's the Veil. We feel it strongest here and in Verdentia. It's why my brethren are usually loath to spend too long away from home."

"So, why did you leave, then? What brought you to Aerithia? Led you to become a member of the king's guard and got you assigned to accompany our sorry asses to Kingshelm?" She shoved her hands into her pockets, her eyes still tracing the glowing path that Shep's magic had lit. "I actually feel like a bit of an asshole for never having asked you this before."

"You are most definitely *not* one of those, my lady. The truth is, as much as I love my home, I never found myself satisfied with the quiet lives my people prefer to live. I longed for the excitement and bustle of the city, of meeting new friends and having new adventures. It's why being part of the delegation was such a dream."

Kit arched a brow, and Shep released another laugh.

"Fine, it was a dream in concept, at least. In practice, it's true that things could have gone a *bit* smoother. But all's well that ends well, yes?"

"All's well that ends well," Kit repeated softly. She had to have hope that would be the case for Elyria, for all that they had collectively endured, for all they were surely still to face ahead.

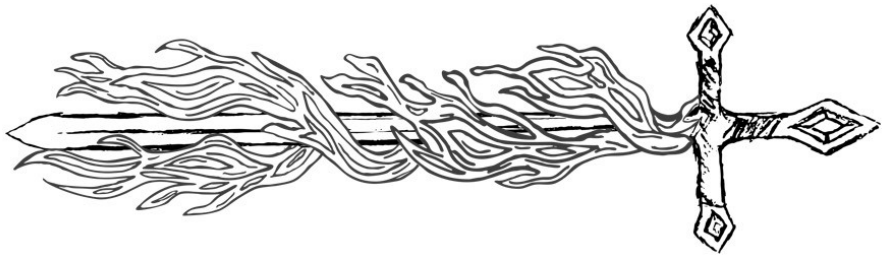
And Kit would hold on to that hope until it was wrenched, kicking and screaming, from her grasp.

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28

WINGS

CEDRIC



THE SHEETS WERE COLD.

Cedric stretched his arm, reaching for Elyria, the lingering dregs of sleep making his movements sluggish, his reactions slow. It took a few seconds for him to identify what he was feeling—the emptiness, the sadness, the disappointment.

The loss.

It took a few seconds more to realize those feelings weren't coming from him.

Spending the past few days with Elyria as she recovered meant the two of them had been able to more thoroughly explore their soul-bond. Even with her sessions with the healers, the visits from Kit, Thraigg, Jocelyn, and Shep, and Cedric's patrol shifts, Elyria and Cedric had plentiful private moments. And the fact that Elyria's physical activity was restricted—not by her own choice, of course, though she was proving a shockingly compliant patient—had meant she and Cedric were left with an unprecedented amount of time to learn more about each other . . . and about the thread that hummed between them.

They had gotten a grasp on how to filter through their more volatile emotions, how to prevent forcing their spikes of panic or anger or irritation on the other—something that had been paramount during Elyria's recovery. They'd been happy to discover it was a simple enough task to erect a sort of

double-sided door between them—one for him and one for her, something they could each open and shut at will.

It would appear that the latches on said doors were somewhat weakened at night, however. Or perhaps it was simply that they could be forced open with a big enough swell of emotion.

The weight currently sitting in the hollow of Cedric's chest certainly lent credence to that second theory.

He blinked, pushing upright in one quick, disoriented motion. A glance through the windows in the ceiling showed Cedric that the moon was not yet high in the sky. He hadn't been asleep for long. But he remembered drifting off with Elyria held gently in his arms, her wings magically masked—hidden, protected.

Now her side of the bed was empty, the blanket pulled back, the pillow cold.

And she was nowhere to be seen.

Sid lifted her head from where she lay curled at the foot of their bed, tilting it quizzically at Cedric.

His pulse pounded in his veins. He pushed into the bond instinctively, calling Elyria's name down that thread. His consciousness followed along after it, searching for her . . .

She didn't answer.

Her door was closed.

He wasn't blocked completely. He could still feel her—like hearing the echo of her heartbeat through stone. But aside from that burst of despair that had momentarily flung both their doors open, he couldn't get a read on her. He couldn't get her to respond.

Cedric raked a hand down his face, exhaling. Elyria's mood over the past few days since the procedure—since she'd awoken in Elderglade after her escape, really—had swung up and down in wild, careening arcs. Flashes raced through his mind—her brittle smile before she went under, the hope that had sparked in her eyes when she awoke afterward.

And then the way that hope had crumbled when she'd tested her wings for the first time.

They were there. Attached. Whole. Beautiful as they'd ever been. Ethereal pieces of the aurora itself draped against her back.

But there, also, was her face.

The crease in her forehead as she rotated her shoulders, flexed her muscles, strained her neck—willing them to move. The way she'd turned away from the healers as they'd issued their warnings, then their reprimands. She needed to stop, they said. It was too soon; it was too much. She just needed more *rest*.

Cedric hadn't needed a soul-bond then to feel the devastation that seeped from Elyria with every word.

Now he dressed quickly, throwing on a tunic and leather trousers, lacing up his boots with haste. His mother's locket was heavy against his neck. Sid had settled back into place, her head laid upon her paws again, her eyes closed. The flicking of her tail was the only sign of her own anxiety, but apparently this was a task the shadowcat would leave to Cedric.

He was already halfway out the door when he stopped to snag Ashrender from where the sword rested near the threshold, belting it to his waist in one fluid movement. He sheathed a dagger in the scabbard at his other side, and then he was gone.

Elderglade was quiet—the hush of contentment. It wasn't silent or still, of course, but for a place that was so lively during the day, the residents here certainly did seem to appreciate the gentleness of night. The occasional hum of low laughter broke through the trickle of the stream and the rustle of leaves high in the surrounding canopy as Cedric ran through the glade.

He followed the bond, that golden thread between them, not down the typical path to the main part of the settlement, nor toward the long trail that led to the entrance. No, he followed it into the eastern woods, to the place where he and Elyria had once lain next to each other in soft grass, staring up at a sunset-pink sky. The place where she'd helped him sort through the fact that his very world had crumbled and been re-formed beneath his feet with the revelations learned here.

He found her there.

Elyria stood in a small clearing, surrounded by mistwood trees, their leaves evergreen. Her back was to him, her hands fisted at her sides, clenching and unclenching. Her shoulders heaved and her breath was ragged as she summoned and vanished her wings in rapid succession.

There.

Gone.

There.

Gone.

Her cherry-almond scent wafted through the air, laced with something bitter, something wanting. It grew stronger with every pass of her magic, every draw of her beautiful purple-and-green wings from the ether.

Wings that lay flat and still against her back every time they reappeared.

Wings that only moved when she bowed and straightened.

Wings that didn't twitch. Didn't tremble.

Didn't flutter.

A beautiful decoration.

Nothing more.

Cedric only saw the tears streaming down Elyria's pale cheeks when he got close. Close enough to see the clench of her jaw, to hear the way her breath hitched, a hiccup in her chest. Close enough to catch her just as her knees buckled with a helpless cry, holding her up before she collapsed in on herself.

"Shhh," he said soothingly into her mind. He knew she could hear him now. His hands gripped her upper arms gently, steadying her.

She careened into him, sobbing into his chest. *"They won't—they won't—I can't—"*

Cedric's heart twisted. *"I know. It's all right. Everything will be all right."*

"Will it?" She tipped her head back, her silver-rimmed eyes meeting his. *"What good am I if they can't—if I can't even—"* She vanished her wings again, as though she couldn't stand the sight of them, couldn't stand the fact that Cedric could see them too.

"Elle," he said quietly, drawing her head to his chest with a gentle hand on the back of her neck. He held her there, held her close, until the shredded cadence of her breath began to match his. Until she finally dislodged herself from his embrace, staggering back, her face covered with both hands.

"I can't fly," she whispered into her palms. "I can't move them. It's worse than before. Worse than when they were gone entirely."

"How is it worse?" he asked.

She pressed a hand to her sternum. "When they were gone, they were gone. Now I can feel them again, feel where they are, feel what they *should* be doing. But they won't listen. They feel . . ." Her lip quivered as she sucked in a trembling breath. "They feel wrong. Foreign. Like they aren't mine. And yet, when I was without them, it was like I wasn't me. I don't know."

Cedric swallowed hard. “You were always you. You always will be. Perfect in every rendition.” He took her hand and held it between his palms, as though he might be able to imbue it with some of his warmth, some of his lingering hope. *“Mine, always.”*

Something in her softened. “You don’t know that everything will be all right.”

The smallest smile tugged at Cedric’s scarred lip. “I have faith.”

“How? After everything that’s happened, everything that’s been done to you and to your family and to your people and to—” Her throat bobbed. “And to me.”

Cedric contemplated this, pulling Elyria close enough to wrap his arms around her once more, pressing a kiss into her hair. “I have faith in *you*. You give me hope—simple as that. And I have to believe that there is something bright and beautiful and worthy waiting for us both at the end of this long, dark tunnel. To think otherwise is . . . I simply have to believe it.”

“He did this to me,” she bit out after a few moments.

“I know. But you are not what he did.”

“That doesn’t change what he took. What I lost. And now what? Am I to live the rest of my days with these . . . these phantoms attached to my back? A memorial to my greatest shame?”

“There is nothing to be ashamed of. And you don’t know that it will be forever. It’s still so, so new, Elle. Elder Larkess said this was uncharted territory. The fact that you have them again at all is surely a great sign. Maybe you just need time.”

New tears streaked down her cheeks. “I don’t know what I need.”

“And that’s all right, too. You don’t have to know right now. The only thing you do have to know is how much I love you—how much we all do. Nothing has changed in my feelings for you. Nothing ever will.”

The ground rumbled gently beneath their boots, as though Elyria’s wild magic was in agreement, even if she was busy trying to subdue her shudders as she cried and cried against him. The branches of the surrounding trees began to sway—a gentle rhythm. Like the very forest was trying to soothe her worry.

They might’ve stood like that for seconds or minutes or hours. Cedric wouldn’t know. He didn’t rush it. Didn’t try to end it. He only held her, letting her pour out her pain, letting her fall apart as much as she needed to.

He would always be there to help her pick up the pieces.

Eventually, Elyria's sobs subsided. Her breathing evened. And when she peeled herself out of Cedric's arms, when his gaze locked with hers once more, there was something other than despair there.

Something that felt a little more like determination, like resolve, sacrosanct and unbreakable.

"That's my girl," he said down the bond, flooding it with love and pride and the infinite *faith* in her he possessed.

"I love you," she replied, and even though the words were still a little bit sad, hope bloomed in the spaces between them.

Elyria wiped at her eyes and sniffled, then adjusted Cedric's now tear-stained tunic. She took a breath, and her wild magic seemed to quiet again.

The ground stopped rumbling, the swaying trees stilled.

There were a few blessed moments of contented silence.

And then they heard the first scream.

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FROM THE SHADOWS

KIT



THE SPARKLE OF SHEP'S MAGIC FADED, AND THE FOREST PATH SEEMED darker in contrast. Kit's eyes flitted to Elderglade's arched entrance, just a dozen or so feet from where the two of them still stood. She sniffed, twisting the toe of her boot in the dirt. "I do love seeing you in your element here, Shep. But if I keep you much longer, I fear I will have a very irate dwarf on my hands."

Shep chuckled under his breath. "As you said, given that he hasn't already come charging back in here must mean luck is on our side tonight, no?"

"Let's hope that remains the case. We'll need as much luck as we can get if we hope to stop Malakar before he—do you feel that?" A chill ran down Kit's spine, causing her to shudder.

"My lady?" Shep's voice sounded rather far away all of a sudden, but there was no mistaking the alarm in it.

Alarm that flared in Kit's mind as her vision blackened around the edges, darkness suddenly swirling over her skin. *What is this?* she tried to say—tried to yell, shout, scream. But no sound came from her. Shep's mouth was moving, but nothing landed in Kit's ears, either. Shimmering smoke surrounded her, clouding the sylvan from her sight. And then it was as though the ground had been sucked away from beneath her feet, and she was falling, falling, falling. . . .

Until she wasn't falling anymore.



IT WAS DARK.

Cold.

A vast nothingness, stretching out on all sides.

Except for the grip—warm, solid—on Kit's forearm.

The icy fear that had sliced through her melted away as her eyes adjusted and she registered the sight of long, slender fingers wrapped around her wrist.

Indigo fingers, just barely discernible in the infinite night.

She lifted her chin, and there was the rest of them. Tenebris Nox seemed somehow taller, even more imperious as they looked at Kit with concern in their crimson-black eyes. But any relief she felt at seeing the nocterrian again was quickly buried beneath her building unease.

"Where are we?" she asked, and the sound floated out in front of her, an echo carried on a cloud.

"The in-between," Nox replied, their unique voice drifting into Kit's ears in the same eerie way. "We have stepped into the shadows, just for a moment."

"How did you—"

Nox shook their head. "There is no time. You must warn the others. Malakar's forces come this night. They seek the Revenant." A pause. "They seek the Sunfyre Heir."

Questions formed so quickly Kit could barely throw one off her tongue before the next one appeared. "How do you know? How do they know where Ellie and Ric are? How are you here?" Her eyes fell to where Nox's hand was still wrapped around her arm. "How did you pull me into the *in-between* if shadow magic is curtailed by Elderglade's protections?"

Nox's mouth pressed into a hard line, though they did not answer, and Kit understood.

"The protections . . . They really are faltering."

"Yes," Nox said. "And they will not be enough to stave off what is coming for you all. You need to get out. Get them all out."

Kit's pulse pounded in her ears. "Come with us. Help us."

"I cannot. I have already risked much in doing this. But you needed to be warned . . . and I needed to give you this." They raised their free hand, their fingers weaving symbols in the dark, the low hum of their voice filling

Kit's ears with lyrics in a foreign tongue. She blinked against a sudden swell of brightness, her eyes watering against the shape emerging from the dark.

Sharp golden spires. Two jagged edges.

Tenebris Nox had half of the Crown of Concord in the palm of their hand and was holding it out to Kit.

"Take it," they said. "Protect it. Protect *them*. You know what needs to be done next."

"Come with us," Kit repeated. Pleaded. "Come with *me*."

Nox shook their head, and even here in the void, Kit would've sworn the motion seemed sad. "Would that I could," they said. "But there is no more time to waste. Go."

They uncurled their fingers from around Kit's wrist, and she was falling again, but forward—or was it upward?—this time. Either way, it lasted only a second, and then Shep's stricken face was in front of Kit's again, his mouth moving, his shoulders tensed. It took another moment for his voice to register in her ears.

"Thank the Earth Mother. My lady, are you back with me?"

"Shep? I . . . Was I . . . ?" Realization had Kit sinking to her knees.

"What happened?" Shep lowered himself into a squat beside her.

"I was about to ask you the same thing."

"We were talking and you said, 'Did you feel that?' and then you simply disappeared. Swallowed by the air. I was about to run for aid, but then"—he pursed his sage-green lips to one side—"you were back."

Kit blinked at him. "How long was I gone?"

"Logically I know it must only have been a few seconds," he said with a frown, "but it felt like *much* longer."

"And Tenebris?"

A crease formed on Shep's forehead. "Tenebris Nox? What about them?"

She looked from side to side, a frown pulling at her mouth. "Are they still here?"

"My lady . . ." Shep's voice was soft, his movements practiced and restrained when he stood upright, as though he realized he was handling something very fragile. "Tenebris Nox is not here. They never have been. You . . . you know this, yes?"

Another blink. The scrambled pieces of Kit's mind were fighting to settle into place, and her face felt suddenly hot. Was that . . . ? Did she just . . . Kit shook her head. She must have had some sort of exhaustion-fueled hallucination. Her concern over Elyria must have pushed her to some sort of unrealized breaking point, and here she was, imagining being swept into the shadows by the only other person she . . .

"I disappeared?" she asked slowly.

Shep pursed his lips and nodded. "It would appear so."

Kit cleared her throat and planted her hands on either side of her, her knuckles meeting cool dirt as she prepared to rise to her feet.

She froze.

Knuckles, not fingers. Not the palms of her hands.

Because said fingers were otherwise occupied.

Shep's eyes widened as he followed Kit's gaze, now pinned to the ground—to the hand that was clasped around something hard and sharp and cool. "Is that . . . ?"

Kit stood, her arm held aloft, Elderglade's luminous glow glinting off the golden crown-half resting against her palm. She took a step, and shadows peeled away from her boots like a receding tide.

"Th-this is impossible." Shep's whisper sliced through the air between them. "Where did it come from?"

"Nox gave it to me. Pulled me into the shadows and . . . I don't really know how they did it, how they got to me in here. But they also said—" She gasped. It was like time had caught up with her, the fuzziness in her head finally clearing. "I have to warn Ellie and Ric. Malakar's followers are coming for them."

"When?"

Kit's panicked eyes met Shep's, the answer sticking to her tongue. Maybe if she didn't speak it aloud, it wouldn't come true.

"When, Kit? When did Nox say they would attack?"

"Tonight."

The sylvan sprang into action, withdrawing the short sword at his waist in a single pull. He made a broad gesture toward Elderglade's entrance, the archway at his back. "I will warn Thraigg, and we must tell the council immediately. Fly back, and whatever you do, do not lose *that*." He pointed the tip of his sword at Kit's hand.

Her fingers clutched the crown so tightly, the metal cut into her skin. She didn’t care. Couldn’t care. “But they won’t be able to get in, right? That’s the whole point of this place. Surely they can’t . . .” Nausea swarmed her.

Shep gave a sad shake of his head. “It is clear nothing is sure anymore. If Nox was able to get to you through the shadows, who knows what else will be able to slip in. We must take their warning seriously. We need to protect the younglings and evacuate everyone. Get them all to the—”

And then there was screaming.

Shep’s. Kit’s own.

Because a dozen bloodred ribbons suddenly lashed out from the archway behind Shep, wrapping around his petite frame. They looped around his arms, his legs, binding tight in an instant, his sword falling to the forest floor.

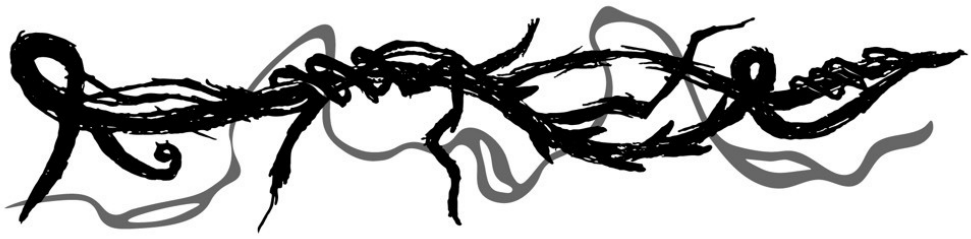
And he was yanked backward through the gate and into the night.

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30

PROTECTION

ELYRIA



"My staff?" Elyria's voice was pitched high, the words strained, stretched thin, her neck craning as if she might be able to see what was happening beyond the surrounding trees.

Cedric shook his head. "Back in Kingshelm. I'm sorry." He pulled a dagger from the scabbard at his hip and handed it to Elyria, handle-first. "Here."

She gave him a tight nod, her fingers tightening around its hilt. She rolled her shoulders back, tensing slightly at the odd sensation there—something both familiar and altogether new.

There was a whole new dimension of sadness in how quickly Elyria had gotten used to her wings being gone, to the feeling of utter nothingness there. And now that they were back—in a way, at least—she would have to get used to them all over again.

Clearly the readjustment would take some time. And Elyria wished more than anything she could spend just a tiny bit more of that time settled in Cedric's calming embrace, the grounding presence of him a reminder of everything there was to be grateful for.

Because Elyria *was* grateful: to be alive, to be free. To have her wings unharmed and whole and *with her* once more, even if that was all they'd ever be—simply, well, there.

But the conflicting, clashing emotions swelling and waning repeatedly in her chest would have to wait, because time was one thing they were in

short supply of.

Another scream echoed in the darkness, followed by shouts—of one, of many.

Magic flared beneath Cedric's skin, his veins alight with power as he wrapped a hand around Ashrender. His burning stare met Elyria's, and her fingers tightened around the hilt of the dagger.

"Let's go."



UTTER MADNESS.

That was the only way to describe the sight before Elyria's eyes as she and Cedric ran into the heart of the glade.

The chaotic, screaming, panicking glade.

Sylvans darted across the grass, blurs of green, sometimes carrying a crying child in their arms or dragging one behind them by the hand. Others bolted out from the doors of their huts, arms laden with precious things, only to drop them at the sight of the red-cloaked figures making their way down the entrance path.

Elyria and Cedric stopped in their tracks at the edge of the clearing, eyes fixed on the approaching enemy. There was no time to question why or how they were here. No point in contemplating how they had gotten past Elderglade's protections.

Elyria already knew.

Cedric had been right.

They were here for her.

Worse still, they had gotten in because of her.

"Go now! Leave it! To the council chamber—hurry! Just go!"

Kit and Jocelyn were near the dining hut, the former standing atop a table, shouting instructions into the chaos. Elyria's heart leapt in her chest at the sight of Kit's silver-and-gold wings flared wide, at the determination on Jocelyn's face as she directed the fleeing residents.

And still, ever closer drew Malakar's cultists.

A dozen of them had come. The dark sorcerer did not appear to be among them, but the relief brought on by that realization was short-lived. So, too, was the fleeting thought that between Cedric, Kit, Jocelyn, and

herself—let alone Thraigg and Young Shep, who were surely around here *somewhere*—this wasn't *that* many cultists. They'd survived much worse odds, after all.

But no, that thought did not bring Elyria comfort.

Because it wasn't the *sanguinagi* themselves that had the blood freezing in Elyria's veins.

It was the row of dark beasts plodding along in front of them—blackened skin stretched tight over monstrous features, spittle dripping from snarling maws, claws digging into the dirt with every step.

A vague, hazy memory stirred, flashes from the night of her rescue. Cedric and Raefe fighting the cultists in Castle Lumin's great hall. Cultists who turned feral, man into monster. The sounds of snapping bones and inhuman growls filled Elyria's mind momentarily, and her stomach sank.

"What has he done?" The words were barely formed as they floated down the bond, so horrified was Elyria at the implications of what had likely been done to the beasts before them.

Cedric stepped up beside her, back straight and stiff, Ashrender gripped in both hands. *"This is the world as he would have it remade."*

The enemy did not run. Did not rush. They were still only halfway down the long, tree-lined pathway. The monsters released the occasional snarl, their heads darting warily from side to side, but it was like they were leashed to the *sanguinagi* plodding evenly behind them, who seemed to be in no hurry at all.

And why would they be? They blocked the entrance—and the exit. They stood between all of Elderglade—healers and teachers and children—and the only way out.

They could take their time.

The cultists brandished no weapons aside from their guardian beasts, and a foolish spark of hope clawed its way up Elyria's chest. Perhaps they had not come here with the intent to kill them all. Perhaps, along with recapturing Elyria, with regaining his final crumb of power, Malakar simply hoped to find more converts among the scared and unprotected.

They were only here because of her. If Elyria went with them, maybe they would leave this place. Maybe they would let its inhabitants continue living in peace.

His descendant had made such a bargain before. Varyth Malchior had agreed to leave Elderglade be in exchange for Zephyr's help in getting

Cedric to the crown during the Crucible. Would Malakar make the same trade? Or was it all too late? If Elyria was not here, could the protections that had kept out the darkness for centuries past be renewed, reforged?

"Don't even fucking *think about it."* Cedric's words bounced around the inside of Elyria's skull, and his gaze was dark when she glanced at him. He must have sensed her indecision, her wavering resolve. He was undoubtedly well versed with how their shared proclivity for self-sacrifice felt.

Damn them both for it.

The reminder washed the lingering film of those thoughts from her mind. No point. There would be no point. Every conclusion she'd drawn while in captivity still rang true. She would rather die than live under Malakar's thumb again. And she knew Cedric would rather die than let that happen too, a thought Elyria could not and would not even *think* of entertaining. After all, if the situation was reversed . . .

A thought sparked in the back of her mind. *Was* it reversed? Who was to say the enemy was not here for Cedric, too? Or instead?

"That's right. Cedric. We know you, don't we? Sunbringer."

The memory of the way Malakar's lips had formed around Cedric's name was like being doused with a bucket of ice water. Did he know who Cedric *truly* was? That he was the very heir to the kingdom Malakar had tried to take? That he was Daephinia's living legacy?

Elyria never wanted to find out.

And so, she wouldn't.

Fuck Malakar and fuck his followers.

They would protect this place.

She nodded at Cedric.

He nodded back.

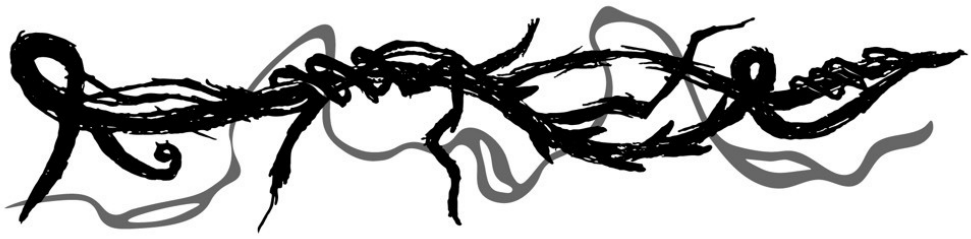
And they ran.

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31

ROSES AMONG BRAMBLES

ELYRIA



LIKE BLURS IN THE NIGHT, ELYRIA AND CEDRIC RACED ACROSS THE clearing toward Kit and Jocelyn, only slowing when an older sylvan woman tripped as they passed. Elyria was already ahead of Cedric, and he waved her on as he stopped to help the woman up.

"Quickly now," he said, his voice clear as day in Elyria's ears even as she continued forward.

"My ankle," the woman cried. "Leave me! You must get the others to safety."

"We leave no one," he said, and Elyria's heart clenched. She turned to see him rubbing his hands together, Ashrender momentarily discarded on the ground. Awe overtook Elyria as she watched Cedric weave a wisp of healing magic over the old woman's ankle before helping her to her feet.

But the pride and joy Elyria might have felt over watching her *solimaeus* so casually and proficiently wield his magic was lost to the sudden ferocity of the snarls coming from the entrance path.

The cultists were not patiently plodding along anymore. They were running now, charging forward, though the alarmed expressions Elyria could make out on their faces told her it was not necessarily of their own volition.

No, it was the snapping, snarling, thrashing beasts they held who were suddenly rushing forward, hauling their supposed masters along with them.

And panic licked up Elyria's spine as she realized every single monster was singularly focused on her knight.

On his magic.

"Motherfuckers," she spat, spinning on the spot. She lunged forward, one knee hitting the ground, plunging Cedric's dagger into the grass and planting both her hands on either side of it.

Elyria's wild magic sparked in her veins as she searched through the threads of life from which all of Elderglade was woven. She followed her power down into the earth, sifting through the nature-made magic there, until she found exactly what she was looking for.

And with her fingers digging into the soil, with the wild, feral sounds of the enemy in her ears and Elderglade's very heartbeat pulsing against her ribs, Elyria *pulled*.

Sharp, thorny brambles burst from the ground in front of the rushing line of *sanguinagi* and their beasts. Elyria quickly wove them around the surrounding silveroak trunks—back and forth, in and out, above and below—until she had formed a spiky, perilous wall that blocked the enemy off from the rest of the glade.

First one wall, then four—five.

Sweat beaded on her temple as she pulled more and more and more from the earth, the outraged cries of the cultists and echoing snarls of the beasts muffled by the wild-woven cage confining them.

Cedric was back by her side, Ashrender once again in hand, by the time she finished. She tore his dagger from the ground and sheathed it in her belt, and then the two of them were running again.

"That won't do much for long, I'm afraid," Kit yelled over the chaotic din when they finally reached her and Jocelyn. She hopped down from the table and wrapped Elyria in a too-quick hug. "I left an ice wall at the entrance in the hopes of slowing them down, but they clearly made quick work of that."

"What's the plan then?" Elyria asked, shuddering as she heard the boom and scrape of power being hurled against her cage of brambles.

"We're evacuating," said Jocelyn, rushing forward to knock an overladen basket of clothing out of a young sylvan woman's hands as she waddled by. "Leave it! Leave everything you don't need. Just *go*!"

"Evacuating to *where*?" Elyria said, incredulous as the young woman burst into tears but did, in fact, go. A cursory glance told her that the area

was almost clear. A half-dozen residents were still making their way past, but most of them were barely more than vague people-shaped things in the mist as they headed toward the massive goldwood tree at the rear of the glade.

Jocelyn turned back to Elyria. “Elder Larkess said to get everyone to the council chambers.”

“Doesn’t putting the entire stars-damned settlement in one place just make it that much easier for them to pick everyone off?”

“Not if we eliminate them first.” Cedric flipped Ashrender’s hilt in his hand. “There aren’t that many of them. At Castle Lumin, Raefe and I took on more than twice as many ourselves.”

“You may have taken on twice as many cultists, but only a few of those were monsters,” Elyria reminded him. “And half-formed ones at that. These ones here tonight are clearly something new—and they are fixated on *you*. They went insane at the first sign of your magic.”

“Still, between the six of us, we can—”

Kit’s face immediately fell. Jocelyn stiffened.

Elyria blinked. Her head swung from side to side, as though she might have just missed seeing where Thraigg and Shep were hiding.

“Not the six of us” was all Kit said.

Elyria’s heart fell into her stomach.

“Thraigg? Young Shep?” Cedric’s voice shook. “Are they . . . ?”

“We don’t know,” Jocelyn offered quietly. “Thraigg was on patrol when . . .”

“I was with Shep when they came.” Kit shook her head. “They pulled him through the gate before they all came through at once. I threw the ice wall up, then ran back here to warn everyone else.”

Her jaw worked as she said the words, and though her tone was even, the words stoic, emotionless, Elyria saw the way they pained her.

“That is exactly what Shep would have wanted,” Elyria said.

Jocelyn gave a sad nod. “Especially given the cargo you carry.”

It was then that Elyria noticed the small satchel strapped across Kit’s body, bouncing against her hip. “What cargo?”

“A story for later,” Kit said. “But I have the—”

A shuddering boom rang through the glade. Red light shone from between the spaces in Elyria’s bramble cage. For a single glorious moment, they looked like rosebuds, gleaming red flowers among the thorns, and it

was, well, beautiful. But then there was another shudder, and a panicked pang ran through Elyria's chest.

"You're right," she told Kit. "It won't last much longer. Cedric, we have to—Cedric?"

But he was no longer beside her.

He had drifted a few yards over to the side of the dining hut, his gaze pinned on something none of the others had seen yet.

Elyria let out a gasp as her eyes followed in front of him, and she realized with terrifying clarity that the glade was not as clear as she had previously thought.

Because there, formerly blocked from view, a small group of sylvans and older mixedborn stood vigil outside the schoolhouse, forming a semicircle in front of its doors.

"What are you doing?" Elyria screamed at them, rushing across the clearing, her hands waving wildly. "You need to get out of here! Get to the—"

"There are still children inside!" one of them shouted. Elyria recognized him as the sylvan boy who had been on patrol when Sid arrived. Her heart plummeted into her gut as she lifted her eyes to the windows on either side of the schoolhouse doors, taking in the smattering of cherubic faces—and the fearful expressions—peering out from within.

"Get them to safety." Elyria heard footsteps behind her and knew that Kit, Jocelyn, and Cedric must have followed. "Get them to the council chamber. We'll hold the enemy off."

"We can fight. We can help." The boy clutched a small paring knife in one hand, the kind used to crush herbs, shell nuts. The young sylvan woman next to him tapped a flipball bat against her boot, while the mixedborn girl on her other side had what looked like a snapped billiard cue, the jagged halves held in front of her like batons.

"Guards and soldiers are in short supply here, I'm afraid," Elder Larkess had said.

No, they weren't soldiers. But they were ready to fight.

They were ready to protect the most precious part of this place, the true purpose of the sanctuary.

"This *is* helping," Elyria said softly. "Is there a back door?"

The mixedborn girl nodded. "Yes, my lady."

"Good. Then go, all of you. Protect them, so we can protect you."

There was a moment of hesitation, but eventually, with a few low murmurs of assent, the trio ran inside.

Elyria turned. Took in the stern set of Jocelyn's and Kit's expressions, their curt nods. Streams of water swirled up Kit's arms, snaking around her wrists, her forearms—ready and waiting. Jocelyn tipped the contents of a small pouch tied to her belt into the palm of one hand, then pulled her short sword free with the other. But where was—

Red light flared from the entrance path, another shudder rocking the entire glade. Those luminous rosebuds turned into bolts of crimson lightning flaring out from within the cage of brambles, blasting it into smithereens.

Elyria's stomach churned as some of those bolts shot into the surrounding trees, not only splintering bark and felling branches but leaving sparks in their wake. Embers smoked at the edges of the charred wood, and Elyria exhaled a relieved breath as they faded away. They hadn't caught, hadn't bloomed into an outright flame.

Not that there would have been time to do anything about it if they had.

The enemy was upon them.

They came in a maelstrom of snarls and curses. The glow cast by Elderglade's luminescent flora glinted eerily off the bloodred crystal swords and scythes and daggers the cultists held as they charged into the clearing, red eyes searching, mouths curving up into wicked grins as they landed on Elyria, Kit, and Jocelyn. Blood dripped from palms and wrists and fingers, filling the air with a sour, copper-laced tang.

Elyria couldn't focus on the sight for long though. Not as she realized that the creatures had been unleashed, racing ahead of their masters like a herd of wildebeests being chased through a canyon.

Not as she saw the way every single one of them was barreling toward Cedric.

Cedric, who had not, in fact, followed her over to the schoolhouse.

Cedric, who was still standing over by the dining hut, his shoulders rolled back, his head held high.

Elyria met his gold-ringed eyes for a single second before he turned and drew Ashrender up with two hands. The sword lit up with blazing sunfyre, and the horde of beasts sped up.

For a moment Elyria could only stare—at Cedric, at the monsters closing in on him like a dark tide, at the dozen cultists carving their own

crimson path across the glade toward her, Kit, and Jocelyn.

No.

Elyria clenched her fists, and the ground rumbled. Her wild magic screamed in her veins, hot and then cold—too cold, *burning* cold—as she pulled more and more of it to the surface. It was too soon, and she was using too much. But there were so many, and she needed to buy them all a little bit of time. She just needed to slow them down, to give the children the opportunity to get away, to give them all a fighting chance to—

The ground cracked open. A rift cleaved through the dirt, grass and fallen leaves tumbling into it as it widened, then ripped along the ground, rushing toward the horde of beasts. Several of them fell in, limbs flailing, to a chorus of unearthly screams.

Jocelyn and Kit startled, their attention torn for a moment from the oncoming wave of cultists. But then it was back again, their magic launching skillfully to keep the enemy at bay. Bolts of ice collided with blood-magic shields. Jocelyn tossed a handful of seeds into the air, where they transformed into massive thorns that shot at the enemy.

Elyria clung to Cedric's focus through the bond—an eerie, razor-sharp calm that felt distinctly at odds with the surrounding chaos. He had his feet planted in the grass by the dining hut, his stance wide. Ashrender burned in his hands, a vertical slice of the sun spearing through the night.

It was calling to them.

The beasts' heads snapped toward the light like rabid wolves scenting fresh meat. Their jaws stretched too wide, spittle glistening on teeth that looked all wrong—too long, too many, but still, somehow, grotesquely familiar.

Elyria's rift had swallowed a handful of them.

The rest had skidded to a stop right at the edge, their claws digging into the dirt. Their bodies moved with a loping, jerking gait—all muscle and hunger and twisted magic. One let out a bone-shaking howl before hauling itself forward with a strength that made Elyria's stomach turn, launching across the open chasm.

The rest followed.

"Cedric!" she shouted, but the word was swallowed by the surrounding noise. Her fingers curled, the dregs of her wild magic still alight in her veins, frenzied and furious . . . but very nearly spent. Somewhere deep in

her chest, her shadows stirred—restless, frantic, like they were begging to join the fray.

She reached for the earth again, and roots erupted in a thick snarl between Cedric and the first wave of beasts, forming a rough lattice meant to catch legs, to bind, to slow—

The monsters tore through them with ease, their claws shredding bark and cutting through fiber as if they were made of paper.

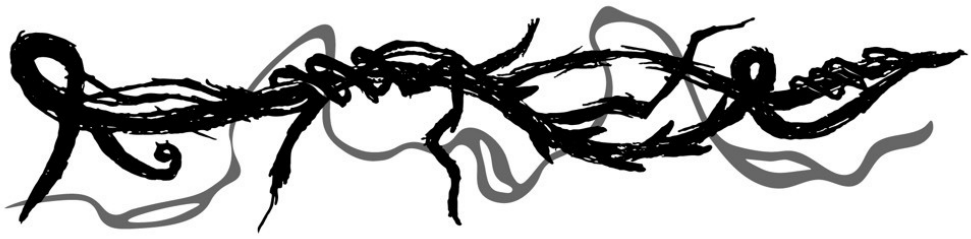
And then they were on him.

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32

STRONGER TOGETHER

ELYRIA



Cedric swept Ashrender up, then plunged it down, the scent of seared flesh wafting through the air as the burning blade sliced clean through the first beast. He drove the sword into the shoulder of the next one, cleaving its arm from its body, but the creature didn't fall. Blood spraying, it reared up with snapping jaws, its teeth inches from Cedric's throat.

And then it wasn't quite as close anymore, but only because another beast had slammed into Cedric's side, throwing him off-balance. He went down to one knee, just as a third monster—massive, with red eyes that glowed like kindled coals—launched itself at his back.

"No!" Elyria screamed, and the word wasn't a sound so much as a command. She threw both hands out, pouring what little power she had left across the clearing. The magic masking her wings faltered, and they burst free over her back as she fell forward, her knees hitting the dirt.

"Ellie, don't!" Kit's cry was lost in Elyria's ears as vines erupted from the ground, lashing at the beasts attacking her *solimaeus*.

But her magic was too slow.

She was too weak.

Cedric was back on his feet, spinning to face the attacking beast, but its claws were already outstretched, already reaching, already set to slice through shirt and flesh and muscle and bone.

A shape dropped out of the sky, landing behind Cedric with such force that it sent the attacking creature sprawling mid-leap. Sid let out a tremorous growl as she turned in the flattened grass, humongous once again, shadows rolling off every inch of her—a dark mist.

The beasts froze. Even the cultists seemed to slow their continued approach for a moment, cries of “Volacarnii!” coming from those who were closest.

Cedric took advantage of the momentary lapse, immediately swinging Ashrender up to carve a second arm from the other monster he had been grappling with. “You *really* love making an entrance, don’t you?” he called, the words coming out as something between a grunt and a breathless laugh.

Sid launched herself at the monster she had waylaid, her teeth clamping around its throat. With a single twist of her head and a *snap* that Elyria felt in her bones, the majestic shadowcat broke the beast’s neck.

Cedric’s chest heaved as he stood and separated the first creature’s head from its shoulders with a final sweep of his sword. “I appreciate the assist,” he said, dipping his chin at Sid.

The shadowcat sniffed the air, as though somehow offended by the implication that her actions should be reduced to something like *assistance*, then turned and threw herself at the remaining beasts.

The vise gripping Elyria’s heart relaxed slightly, and with effort, she got back to her feet. Breath coming in shaky bursts, she reached behind her back and ran a trembling finger along the edge of one wing.

Still there.

They were still there.

A *bang* sounded from the schoolhouse behind her, and Elyria could only hope that it was the sound of a back door being flung open, of children being ushered toward safety.

Good, she thought. *Go.*

Go, go, go.

They came.

The cultists had finally reached them, all of them packed together in a tight phalanx, their *sanguinagi* shields and weapons held aloft. Kit’s and Jocelyn’s efforts had slowed their approach, but they hadn’t taken any of them out, and the three fae now found themselves facing a full dozen blood mages.

“Are you all right?” Kit hissed, coming up next to Elyria, voice tight. “Can you still fight?” Water spun around her wrists, crystallizing into icy plates along her forearms.

Elyria grabbed Cedric’s dagger from her belt, flipping it in her palm. “Do I have a choice?”

“Attagirl.”

A few feet to Elyria’s other side, Jocelyn released a low curse. She threw another handful of seeds from her palm in a glittering arc. They began growing as soon as they hit the grass, forming a thicket of thorny bushes. Several of the cultists shrieked, their tight line faltering, as jagged roots punched through the ground, pinning their legs.

But, again, it bought them only a few moments. Because with the number of *sanguinagi*, the sheer amount of power at their bloodied fingertips, they were able to make quick work of the fae’s defenses.

It was as though the cultists had learned something about how best to wield their magic in the time since Elyria had last confronted them.

They were stronger together.

Elyria swallowed hard. “We need to cut down their numbers. Separate them.”

“Fall back to the schoolhouse, Ellie. We’re on it.” And then Kit sprang into the air, soaring to the left, hurling two icy six-pointed throwing stars at the cultists as she flitted away.

“Four for each of us,” Jocelyn called over her shoulder, sprinting to the right. “Easy as pie.”

It was not four cultists that ended up approaching Elyria. No, only two came for her, while another three chased after Kit. The other *seven*, though, followed Jocelyn around the side of the schoolhouse, where she then ran toward the trees, leaving a trail of briars in her wake.

Why are so many of them chasing her? Elyria wondered. And it wasn’t until the pair of advancing cultists had finally reached her, wasn’t until she’d sliced one’s throat, then shoved her dagger between the ribs of the other, wasn’t until the wet words had fallen from the *sanguinagi’s* dying lips, that Elyria understood.

“You are foolish to try to stop us. He will stop at nothing to have her back,” the cultist rasped, blood dribbling from the corner of her mouth. “And then nothing will stop him.”

And Elyria realized that in the haze of battle, it was difficult to tell who was who. That the skewed tint of night and Elderglade's luminous flora painted everything in a cool, bluish light. That everyone's hair had taken on the same sort of colorless tone.

And that there was only one fae in this clearing who did not have wings.

They were targeting the wrong wildshaper.

They thought Jocelyn was Elyria.

And they would stop at nothing to take her.

"Four hells," Elyria breathed, sprinting after Jocelyn, the bloodied dagger heavy in her hand. "Four *fucking* hells!" she hissed as she burst through the trees.

By the time Elyria caught up with her, Jocelyn was engaged in battle with four different *sanguinagi*, her sword scraping against crystal blades. One of them held no weapon but had bloodred ribbons streaming from each of her ten fingers, trying desperately to wrap them around Jocelyn's limbs —her feet, her ankles, her wrists. But the fae was a blur, ducking and dodging and kicking and swinging. She hacked at the ribbons, and the cultist screamed in pain. Then she landed a blow right in the center of one of her other attacker's chests, sending him careening into the third and fourth, knocking them over as if they were ninepins.

The sight might have sent a bolt of pride running up Elyria's spine were it not for the rest of the scene unfolding before her. Because Jocelyn wasn't the only one fighting.

There was the young sylvan woman wailing on a cultist with her flipball bat.

There was the mixedborn girl brandishing her jagged batons with a white-knuckled grip.

There was the sylvan boy with his paring knife, thrusting it into a *sanguinagi's* shoulder.

And behind them all, tiny shadows in the darkness peered out from behind trees and crouched against the leaf-strewn ground. Behind them all, at least ten children hid.

The path Jocelyn had taken to draw the *sanguinagi* away had inadvertently collided with the younglings' escape route. And now the children had the attention of these raging blood mages. Not just children, either. *Mixedborn* children. The very antithesis of everything Malakar believed in, the personification of everything his cult hated.

Elyria leapt forward into the fray, but she had arrived too late. Between the three young guardians, they had taken one cultist down.

But only one.

She heard it all before she saw it—the strangled cry as a red crystal scimitar sliced across the sylvan woman's chest, the sound of her crumpling to the ground, her body folded in on itself.

The sylvan boy gurgled, his green eyes full of pain and heartbreak as they met Elyria's before he, too, dropped to the forest floor, a *sanguinagi* axe embedded in his chest.

Elyria's heart cracked.

She had been right.

They weren't soldiers.

But they fell like them.

One after another after—

"Move!" Elyria screamed, the word ripping raw from her throat at the mixedborn girl, whose face had drained of color, her makeshift weapons flung from her hands by the cultist bearing down on her.

The girl scrambled back, a whimper pulling from her throat, the children hidden in the trees behind her crying. The cultist swung her blood-forged blade . . .

. . . and met a wall of ice.

Kit's silver-and-gold wings were a beacon in the dark forest as she soared in front of the ice wall she'd erected, cutting off the children, however momentarily, from their assailants. Through the icy barrier, Elyria could just make out the sight of the mixedborn girl gathering the younger children, could see their forms grow smaller as she ushered them back through the woods, toward safety.

Elyria exhaled a quick, relieved breath. Then steadied herself. It was time to finish this.

Swallowing back bile, Elyria tore the axe from the sylvan boy's body and immediately threw it into the back of one of the cultists still fighting with Jocelyn. Shrieks rang through the air in duplicate as Elyria realized that the ice wall Kit had constructed in the blink of an eye had covered the feet of two of the other *sanguinagi*, freezing them in place. Elyria darted forward and thrust her dagger between the ribs of one, then the other. Their final breaths were satisfyingly wet as they sank to their knees.

Satisfying, too, was the sight of Kit showering a third cultist with a burst of water that instantly crystallized on her skin, leaving her screaming in agony long enough for Kit to descend and plunge an icy dagger into her *sanguinagi* heart.

But it still wasn't all of them.

Jocelyn fought the two remaining cultists, and the toll this battle had taken on her was becoming clear. Her movements were sluggish, her reactions delayed. The night was wearing on Elyria, too, whose wild magic was barely a glimmer within her now. Her heart was still racing though, the need to survive, to *protect*, pulsing through her veins and keeping her alert.

She needed to stay in it, if just for a little longer.

In the distance, Elyria heard a riotous bellow, the screams and growls of the monsters Cedric and Sid still battled. She grappled for the bond inside her, relief stealing her breath when she found it strong, glowing with her knight's steel-willed determination. They were doing all right.

It was almost over.

The thought came just as one of the cultists slipped under Jocelyn's outstretched arm, moving like a wraith with a blood-crystal dagger raised high.

Elyria was, once again, too slow.

And the cultist's grin was bright in Elderglade's glow, her eyes fevered and red, as she plunged her dagger into the soft juncture between Jocelyn's arm and shoulder.

Jocelyn cried out.

Elyria lunged.

Instinct took over, the quiet shadows she'd kept buried in her chest—the ones she'd been so grateful not to have to think about, the ones she'd been purposefully ignoring so she wouldn't have to consider what they were, what they meant—surged forth.

She still wasn't thinking about what they meant as shadows snapped out from Elyria's palms, ribbons of black diving through the air. They wrapped around the cultist's torso, hauling her off Jocelyn and hurtling her into a nearby silveroak so hard the wood groaned.

The cultist left a bloody streak down the silver-striped trunk as Elyria's shadows unwound from her body and she collapsed limply at the base.

"I'll be fine, Elle," Jocelyn said weakly, clutching at her wound, trying to stem the gush of blood. She fell to her knees, her weapon discarded on

the ground. The dagger had gone in at a bad angle, the blade serrated, and when the cultist had ripped it out, she'd taken a chunk of Jocelyn with it.

Elyria saw red, her eyes narrowing on the single remaining cultist.

It was only him now. Him against Kit and Elyria both, bearing down on him together. Elyria's shadowy ribbons had receded, but darkness now misted over her skin, clouding her in night.

The *sanguinagi's* crimson eyes darted between Jocelyn on the ground and then Elyria before him. They widened as understanding dawned. Understanding . . . and fear.

This was the Revenant.

Crimson lightning burst from the man's hands, aimed at Elyria, whose shadows were ready to lash out in response. But before she even had the chance, Kit was there, erecting a shield of ice, blocking the barrage of blood magic and sending it ricocheting into the canopy above instead.

Elyria cursed as the bolts collided with branches and leaves, and the sparks left in their wake did not fade, did not snuff out this time.

They ignited.

Flames danced through the trees, the autumnal oranges of the leaves erupting in angry shades of burning red. Elyria leapt back as an enormous charred branch, the initial impact point of the *sanguinagi* man's magic, fell from overhead. The horror on her face was momentarily replaced with disgust at the wet squelch that came from said branch landing directly on the body of the cultist woman Elyria had felled.

The man turned and ran.

Elyria started to bolt after him, but a cry from Jocelyn as she slumped to the forest floor had Elyria halting after only a few steps.

"Fuck, she's lost so much blood already." Kit held a hand over Jocelyn's wound, healing magic already at her fingertips, trying to keep her from losing more.

Shadows dissipating into the ether, Elyria looped Jocelyn's uninjured arm over her own shoulder. "He'll get away."

"Let him," Kit replied, bracing Jocelyn from the other side. "Look up."

Elyria looked. Looked at the heavy smoke billowing from the flaming treetops and then to the empty glade behind them. "Elderglade is lost," she whispered.

"It is." There was something worse than sadness in Kit's voice. Something infinitely more final. "But we haven't. Not yet."

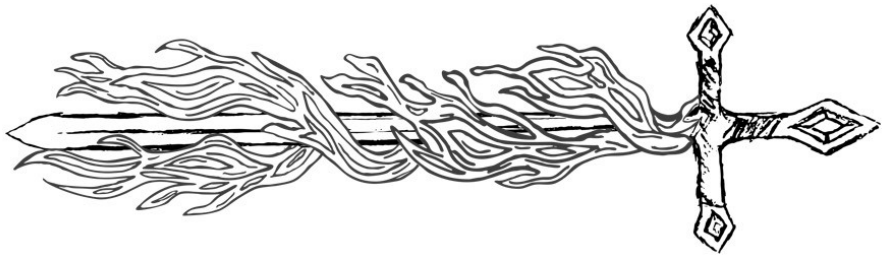
So, together, the three of them ran through the forest, following the path trod earlier by tinier feet, heading toward the towering goldwood at the back of the glen.

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33

SANCTUS SALUTUM

CEDRIC



PRIDE AND GRATITUDE AND BLESSED, BLISSFUL RELIEF LIT CEDRIC FROM THE inside the instant he saw Elyria, Kit, and Jocelyn emerge from the trees. Then it shrank into fear as he took in Jocelyn's state—her lolling head, her tunic so soaked with blood, it was dripping from the hem—and the smoke rising into the sky behind them.

"Quickly," he said, darting forward and scooping a now nearly-unconscious Jocelyn into his arms. "To the healers."

"One of the cultists escaped," Elyria said bitterly.

Cedric grimaced. "One of the creatures did too."

Sid loped up beside him, maw wet with black blood, and released an irritated huff. She did not appear pleased with the fact that one got away.

"It doesn't matter." The faint scent of rosemary wafted through the copper-tinged air as Kit used her magic to rinse Jocelyn's blood from her hands. "Did you see the others come through? The children?"

Cedric nodded, gently shifting Jocelyn in his arms as the small, bloodied group began walking up the path. "Yes. The oldest girl told me where she'd last seen you three fighting. And then we ran into two of the elders who had come looking for them."

"Larkess?" asked Elyria.

Cedric shook his head. "She remains at the council chamber, ushering everyone through. Evidently, there's an exit within the goldwood, but only an elder can keep it open."

The bond vibrated with the magnitude of Elyria's relief. "I knew there had to be something."

"Where will they go?" asked Kit. "The sanctuary is . . ."

Cedric's eyes darted back to the smoke-filled tree line, then to the ever-brightening glow appearing between the trunks at their back. "I don't know," he replied. "They seem like they know what they're doing though. And we clearly need to get moving. We'll regroup with everyone, and surely we can figure out—"

Pain flared against his sternum. His steps faltered.

"Ric?" Kit's voice was full of alarm.

"What's wrong?" Elyria was immediately at his side, her hand on his shoulder, her voice a balm to his mind. But it did nothing to stop the searing pain on his skin.

"Take her," Cedric gritted out, and Kit was quick to lift a limp Jocelyn out of his arms right before he doubled over, his hand clawing at his chest. "The locket," he gasped. "It's—it burns."

Elyria's fingers were already at his neck, grappling with the chain of the locket and withdrawing it from beneath his tunic. It glowed, bright and hot, orange-tinged at the edges, like it had been freshly pulled from a forge. "What's happening? Why now?"

Cedric braced his hands on his knees, his breaths shaky, a deep dread roiling in his gut. Before he could even voice the thought, though, a roar echoed from deeper down the path.

Sid whipped her head toward the sound, hackles raised.

They ran.

Then, just a few yards in front of the massive goldwood tree, with horrified gasps, they stopped.

Several figures lay unmoving in the grass.

The bloodstained grass.

Cedric's gaze snagged on the unseeing eyes of a healer he recognized, one of the very ones who had worked so diligently to take care of Elyria. A few yards down, the mixedborn girl who had defended the schoolhouse, who had gotten the children to safety, was crumpled on the ground.

Cedric's heart cracked.

Then it broke.

Because there, looming over a shuddering body—another all-too-*familiar* body—was the final monstrous beast.

It lifted its head with a snarl, slowly, like it had registered Cedric's, Elyria's, and Sid's sudden presence but was debating whether to abandon its mauled prey. Demonic black eyes fixed on the locket dangling from Elyria's hand, lit up like a tiny beacon, and that seemed to make up its mind.

It lunged with a roar.

So did Sid.

She collided with the creature mid-leap, the impact sending both of them tumbling to the side. Cedric felt Elyria's flare of panic down the bond, but before either of them could voice their concern for Sid, the shadowcat had the monster pinned, snapping and thrashing, beneath her.

Cedric didn't hesitate. One second to unsheathe Ashrender. Another to close the distance between him and the grappling beasts. A third to pierce the monster's skull with the tip of his blade, then sever its head from its body.

The beast went limp beneath Sid, who shoved it aside with a snarl before turning back toward Cedric with bright, furious eyes. Guilt immediately ate at him, a poison beneath his ribs. This was the monster who had escaped him. He'd thought he saw it heading back toward Elderglade's entrance, thought it had turned tail and run.

He'd been wrong.

Elyria called to him from where she was now crouched beside the person the beast had just attacked. The locket lay on the ground next to her, burning a black circle into the grass as she worked over the body.

The body of . . .

"Larkess," Cedric breathed, dropping to his knees beside the fallen elder. "No."

The elder's eyelids were half-shut, as though the effort of keeping them open was already too much. Still, as her milky eyes found Cedric's face, her lips curved into a weak smile. "My boy."

"Shh. Please, let me—just hold on." He summoned warmth to his fingertips, his palms lighting up with healing magic. But the depth and expanse of her wounds . . .

He lifted his head to find Elyria staring at him, her emerald eyes lined with tears that spilled down her blood-speckled cheeks as soon as his gaze met hers. She shook her head, and the helplessness pulsing down the bond only served to magnify his own.

She was out of magic.

And even if Cedric had any kind of real mastery over his power, he did not think these were the kinds of injuries that could be healed.

“It is all right,” said Larkess breathily. “The rest are through. The rest are safe. As are you. That is enough.”

“You can’t go,” he whispered hoarsely. “You aren’t done yet. We still need you. I—” He swallowed hard, forcing himself to breathe through the panic threatening to overtake him. She was more than just a sylvan elder, a guide in these dark times. She was the last living connection he had to his family, his legacy. “Alouette, please. *I* still need you.”

Larkess reached for him with trembling fingers. He caught her hand immediately, trying not to sob at how cold it felt. Distantly, he heard footsteps crunching in the grass, heard the low, sad “No” as Kit finally caught up, Jocelyn still in her arms.

“You already have everything you need, dear one,” murmured the elder, her voice weak. “And I am so proud . . . to have seen . . . the man you have become.”

Cedric shook his head. “You’ve so much more yet to see. Conserve your strength.”

Elyria let out a broken sound, her hands hovering uselessly over Larkess’s chest, as though afraid to touch her and make it all worse. Her grief crested through the bond, guilt and sorrow and fury tangling together.

“I’m so sorry,” she choked out. “I should never have come here. I put everyone at risk, and I—”

“Hush now.” Larkess shifted minutely, her eyes unfocusing and refocusing as she sought Elyria’s face. “You are not your darkness. . . . You did not break this place.” She loosed a shuddering breath. “You are the shadow from which the dawn emerges.”

Elyria’s tears fell freely now, and Cedric felt his own carve a path down his face. “There has to be something I can do,” he said, desperation roughening his voice. “Anything. Just tell me what to do.”

Larkess’s fingers tightened faintly around his. “You already know . . . what to do. Dawnbringer . . . Realm healer . . .” She closed her eyes. “King.”

And then she was gone.

Despair clawed at Cedric, but he could not dwell in it. Not when Elyria was suddenly scrambling back from where she’d just been kneeling, her

glassy eyes fixed on the spot in the grass where the locket was barely visible now among the blinding light pouring from it in pulsing waves.

Her gasp was mirrored by Cedric's own as the locket lifted into the air, spinning as it hovered above the ground. The chain snapped apart with a sharp *crack*, the metal unraveling as it spun, winding and winding like thread on a spindle. And then that thread—that shimmering, shining, luminous thread, like it was forged from daylight—began reshaping itself in midair.

Edges sharpened.

A surface formed.

And half of the Crown of Concord clattered to the ground, a twin to the one Elyria and Cedric had won in the Crucible.

There should have been relief. Should have been a sense of victory.

There was only grief.

Cedric stared at the crown, nestled in the blackened grass, unable to move but unable to look away. He felt frozen—in time, in space, in feeling.

He wasn't sure how long they sat like that. Minutes, or maybe only seconds. But it wasn't until Sid padded up beside him, nudging his arm with her broad nose, that he realized he was still holding Elder Larkess's hand. Gently, he laid it down, then sank into the shadowcat's side with a sob.

That was all there was time for.

"Ellie. Ric."

They both looked up at the sound of Kit's voice. She stood a few paces away, her hands clasped in front of her. It took Cedric a moment to register the fact that she was not holding Jocelyn any longer.

Nor was she standing there alone.

To her left was one of the other sylvan elders—the man with the intricate face tattoo whose looks of disdain toward Elyria had not gone unnoticed by Cedric. And to her right was—

"Shep!"

Elyria sprang to her feet and dashed over to the trio, the crown half all but forgotten. Well, it wasn't forgotten by Cedric, whose eyes darted between the sharp spires sticking up from the grass and Young Shep. The sylvan's tunic was ripped, tangible grief written into the creases of his face.

"Jocelyn?" Elyria asked.

Shep offered a tight smile. "Already through, headed to the healers on the other side."

“And Thraigg?”

“He awaits us there too,” he said, though Cedric didn’t miss the way his smile flickered.

“Thank the stars.” Kit blew out a forceful breath. “But how did—”

“A tale to be told on the way. We must go.” Shep’s eyes flicked to the path behind them, some mix of nervousness and a deep, bone-weary sadness glazing them.

Cedric’s chest seized when he followed the sylvan’s gaze and registered the sight of the burning forest behind them.

“Elder Jung cannot hold the way open for long,” Shep continued.

The elder nodded grimly.

Cedric balked, his hand hovering protectively over Larkess’s body. “We can’t just leave her . . .”

Elder Jung’s face softened. “Her soul has already gone to the Hereafter. Her body returns to the Earth Mother, as all living things do.”

It was only then that Cedric noticed the way the grass had surged around Larkess’s form—stretching, growing, covering her limbs. The ground under his knees had grown soft, pliant, and he had begun to sink into the soil along with the elder’s body.

Nature was reclaiming her, along with the bodies of the others who had fallen in service of protecting the sanctuary. Cedric reached over and retrieved the crown-half before it, too, was claimed by the earth. And before it was claimed by the fire still slowly making its way toward them.

The metal was warm when he pressed it into Elyria’s shaking hands.

“Quickly now,” said Elder Jung, and into the heart of the goldwood tree they went.



“WHERE ARE WE?” Elyria asked when they finally emerged into snowy, winter-covered woods.

It had felt as though the four of them—Cedric, Elyria, Shep, and Elder Jung—had wandered through the narrow tunnel for both ages and no time at all. The entire experience was an onslaught of contradictions, and it all made Cedric feel unmoored. Trekking through the tunnel should have wrung him dry, should have extinguished what was left of his stamina.

Instead, warmth crept back into his limbs with every step, his magic replenishing like lungs filling with fresh air after almost drowning.

Elder Jung only smiled when Cedric asked how. “Such is the power of the Veil.”

It was irritatingly unhelpful, really. Cedric didn’t want to seem ungrateful, of course. Especially with how close to the edge Elyria had gotten while she was fighting, how dangerously she had danced with burning out. It had killed him to know she was spending her wild magic so utterly in his defense, and so the fact that her recovery was being aided by their journey was certainly not something Cedric would begrudge.

Still, the cagey way the elder spoke of the Verdant Veil was irritating, to say the least, and Cedric found himself suddenly understanding Zephyr just a little bit better. The sylvan people were clearly much better suited to secret-keeping and subterfuge than their mild-mannered reputation suggested.

Equally unhelpful as Elder Jung’s mysterious references had been Young Shep’s explanation for how he and Thraigg had survived the cultist ambush. Not that Cedric was complaining, of course. He was beyond grateful to know they had both survived, even if Thraigg had evidently been injured in the initial assault. He was alive, though, and that, of course, was all that mattered.

Still, Shep’s muttered “You’ll see when we get there” when they’d asked for more details had left Cedric unsettled.

Or maybe that feeling was simply carried over from realizing that they now held *both* halves of the Crown of Concord in Kit’s little satchel. A satchel that now rested against Elyria’s hip, the strap secure over her shoulders, her wings once again vanished from view.

Cedric found he hadn’t even been able to muster surprise at Kit’s story of how Tenebris Nox had sucked her momentarily into the in-between in order to hand over the first half of the crown. He had made peace with the nocterrian’s enigmatic ways by now, and while there was a lingering sense of concern over why Nox couldn’t be with them at present, the fact of the matter was that there were simply *too many* things to be worried about. And somehow, miraculously, that offered Cedric a strange kind of respite from his typically racing thoughts.

He knew said respite wouldn’t last, of course. He just hadn’t thought it would dissipate immediately upon exiting the secret tunnel.

“Where are we?” Elyria asked again, her breath misting in the air.

Cedric stood close to her, the furnace of power in his chest simmering, a layer of sunfyre settling over his skin. It wasn’t enough to light him up, to draw attention to them in the dark woods, just enough to provide some soft warmth—a brace against the wintry chill.

“We are in the Forest of Valandor,” said a familiar voice, which had shock rippling down the bond in both directions.

Cedric and Elyria spun in place. He blinked, his eyes still adjusting to the starlit night. But eventually they found the voice’s owner, standing in front of a frost-covered evergreen.

Elyria barked a laugh—sharp, borderline maniacal. “Stars a-fucking-bove. Of course it’s you. It’s always fucking *you*.”

Cedric blinked. “What are you doing here, Raefe?”

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THE FOREST OF VALANDOR

ELYRIA



"I CANNOT *HANDLE* ANY MORE OF THIS SHIT," ELYRIA SAID, HEAD TIPPING back, like maybe if she said it directly to the sky, the celestials might actually hear her and cut her a fucking break. Sid brushed against her hip, and her fingers reflexively dug into the not-quite-fur at the shadowcat's neck before she added, "Why the fuck are you here, Raefe?"

A sigh punctured the air, and Sephone slipped out from behind Raefe wearing an exasperated expression. "We came to help, obviously."

Elyria turned to look at Cedric with the hopes that whatever she found on his face would make her feel slightly less insane, but all it did was add to the ruckus in her mind.

Cedric's head whipped from side to side, looking at the surrounding trees, confusion pulsing down the bond. *"Impossible, impossible, impossible,"* he murmured. *"It's so far."*

Elyria didn't think he meant to send the words into her mind, but she heard them anyway. The realization of why Cedric was so confused came a half second later, replacing her frustration with incredulity. "Did you say *Valandor*?"

"I did," Raefe said, his tone wary, the words loaded.

"The Forest of Valandor is halfway up the Midlands. Hundreds of miles from Elderglade. How—"

"Such is the power of the Veil," murmured Elder Jung again as he shuffled past.

Sephone and Raefe both gave the elder a deferential nod. “There is a large tent in the middle that has been designated for the healers,” Sephone said. “Look for the orange flap.”

Elder Jung muttered a few low words of thanks, then turned and headed off into the woods. Elyria’s mouth gaped open when her eyes tracked past him, past the circle of surrounding trees, to the bustle of activity happening in the small clearing beyond.

Campfire smoke drifted up into the snow-covered canopy from between clusters of tents. Wide paths had already been trampled through the snow, crates stacked along the edges. Someone had even strung lantern lights between some of the trees.

This was not something that had been thrown together in the chaos of the last few hours. This was an entire campsite—prepared, preplanned.

“Jocelyn’s already in good hands, but we should get you all over there too and let the healers look you over,” said Sephone, snapping Elyria’s attention back.

“Someone had better explain what’s going on before I *lose my fucking mind*.”

Raefe held his hands up, palms out in supplication, as if to say, *I’m not touching that one.*

Sephone rolled her eyes, though her exasperation vanished as Kit stepped forward with her arms folded over her chest. “Hey there, Princess. We meet again.”

Kit rolled her mismatched eyes and jerked her head in Elyria’s direction. “You heard her. *Explain*. How are you here?”

Sephone shrugged. “We followed you.”

“Evidently. Why?”

“Master Tartanis did not trust you to uphold your end of the agreement.”

Kit scoffed. “Did your *master* forget that the only thing I promised him was that I’d pass along his message? Why would that need following up on? And not that it matters, but I most certainly did so. Ask Ellie.”

“She did,” Elyria agreed. “But she’s right, it doesn’t matter anyway. Because none of that explains how we are *here* right now, with an entire stars-damned campground ready and waiting for us. And in the Forest of fucking Valandor, no less?” Her voice cracked on the last few words, her shadows restless in her chest. Now that she was no longer within the

boundaries of Elderglade, they were loud again. They rolled around in the cavity within her chest—anxious, waiting.

Elyria's outburst finally seemed to stir Cedric from his dumbfounded reverie. "We were not traipsing through that passage for days. How did we cover so much ground?" he asked.

"Stars above, so many *questions*." Sephone folded her arms over her chest. "Can't you just enjoy the fact that you have our help at all?"

"No," Kit and Elyria and Cedric all replied—simultaneously and instantaneously.

"If I may," Shep interjected softly, and Elyria nearly jumped at the sound of his voice. Guilt prickled the back of her neck as she turned toward him—she'd forgotten he was even here. "I suggest we move this conversation inside." He swept an arm in the general direction of the camp, and Elyria's guilt intensified as she took in the way he shivered, rubbing at his arms. It was clear sylvans weren't built for the cold.

"Fine," she said, snagging Cedric's hand and pulling him through the snow. Sid plodded along at their side for a few paces. Then, it was as if the shadowcat suddenly realized where they were, like the safety of their surroundings had finally set in. Elderglade's protections were no longer dimming her power either, and evidently she just couldn't wait to hop back into the shadows. So that's exactly what she did, disappearing into the air with a final cursory glance at Elyria and a flick of her tail.

"Traitor," Elyria muttered in her mind, and Cedric released a low chuckle behind her. Just thinking about the conversation that was about to occur, the *explanations* she was sure to hear, was already wearing Elyria out. But she had Cedric's hand in hers, and her friends were here, and somehow, the peoples of Elderglade were safe.

It would have to do for now.

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35

THE RULES OF THE GAME

KIT



"YOU'RE TELLING ME YOU HAD SOME SECRET SYLVAN WAY TO FAST-TRAVEL throughout Arcanis all this time?" Elyria threw her hands in the air, pacing the perimeter of the tent for the fourth—or was it fifth?—time.

"Alas, it does not work like that," said Shep. "Manipulation of the Veil at this level is something only the most powerful among us can do. Creating this pathway required the magic of every elder in Elderglade and Verdentia combined."

"Still, the fact that this ability existed, that this *pathway* existed, that there were plans to escape already underway, and we knew nothing of them," Cedric said sullenly from where he sat, leaning against a stack of crates. "You let me prattle on needlessly about my fears, about needing patrols and guards for Elderglade, all the while reassuring me nothing was amiss." He loosed a breath, his eyebrows drawing together. "I feel quite misled, Shep, I won't lie."

The sylvan's face fell. "That was never my intention. And it was *not* needless, my lord. Were it not for the patrols, Kit and I would not have been where we were at the exact moment of the attack. It was because of you that we had the maximum warning, that we were able to start evacuating folks as quickly as we did."

The memory of those blood-magic ribbons wrapping around Shep and pulling him through the gate flashed across Kit's mind, and she shuddered. "Is this when you explain how you survived said attack?" she asked softly.

“I’d like to think we can take at least a little bit of credit for that, too,” Sephone interjected, and Elyria groaned.

“You would,” she muttered, still pacing.

“We can chalk it up to *very* good timing,” Shep said. “I was not actually aware of Master Tartanis’s involvement until Sephone and Raefe showed up and freed us from the cultists.”

“That easy, huh?”

Shep frowned. “Well, the enemy left us shackled out front. They’d already gone through the gate when these two appeared. And believe me, I would have followed, would have come to help, to fight. Only . . .”

“Only your dwarven friend had put up a lot of fight on his own before being captured,” said Raefe.

“And he paid for it too,” added Sephone. “He was in decidedly *not good* shape when we came across the two of them.”

“Convenient that you managed to escape relatively unscathed, then,” Elyria said to Shep, and when Kit met her emerald-green stare, she didn’t need a soul-bond or a mindwielder’s power to know they were both thinking the same thing. Shep wouldn’t be the first sylvan they discovered to have been secretly working with the enemy, after all.

Shep’s face fell. “Go on, then. Say it.”

Elyria arched a brow. “Say what?”

“You wonder if I’ve betrayed you somehow. If there’s something even more nefarious behind what happened tonight. I can’t even blame you—what happened with Zephyr during the Crucible would have made a skeptic of me, too.”

Damn, he was good.

“But I promise you,” he continued, “there’s no ulterior motive, no secret agenda here.”

“Other than the overall general secrecy of, well, all of this, you mean,” grumbled Cedric, gesturing vaguely to their surroundings.

Shep bit his lip. “Yes, other than that.”

“I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised. Elder Larkess had an entirely different identity—a different form entirely—that she kept hidden the whole time I knew her as Alouette. She was the one who kept my mother safe during Malakar’s first coup, wasn’t she? The one who spirited her away the night he killed my grandfather? Secret escape plans were clearly a specialty of hers.” The words were bitter as they fell from Cedric’s tongue,

but it wasn’t hard to hear the emotion behind them. He might have been frustrated—wounded, even—by the elder’s secrets, but her death was clearly taking its toll.

“But surely you can understand, then,” Shep said gently. “Her plans were always in service of the greater good. And she did not want to add to your already burdensome plate. Plus, these are . . .” He fiddled with the sleeve of his tunic. “Well, these are sylvan secrets. Ones kept close to the vest for eons. The council is loath to share them with just anyone.”

“Yes, but Ric and Ellie are hardly ‘just anyone,’ are they, Shep?” Kit said, tone curt. The limits of her own patience were certainly being tested tonight. “Your elders are perfectly happy to put the weight of saving all Arcanis on their shoulders but don’t want to let them in on their plans?”

“Noctis take me.” Cedric rubbed at his eyes, his head tipping back against the stack of crates with a gentle *thump.* “I’m just so fucking tired of secrets.”

Shep cleared his throat. “I’m not entirely sure why the cultists didn’t kill me or Thraigg outright at the onset of their attack. I think they may have intended to use us as leverage. Thraigg needed help, though, and by the time we’d been freed, the evacuation was well underway. We got Thraigg to the healers, but by the time I made it back for you all, the fighting was over.”

Silence fell over the tent, the weight of the losses sustained weighing heavy on them all. Elderglade was supposed to be a sanctuary. Tonight, it had been a battlefield. Lives and homes and all senses of safety had gone up in literal flames, and Kit suspected that if Sephone were to drop the sound barrier she’d erected around the tent, their ears would be filled with the sounds of grieving.

Elyria sighed. “Assuming we believe you, mainly because I’m simply too exhausted to consider any other option at present—fine. You didn’t purposely keep information about my father’s involvement from me. You were helping in other ways. I’m *slightly* less pissed off at you now.”

Shep huffed a sad laugh.

“But I’m still stuck on the fact that these magical sylvan pathways exist in the first place,” she continued. “While we’ve been spraining our wings flying across the continent, or plodding along on horseback like fools and—wait.” She stopped pacing mid-step. “Four hells. Horseback. The horses! Are Polonius and—”

“The horses are fine. They are here. We got them out too.”

“Fucking *when*?” Elyria exclaimed. “Evacuating the glade was one thing, but when could you possibly have coordinated everything here? To have supplies and tents and a whole stars-damned refugee camp ready and waiting and—”

“Time could not stop while you recovered, my lady. There was much to be done.” Shep toed the canvas floor of the tent with the tip of his sock-covered foot.

Elyria’s face fell, and Kit could almost see the self-flagellation occurring behind her sister’s eyes. She moved to go to her, but before she could even take a single step, Cedric was already there.

A silent conversation passed between him and Elyria, his arm going around her shoulder and pulling her against him. Kit’s heart warmed at the sight, though ice still crept through her veins over everything else that had been revealed tonight.

She realized belatedly that Shep was still talking. “. . . and we began making preparations for this sort of possibility soon after Cedric first raised his concerns about Elderglade’s failing protections. The offer of help from your father must have come around the same time, though you’d have to ask the elders for the specifics, since, as I said, I was not privy to those details.”

“I was, though,” said Sephone. “And he’s right. Your father sent messages to the council, asking if he could be of assistance with your recovery.”

“My father is hardly altruistic,” Elyria said with a scoff. “What did he ask for in return?”

Sephone and Raefe exchanged a look.

“What. Did. He. Ask. For?”

“Technically nothing,” Raefe said. “But . . . he’s here. And he would *really* like to see you.”

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STRANGE TIDINGS

TENNY



"AHH, THERE'S SOMETHING SO *FREEING* ABOUT BEING IN THE GREAT outdoors, isn't there? I fear I was beginning to get a bit *too* accustomed to palace living." Ollie patted his starkly flat stomach with a wink as he trotted ahead. He adjusted the hood of his cloak, tucking a few stray strands of turquoise behind his ear, then called over his shoulder, "Have I mentioned how glad I am that you finally got off your high horse about waiting to go?"

"So you've said," Tenny replied, pulling her own heavy woolen coat tighter around her shoulders. "Though I feel pressed to note that we are *literally* on horseback right now." She reached down to pat Fjaethe on the side of her muscled neck, and the horse nickered, breath misting the air.

"It's a turn of phrase." Ollie gestured to his dappled mare, slowing her back to a walk and falling into step beside Tenny. "Paisley and Fjaethe get it, don't you, girls?"

"You don't think Elyria will mind me having borrowed her horse, do you?"

"For the four thousandth time, no. If anything, she'll probably be glad to know the poor creature's finally getting some attention."

"Yes, well, something told me that Miss Elizabeth wouldn't have fared quite so well on the journey. She hasn't taken more than a quick jaunt around the castle grounds in quite some time."

"Speaking of the castle . . . What was King Callum's final word in response to the petition?"

“Thankfully, His Majesty agrees that ferreting out cultist activity is indeed a priority. He has issued orders for a contingent of soldiers to head to Luminaria. They should be on the road soon, if they aren’t already.”

Ollie’s brow creased. “Why don’t you sound happy about that?”

“Oh, I am, believe me. I just feel a bit bad. The latest letter I received from Kit indicated that her efforts in Aerithia to gain aid were . . . less successful.”

“Unfortunately, that doesn’t surprise me. King Lachlandris does not have a reputation for being particularly flexible.”

“Is that an Arcanian trait as a whole?” Tenny asked, grinning.

The crease in Ollie’s brow deepened. “What makes you say that?”

“Relax. I’m only teasing. Although . . .” She tilted her head. “I mean, it would make sense, wouldn’t it? For you all to be far more set in your ways? I think I would be too, if I lived as long as you all did. Already, at the grand old age of twenty-seven, I find myself more and more resistant to change.”

“Well, understandably so. You *are* basically one foot in the grave already.”

Tenny’s tongue darted out of her mouth, and Ollie laughed. “In all seriousness, though, my heart goes out to Kit. She sounded so defeated by her uncle’s failure to act. And her mother seems to have chosen the path of least resistance, which has to be disappointing.”

“You seem to care very deeply about the Ravenswing family tree,” Ollie said, his mouth pulling knowingly to one side.

“No, I just care about . . .” Tenny cleared her throat. “How much farther until Kinsgaith, would you say? Traipsing along so close to the Chasm makes me nervous.”

“Didn’t you grow up right next to the Chasm?”

“Precisely.”

Ollie shook his head. “You and Cedric and your fear of heights. Is that a human trait as a whole?”

Tenny bit her tongue to keep herself from sticking it out at him again. “You’ve got a quick wit, Oleander. I understand why Elle is so fond of you.”

“Aww, Ten. Is that your way of telling me you’re fond of me too?”

Tenny faced forward again, smiling to herself. How her people had gone centuries hating the fae, being fearful of Arcanians, she would never understand. Or, rather, she *could* understand it but only because she knew

they had to have gone generations without ever having met one. If they had . . .

Her smile faltered when she remembered that her own father had been the one responsible for continuing to foster so much of that hate.

Ollie must have sensed the change in her disposition, because his voice was free of teasing when he said, “To answer your question, we should be there soon. I can see the river up ahead, and the village lies just beyond that.”

Tenny gave the fae a grateful nod, and the two of them trotted along in amiable silence. Ollie was certainly right about one thing. Well, he was irritatingly right about many things, actually, another symptom of being as long-lived as he was, she suspected. But she wasn’t about to tell him that.

However, the freedom he mentioned in being out here . . . now, *that* she could agree with. Aside from traveling between Seastone and Kingshelm, Tenny had seen shockingly little of the realm she called home. Even in winter, there was so much beauty, so much *majesty* to be seen here—fields of cheerful pansies pushing through the snow, screeching eagles flying overhead, dense evergreen forests, a telebear cub trying to dig through the surface of a frozen pond.

She was halfway through mentally cataloging all the things she’d need to jot down in her travel journal when the sparrow found her.

It landed on Fjaethe’s saddle horn, black feet perched upon the leather, dark, feathery shadows misting off its tiny body.

The sight of it made Tenny want to cry. Elyria really was all right. She was well enough to send one of her shadowy messengers—the same kind they had used to communicate across distance before she was taken.

“Look, Ollie,” she whispered, slowing the horse to a stop.

Ollie’s mouth dropped open. “Is that—”

She nodded. The sparrow opened its mouth. Elyria’s melodic voice came out.

And then Tenny wanted to cry for an entirely different reason.

“The cult came. Elderglade has fallen. We are safe and have both halves. More soon. Be well.” Then the sparrow chirped off a set of mana stone coordinates and fell silent.

“The sanctuary has . . . fallen?” Ollie’s voice was uncharacteristically even. “What does that mean?”

Tenny bit her lip. “I know as much as you do. She says they are safe, at least.”

“Yes, but who is ‘we’?”

Tenny could only shake her head. “Where do you think they are now?”

“I couldn’t tell you. Sounds like it’s somewhere with a mana stone, thank the stars. So at least we’ll be able to send future missives of our own to them.”

“The message was so clear, despite us having traveled this far north. Do you remember what it was like before?” She recalled the sparrow messengers she’d received when Elyria, Cedric, and their party were on the road to Dawnspire—how each one arrived more broken, the message less clear, the farther the party had ventured from Kingshelm. Eventually, Tenny, Nox, and Kit hadn’t even been able to send anything back.

“Maybe she’s just stronger now,” Ollie said, beaming with obvious pride. The relief the fae must have felt in hearing his friend’s voice after so long, to know she was *safe* . . .

For now, at least.

“I suppose these are all things we can ask?” She pointed down at the sparrow, still sitting on her saddle horn, waiting expectantly. “It’s waiting for us to send something back. What should we say?”

He bit his lip, then huffed a breathy laugh. “Why do I feel pressure now to make sure we say the right thing?”

Tenny chuckled with him. “What was that other bit she mentioned—something about both halves? Do you think that means—”

Ollie’s brows show up his forehead. “The crown?”

“Stars above, I think you’re right,” Tenny murmured. She crouched in her saddle, bending down to speak directly to the sparrow, still patiently waiting to carry a message back to its creator. “Ollie and I make for Kinsgaith, to join Tristan and Zephyr. King Callum’s soldiers move to help search for Malakar and his cultists. If there is anything we can do to help, just say the word. Stay safe; stay well.”

“Well said.” Ollie gave Tenny a gentle smile as the sparrow took flight, lifting into the air on its shadowy wings, then disappearing into the ether with a *poof*.

Then the reality of what she’d just heard crashed down on her shoulders at once, and if she hadn’t already been seated on Fjaethe’s back, Tenny thought her knees might have buckled.

Elderglade had fallen. The sanctuary that the sylvan people had long protected, the one place of safety for mixedborn children, had been eliminated.

“The Sanctus Salutum,” Tenny said, voice hushed.

“I know,” replied Ollie.

“He must be stopped. If they have the crown, do you think they can do it?”

Ollie’s throat bobbed. “I hope so. Elle told me after the Crucible that her plan had been to use it to seal the Chasms. And based on what Kit informed us about Malakar’s suspected master plan, I expect that is still the case. As long as they can prevent him from accessing the Line, it is only a matter of time, right? Until we find him. Until we can stop him for good.”

They sat in silence for a few moments after that, the road stretching on ahead of them, wholly unchanged by this news. Eventually, with the prod of a boot, Tenny urged Fjaethe forward again.

“We still haven’t heard from Tristan,” Ollie said after a few minutes.

Tenny gave a grim nod. She’d been trying not to think about that. “No word from him or Zephyr since right before they reached the village. Since before we left.”

“It’s not like them.”

“No,” she agreed. “It isn’t.”

That had been what decided it, after all. Had been the final factor cementing Tenny’s choice to finally leave. Even though King Callum hadn’t quite fully returned to his former self, even though there was still work to do in Kingshelm, even though Tenny didn’t trust Tobin Barcroff as far as she could throw him to actually get things done, she simply couldn’t stand sitting around and waiting any longer.

And so, she did not.



THEY REACHED the village before dusk.

From a distance, everything looked fine. Perfectly normal. A few rows of modest-looking houses. A small chapel sitting at the top of the sloped main road. Some well-kept flowerbeds, filled with early snowdrop blooms.

A grain field penned off with a crooked wooden fence, separating it from the Chasm beyond.

But it was . . . quiet.

Too quiet.

There were no barking dogs, no children's squeals, no hums of conversation coming through the open windows as Tenny and Ollie walked through the village. Tenny glanced back to the top of the main road, where they'd left Fjaethe and Paisley hitched to a low post.

"Is this strange?" Tenny asked quietly. "I haven't visited many villages, so I'm hardly an expert, but this *seems* odd. The sun's still out. It isn't a mealtime. Where is everybody?"

"It's strange," confirmed Ollie, his eyes darting to and from the houses lining either side of the street. Some of the doors were slightly ajar, like its residents had left in a hurry.

Tenny swallowed hard as she and Ollie made for the chapel at the top of the street. At least there seemed to be some movement happening there—smoke curling lazily from the chimney, flashes of light beyond the frosted windows.

"Careful, Ten," said Ollie. "Don't forget that this place has ties to the Cult."

"Does it feel the same as Dawnspire?"

He shook his head, taking the steps up to the chapel doors two at a time. "No, not exactly. That had been an entirely different type of strange. This doesn't feel *quite* like the same sort of trap, at least."

"How reassuring," Tenny replied, breathing quickly as she aimed to catch up with the fae, then hurrying ahead of him when he stopped to take another look at the village. "There are definitely people inside. Perhaps they've gathered for pre-evening prayers?" She reached for the handle of one of the large wooden doors. "And maybe someone inside can tell us if they've seen Tristan and Zephyr come through, at least?"

Ollie didn't answer.

She turned her head, looking for confirmation, and found the space he had *just* been occupying entirely empty. There was no time to panic about where he had gone, though. No, all of Portentia Church's panic had been instantaneously allocated to herself and the hand that was currently clamped over her mouth.

Another hand gripped her upper arm, and suddenly she was being yanked backward. Vaguely, she registered the scratch of a beard against her temple, thick forearms covered with dark hair. All of it unfamiliar, all of it terrifying. But Tenny was so shocked, she didn't even fight against her kidnapper. She simply went sort of limp, her boots dragging against the frost-covered ground until the man threw her over his shoulder. He hauled her along the side of the chapel, then down the low-sloping hill at its rear—directly toward the gaping Chasm.

A stacked stone wall ran perpendicular to the abyss, a few feet back from the edge. It was leaning, the pattern of the stones uneven, as though the entire thing was slowly being pulled toward the great abyss. Perhaps it would eventually be pulled right in. And as the broad, burly man carted her through a small gap in the wall, alarm speared through Tenny at the thought that she was about to meet the same fate. The hill and chapel—the entire village of Kinsgaith, really—disappeared from view, and she threw a quiet prayer up to the Five that Ollie had somehow escaped.

But evidently the Chasm was not how Tenny was to meet her untimely demise. Without warning, the man changed directions and began jogging along the wall. Tenny swung her head to find they were approaching a run-down shack that sat no more than ten feet from the edge of the world. She yelped as she was placed back on her feet, then ushered inside. Her boot caught on a broken floorboard, causing her to stumble directly into—and somewhat on top of—someone new who was waiting inside.

Or rather, someone decidedly *not* new, as it turned out.

"Quartered hell, Ten, that's my foot!"

Relief and bewilderment speared through Tenny at the sound of the all-too-familiar voice. Her eyes adjusted to the low lantern light inside the shed, and Tristan's face materialized in front of her.

"Quartered hell me? Quartered hell *you*, Tristan Hale! What in Aurelia's name are you doing? Who was—what was—" Whipping her head between Tristan and the large bearded man now standing in the doorway, she forced herself to take a deep breath. "What is going on?"

The man closed the door behind him, and his shoulders immediately dropped. There was something melancholic about his expression as he turned to face Tenny and Tristan. "My deepest apologies, my lady," came a voice that was *vehemently* mismatched with the person standing before her. It was soft and feminine, with a distinct accent and—

“Stars above,” Tenny whispered. Green light burst from the man’s burly form, his silhouette shimmered, and a half second later, Tenny found herself staring not at her bearded assailant but at a slight sylvan woman with short, forest-green hair and wide, apologetic eyes.

“I’m so sorry for alarming you,” said Zephyr, her eyes downcast. “The villagers here don’t, ah . . . They don’t take too kindly to strangers, we’ve found. Had to be a little obvious about where it looked like I was taking you. Unlike Ollie, you’d already been spotted by some of the folks in the chapel, and I couldn’t—”

Tenny threw her hands in the air. “What in all four hells are you talking about? Where *is* Ollie?”

“I’m right here, Ten.” Ollie emerged from a shadowy corner of the room with a wry grin on his face. He exchanged a look with Tristan, and his grin broadened.

Tenny narrowed her eyes at him. “Enjoying yourself, are you?”

“Is life even worth living if you can’t find the sight of your friend being manhandled by a shapeshifted sylvan entertaining?”

She rolled her eyes, then turned back to Tristan. “The time for speaking is now, *Sir Hale*,” she hissed through clenched teeth.

“Whew, where to even begin?” The knight raked his fingers through the mop of dirty-blond hair atop his head. Dirtier than usual, Tenny realized. As were the clothes he was wearing. She cast a quick look around the shack, which appeared to have been long abandoned, and saw a large bundle of blankets shoved in one corner and what appeared to be a pile of Tristan’s travel armor hastily piled in another.

“You’ve been living here?” Tenny asked, incredulous.

“I’ve been *staying* here the past few nights, yes,” Tristan replied defensively. “As Zephyr said, this place is . . . By the Five, I truly don’t even know where to start.”

Zephyr stepped forward, looking even smaller than normal in the oversized shirt and overcoat that she had donned as part of her disguise. “We came here because this is where those cultists we . . . er . . . ran into outside of Daeglen were from. They’d made it sound like their entire village had been coerced into joining the Cult of Malakar, and Cedric thought if we could find any members willing to defect, they might help us locate Elyria.”

“But Elle is already safe, as you know,” Tenny said, “so why would—”

“And thank the stars for it,” said Tristan. “But we were already nearly here by the time we learned of this, and I knew Sir Bleeding Heart would still want us to see if we could help free any of these people from the oaths they’d sworn to the blood king. And he’d made a promise of his own to Ignatius before he, uh, passed.”

Zephyr nodded sadly. “Mira.”

“Yes, Mira, his daughter. So, we came, and we asked a few careful questions. There was no Mira to be found here, but some of the other villagers seemed interested in learning more about what we came to say. One of them put us up for the evening, said we’d get to chat more in the morning.” His throat bobbed.

“And?” urged Tenny. “What happened then?”

Zephyr averted her eyes.

“And then, in the middle of the stars-forsaken night, we were ripped from our beds and tossed right into the bloody fucking Chasm.”

Tenny and Ollie gasped in synchrony.

“Yep. No warning.” Tristan sighed. “Maybe this place was different back before Ignatius and Tyrren left on their mission to Nyrundelle. Maybe it was better then. But it’s starkly clear that the entire fucking village is suckling from Malakar’s teat now. We didn’t even get a chance to plead our case.”

“Motherfuckers,” Ollie muttered.

“How did you survive?” Tenny asked, her voice barely more than a whisper.

Tristan jutted his thumb at Zephyr. “Only because of this one. She shifted mid-fall. Caught me. We hid on a ledge partway down the Chasm until we were sure they’d all left, then made our way back up. After that, we found this place, and you can work out the rest.”

“Why did you stay?” Ollie said gently, tucking a lock of Tristan’s hair behind his ear. “Why didn’t you just come home?”

Tristan’s answering smile was sad. “Would you have been able to leave, knowing what was surely happening here? We needed some kind of answer before we could head back to Ric with our tail between our legs.”

“And did you? Find answers?”

Tristan and Zephyr exchanged another look.

Ollie frowned. “I take that as a yes. Tell us.”

Tristan opened his mouth, but the next sound Tenny heard wasn't an explanation. It was a low, pained groan coming from the corner of the shack. She followed the noise, inhaling sharply as she realized that hadn't been a bundle of blankets she'd seen before. A figure stirred against the floor, and Tenny's eyes widened as she took in the full brown beard, then the familiar facial features.

The exact same ones she had just seen worn by another.

"Shit, he's awake," Tristan muttered.

"I've got it," replied Zephyr, darting over to her disguise-doppelgänger, who writhed groggily against his restraints as he lay gagged and bound on the ground. There was the sound of tinkling glass as she searched through a small collection of vials and bottles sitting on top of a nearby crate, then proceeded to pour the contents of one into a goblet.

Tristan, meanwhile, sauntered over to the man and grabbed him under the armpits, hauling him upright into a seated position before pulling at the piece of fabric that was currently tied around his mouth.

"Motherfucking greenie! Arcanian scum!" the man rasped the instant his gag was removed, but with his hands and feet still bound and consciousness clearly having only *just* returned to him, that seemed to be the extent of what he could do. Which was why it didn't seem like it took much effort for Tristan to hold his mouth open and Zephyr to pour her concoction into it, then brush her small hand over his throat until he swallowed.

"Oh, hush," said Zephyr. "Back to bed with you now."

The man could only give a few more grunts of protest before his eyes drifted shut again, and with a *whump* that sent a cloud of dust scattering into the air, he fell back on his side, fast asleep.

"Don't worry, Ten," said Tristan, and Tenny quickly schooled what must have been a horrified expression off her face. "Just a bit of somnium seed."

Ollie arched a brow. "A bit?"

"Fine, a lot. But we can't have the man blowing our cover. Not when Zephyr's finally gotten access to some information that might actually help here. Your arrival truly couldn't have been more perfectly timed, really."

"Or depending on how you look at it, you might say the timing couldn't have been worse," Zephyr said quietly.

Tristan shrugged, then gave Tenny a pensive look. "I can't say I'm thrilled you're wrapped in this now, Ten. I don't think Ric will be either."

Tenny scoffed. “I’ve been wrapped up in this since the day I was born, evidently. My father was the architect of this mess. It’s only right I get to contribute to cleaning it up in some way or another.”

“Fair enough, then.” The knight rolled their unconscious prisoner back into the corner. “But when the real mess begins, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Tenny’s brow furrowed. “Is he . . . ? What are you going to do with him?”

“Tip him over the Chasm, same as he did to us?”

“Tristan.”

“Ugh, fine. You know I would never.” A beat, then under his breath, he added, “Because Zephyr wouldn’t let me.”

The sylvan loosed a derisive laugh, the sound at odds with the gentle demeanor Tenny had begun to associate her with. Then again, she was the one who had betrayed them all in the Crucible, so it was quite clear that Tenny didn’t actually know a thing about her.

“I believe what I actually said was that we should wait,” Zephyr insisted, “because I needed to study him in order to match his appearance. You’re the one who has been insistent on keeping him drugged instead of cutting our losses.”

Tristan huffed, raising both his hands, palms facing the ceiling, and moving them up and down as though he was weighing something. “A little somnium seed versus defenseless murder. Tough choice, it’s true.”

“Enough, you two,” Ollie interjected. “You’ve spent entirely too much time together on the road, I see.”

“Please, Tris,” said Tenny, eager to route the conversation back to the matter at hand. “Tell us what you found.”

“It would perhaps be easier to show you.” Tristan cleared off a large crate in the middle of the shack. “Go ahead, Zeph.”

The sylvan spread a few sheets of parchment out on the makeshift table.

“Maps?” Ollie asked.

“Of a sort,” Zephyr replied.

Tenny looked down, squinting in the limited light. Tristan fetched one of the lanterns and brought it closer, and Tenny couldn’t stop the soft whimper from escaping her tongue as the images before her became clear.

One of the sheets contained a detailed anatomical drawing of a human body, the figure’s arms and legs spread wide. Body parts were labeled with

crudely written symbols, messily marked as though they had been written in—

"Is that blood?" Tenny asked.

"Yes," replied Zephyr. "It's on this one too." She placed another piece of parchment on top of the sheets, unfolding it to reveal a map of Arcanis. "Look at what they've marked here."

Tenny raked her eyes over the map to see similar symbols strewn across it. But they didn't seem to be denoting cities or villages or roads. They were concentrated on where there were—

"Mana springs," said Ollie.

"The veins of the world," Zephyr said.

"What do the markings mean?" asked Tenny, her voice quiet, like she was afraid that speaking too loud might awaken the dark magic clearly at play here.

"I thought you knew how to read the Old Language," Ollie said, bumping her shoulder playfully.

"I learned how to read a book of fairy tales, and just passably." She rolled her eyes at the fae, though she was grateful for the moment of levity, however fleeting. "Very different from . . . whatever this is."

"Good thing we've someone who has been around long enough to be something of an expert, then," Tristan said, gesturing for Zephyr to proceed.

The sylvan pulled the first sheet from beneath the map, then pointed her slender green finger at a mark placed next to the figure's right wrist. "Power," she said solemnly, then pointed to the other wrist. "Spirit." She pointed to a symbol above the figure's head. "Mind."

"And that one?" Tenny tapped on the page next to a symbol that looked like two interlocking circles with a line piercing through them at an angle. It was placed directly on top of where the figure's heart would be.

"Life."

Tenny pushed the page aside, scanning the map once more. Each mana spring was labeled with a symbol—sometimes more than one. "Power" and "mind" were the most common, with the easternmost springs, most notably the one that sat under Nyrundelle's Sacred Mountain, also garnering a mark for "spirit."

But there was only one spring marked with the symbol for "life," and it sat directly across the Chasm from Kinsgaith.

Tenny looked up, as though she might be able to see through the shack's wooden walls to the mana spring far on the other side of the Chasm.

"You already understand, don't you?" Zephyr asked.

"This is where he intends to pierce the Line," Tenny whispered into the air. She glanced down at the map again, seeing now that the stretch of the Chasm that lay between Kinsgaith and the mana spring had been filled in with blood. "Malakar will venture into the Chasm and attempt to commandeer Arcanis's very lifeblood."

"We think so," Tristan said, all signs of his typical humor erased from his face. "And from the things Zephyr has overheard in the village, we believe he is on his way here now."

"We have to tell the others," Ollie said quickly.

"But how? Elyria sent a sparrow, but the damned thing disappeared on me before it had even finished its message."

Tenny glanced at Zephyr, whose face had fallen. "You heard what happened though. To Elderglade."

"Yes," she said, voice strangled.

"I am so sorry."

"If my people are safe, that is all that matters. We must endeavor to ensure it stays that way."

Tristan cleared his throat. "Right. Which means getting Ric, Elle, and the others up here as soon as possible to stop these rat bastards."

"We would have sent something to them already, but you two are the only ones we'd been communicating with," said Zephyr. "Last we'd heard, you were coming here and—"

"And it's not like we could trust *Barcroff* with this sort of thing, now, could we?" Tristan said icily, before releasing a long exhale. "Of course, that's still a problem for us to solve, isn't it? Because now that you're here with us, and with everyone else Noctis knows where, how the fuck are we supposed to get a message to them? Are we shit out of luck until Elle decides to send another sparrow? Do we just have to hope we can actually send something back next time?"

Tenny met Ollie's gaze, and the two of them exchanged a smile.

"What? What does that mean? What are those faces for?"

Ollie turned to Zephyr. "You have access to the village's missive station, yes? The mana stone here?"

There was another flash of green light, and Zephyr was expanding once more—growing, filling out, until she had once again taken the form of their burly prisoner. “Indeed, I do.”

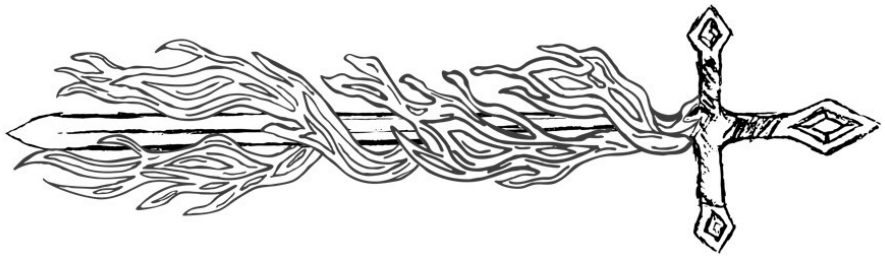
Tenny blinked through the discomfort of hearing the sylvan’s lilting voice coming from the massive man’s form once again. She rolled her shoulders back and lifted her chin. “All right, then. We’re going to need to write two letters.”

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37

LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON

CEDRIC



ELYRIA WOULD NOT STOP WRINGING HER HANDS. SHE HAD TO HAVE CHAFED them into oblivion by now, especially given the dry winter air and her penchant for scooping up snow in order to lob snowballs at Cedric at every ostensible opportunity. But she did not seem to care. She just kept wringing and wringing, until the moment they got to the flap of the tent that Sephone had instructed them to go to, and all signs of nervousness seemed to evaporate from her at once.

Her spine was straight, her chin lifted, her expression carefully neutral. She had her mask on, and if not for the tightness of her jaw or the unease vibrating along their bond, Cedric might have actually thought her calm, collected.

She was decidedly *not*.

"Oi! There they are!" Thraigg's jovial voice immediately pulled at Cedric's heartstrings, his lips tilting into a smile despite his own guardedness. It fell as he took in the sight of the man sitting at the dwarf's bedside.

Cedric knew it was Tartanis on sight. Elyria resembled him in several obvious ways, the starkest of which being the eyes that were *her* exact shade of emerald green taking stock of Cedric from another face.

"Gaia's smothering tits, am I glad to see ye," Thraigg chirped. He was sitting up, leaning against a tall stack of crates that had been piled high behind his cot. The upper part of his chest and right shoulder were wrapped

in a thick bandage, and there was some kind of paste applied to what looked like a deep cut bisecting his left brow, but the dwarf was clearly in *excellent* spirits. “I had no doubt ye’d make quick work of those cultist bastards, but it’s still good to see it confirmed with my own eyes.”

Tartanis stood, shuffling a deck of playing cards from hand to hand. He was nearly as tall as Cedric, his hair darker than he’d imagined it from Elyria’s description of him. Those green eyes softened when they landed on her.

“Daughter,” he said warmly, his lips curving into a one-sided smile that was so familiar, Cedric had to actively avert his gaze.

“Father,” Elyria replied icily.

Thraigg’s brow furrowed as his gaze flicked between the two of them in rapid succession. “Er, everything all right there, Rev? Ric?”

“Just fine, Thraigg,” Elyria said. Then, after a moment, she added, “Are you? I’m sorry about Larkess. I know she was your friend.”

Thraigg’s cheeks puffed as the dwarf blew out a long breath. “Aye. Much appreciated, lass. Can’t say I won’t miss the old bird. Some people are just good people, ye know?”

Elyria glanced up at Cedric, and something twisted in his chest at her expression when their eyes met. “I know.” She cleared her throat before returning her gaze to her father, and Cedric didn’t need to hear her thoughts to know what she was thinking.

Some people aren’t such good people, too.

She looked pointedly at the cards in Tartanis’s hands. “Don’t let us interrupt you. It’s clear you’re doing very important work here.”

“Nonsense. We just finished. You have perfect timing.” Tartanis’s voice was low and smooth, his tone pleasant. One might even call it charming. Cedric supposed one would have to be as much, given his particular line of work.

“Ye never told me yer father’s such a shark at cards, Rev. He’s nearly bled me dry.”

“Apt choice of words,” she muttered, and the look of confusion on Thraigg’s face deepened.

Tartanis turned his attention to Cedric, his green-eyed gaze quickly roaming over him before he fixed a smile back on his face. “Lord Victor,” he said with a nod. “It is *so* good to finally meet you. I’ve heard many wonderful things.”

Cedric blinked. Opened his mouth. Closed it again. All that time he'd spent ruminating on what it would be like to meet Elyria's father, to face the man who had caused her so much hurt, all that effort put into thinking about how she was feeling, how she would react, how she would fare . . . and Cedric hadn't once considered what he himself might say to the man.

"Err, hello, Mr., uh, Lightbreaker . . . sir." *Noctis take me*.

Elyria's laughter rang in Cedric's head before he heard it aloud.

"Tartanis is fine, Sir Manners. It's his surname," she told him with a snort. "Lightbreaker belonged to my mother."

Tartanis dipped his chin, then bent at the waist in the slightest of bows. "Aster Tartanis, at your service."

"Oh, I bet you are," Elyria said, though her sarcastic remark barely registered.

"I'm sorry, did you say, 'Aster'? But, your, uh . . ." *Don't say "minions." Don't say "minions."* "Your employees, they call you . . . I've only ever heard you referred to as . . ."

"*Master* Tartanis. Yes, I know. It was a joke of sorts, at first. Then it sort of . . . stuck."

"I see." Stars above, this was not in any way what Cedric had expected.

"You were expecting something else?" Tartanis asked with an unbothered smile, setting down the deck of cards.

Cedric balked. Had he said that out loud? He hesitated, honesty warring briefly with self-preservation. He really wasn't sure what kind of impression he was supposed to be making on the man, or if he was supposed to care if he made any impression at all. "I suppose I was? I don't know, sir," he said lamely.

"From my name or from me? What would have been more fitting, do you think? A dark cloak? A hood? A booming voice echoing from the shadows?" Tartanis's lips twitched. "Alas, I'm afraid I left the theatrics behind quite some time ago."

"You could've fooled me," Elyria said flatly.

"Yes, well, you'd know something about leaving things behind, wouldn't you, my *stellanoctus*?"

The word bounced down the bond like a stone dropped into still water. Cedric felt the ripples of Elyria's hurt surge down it, sharp enough that he instinctively shifted closer to her. She didn't look at him. Didn't look at her father either. Her gaze remained fixed on some point just past Tartanis's

shoulder, as though she couldn't stand the thought of meeting his emerald stare with her own.

"Don't call me that," she said.

Cedric was about to ask her what it meant when a memory stirred from the back of his mind.

"He used to call me his dark star. Isn't that poetic? I hated it then. Hate it now."

His jaw tensed.

Tartanis raised his hands in supplication. "My apologies, Elyria. Back to the matter at hand, then. You thought 'master' was a different kind of moniker, did you, Sir Thorne? A reference to being a slavedriver, as it were, perhaps? Or simply how I work my . . . what was it you said . . . *minions* to the bone?"

Cedric stumbled back a step. He most definitely had not said *that* aloud.

Fuck it all, Tartanis was a stars-damned mindwielder.

He smiled that half-tipped smile.

"That's enough, Father. Stop playing with him," Elyria said curtly. Then, down the bond, she added, *"Welcome to my own personal quarter of hell."*

"How do I keep him from reading my thoughts?" Cedric sent back, praying that the things said between the two of them could at least stay private.

"Same way we practiced keeping them from each other. Close the door. Close them all*."*

Cedric swallowed but did as she suggested. He shut every one of his mental doors, locking them up tight, trying not to physically shudder as he shut out Elyria and felt their bond go mute.

"You're a quick study," Tartanis said after a moment. "I am impressed."

"That makes one of us," Cedric replied, doing his best to keep his hands from curling into fists. "Is this all a game to you? You are the one who summoned us here. Did you only do so because you wanted to, what, toy with us? Rub your influence in your daughter's face, stare down her—"

"Her what?" Tartanis said sharply. "What are you exactly, Sir Cedric Thorne? *Who* are you to think you can lay claim to my daughter? My request was to speak with her, not with you. It would be best if you took your leave."

Elyria stepped forward, and Cedric didn't need the bond to feel the anger pulsing off her. "Who are *you* to speak to him that way? I am more his than I have *ever* been yours, and *we* are only here as a courtesy. For whatever reason, you helped the people of Elderglade escape Malakar's attack tonight, and for that I *will* begrudgingly admit my thanks. But whatever this"—she gestured rapidly between herself, Tartanis, and Cedric—"is, it needs to come to a very rapid end before either of us says or does something we will never be able to take back."

Silence pressed in around them, thick as packed snow. It only broke when Thraigg, still staring at the trio with wide, bewildered eyes from his cot, cleared his throat. "I *very much* feel like I shouldn't be here right now," he said after a moment. "But ye're the ones crowdin' my bedside at the moment, and I'm on strict orders not to go anywhere. So if ye won't relocate, could ye at least clue me in?"

Tartanis sucked in a slow breath, looking from Thraigg to Elyria to Cedric and back again. "My new dwarven friend is right. And I did not come here to reopen old wounds. It is simply difficult to pretend they don't exist."

"But you've always been so good at pretending," Elyria spat back. "Pretending nothing's wrong, pretending like you're a good father, pretending like you weren't using your child for—"

"Elle," Cedric said softly, and she rolled her eyes but did not continue.

To his credit, Tartanis did look . . . sad. "Forgive an old man," he said after a moment. "There are many things I would've done differently, were I given the chance to redo them."

She shrugged. "You'll never earn my forgiveness, so there's little point in asking for it. You might still gain his though." She tilted her head at Cedric. "He's a far better person than me."

Some flash of emotion flickered across Tartanis's face, but it was gone too quickly for Cedric to discern exactly what it was.

"I apologize for my earlier behavior, Sir Thorne," Tartanis said, and Cedric's eyebrows shot up his forehead. "Even with my daughter and I being estranged for many years, you might understand a father's . . . protectiveness . . . when it comes to his children's paramours. Especially one with such a storied legacy."

Elyria barked a laugh. "For fuck's sake, just come out and say it. You're judging him because he's part human."

“He’s *mostly* human. And of course I’m judging it—though I don’t judge *him* for it. I am not so high and mighty that I can’t recognize when a thing is or isn’t someone’s fault.”

Elyria only glared at her father.

He sighed. “But you don’t know the heartache you’re in for, my girl.”

“And *you* don’t know a real thing about him. About either of us.”

“I know enough. And human or fae, that isn’t even the real crux of the issue. His grandmother was the very one who sundered the realm. He will have enemies of all kinds at his back when he takes the throne.”

“I don’t want to take the—” Cedric tried to protest, but it appeared that getting a word in edgewise, even when he was the very topic of conversation, was an impossible feat.

“What do you think Lachlandris will do when he learns who he is?” Tartanis continued, talking over Cedric. “I’ve kept it from him for now, but we won’t be able to hide it forever. Especially not after what I suspect you are planning to do next. Already, the king has been so embittered by Dentarius’s death, it’s a wonder he hasn’t declared war outright on Havensreach.”

“Is that true?” Thraigg interjected, mouth gaping. “That’s why ye wanted to know about—”

“Yes,” Tartanis replied tightly. “The king’s resistance is greater than I could have anticipated. He refuses to allocate resources to hunting Malakar. Refuses to send Arcanian troops beyond Nyrundelle’s border, in fact.”

“Kit said you told her you had influence,” Elyria said. “That you would get the king to see reason. We need Aerithia’s aid more than ever now.”

Tartanis’s mouth thinned. “I tried. Grief is a powerful anchor. It can drown even the most reasonable man.”

Elyria looked at Cedric. “We are alone, then.”

“No, you are not,” said Tartanis. “*That* is why I am here.”

A beat of heavy silence passed through the tent. Then another.

Tartanis sighed. “I came because the threat Malakar poses to all of Arcanis is greater than any of us. I came because whatever may have happened in our past, I know you are the key to protecting the future.”

“And what better way to secure your own future than to ensure you’ve attached yourself to the winning side, right?”

“Rev, don’t you think yer being—” Thraigg cut himself off at the look Elyria shot him. “Right. I’ll . . . just be over here. Breathing.”

“Elyria,” Tartanis said, all pretense of charm and warmth gone. There was only cold resolve as he took a few steps closer, and Cedric found it . . . refreshing. “I am here to help in every capacity I possess. I thought that much was made clear by the very existence of this place. I have bankrolled these supplies, secured passage for these people, out of my own pocket. For the good of Arcanis. For *you*.”

He was close enough now to put his hand on Elyria’s shoulder, and to Cedric’s great surprise, she let him.

“I’m not a naive little girl anymore, Father. There’s something you’re hoping to get out of this. You never pull strings without some benefit for yourself.”

“What use is there pulling strings from the shadows if there is no longer a world worth living in the light for? For all my shortcomings, I think you know I am a man of my word. So believe me when I tell you, I am *trying* to do right here.” He gave her a sad smile before dropping his hand. “To do right by you.”

Before Elyria could respond, the tent flap rustled, and a slight sylvan man appeared, breath fogging in the cold. “A message for you, my lady,” he said, thrusting a folded scrap of parchment into Elyria’s hand. “An urgent one.”

Cedric watched the color all but drain from Elyria’s face as she read the letter, then handed it to him. He immediately recognized Tenny’s neat penmanship, and something settled in his chest at the sight . . . though it became rapidly *un*settled as he digested the words she had written.

“Kinsgaith? That same tiny village Tristan and Zephyr were headed to, on some off-the-wall search for the daughter of the man I killed? *That’s* to be the site of Malakar’s grand stand?”

“So it would appear,” Elyria said tightly. “According to Tenny, Tristan, Ollie, and Zephyr, he’s en route as we speak.”

“The Line,” Tartanis murmured. “So that is where he intends to break it.”

“And where we must stop him. Will King Lachlandris truly not send aid now?”

“I will try again. Perhaps another plea from his niece, in combination with my promise to . . .” Tartanis pursed his lips. “I must make haste. There is much to attend to.”

Elyria nodded, and it seemed as though something had shifted between the two of them in recognition of this shared goal. “We can’t wait for him. We have to fill the Chasm, keep Malakar from accessing the Line.”

Cedric didn’t hesitate. “Then we seal our life-bond tonight, that we might heal the crown.”

Thraigg let out a low whistle. “Hell of a thing to do in a borrowed tent.” He glanced at Elyria. “I thought yer people made a whole show out of this sort of thing.”

She shot him a wry look. “I’m nothing if not a fan of breaking tradition.”

“Aye,” Thraigg said quietly, a soft smile poking out from above his beard. “That you are, lass.”

Tartanis was staring at his daughter, something unreadable in the set of his brow, the creases at the edges of his eyes. “I see,” he said after a moment, his calculating aura melding into something . . . else. Not approval, exactly, but more akin to understanding. “So his humanity is not an obstacle for you then, is it?”

Elyria lifted her chin. “It never was. But with regard to the heartache you mentioned, yes, we had already discussed the life-bond.”

“Even knowing it might change you?”

Cedric’s eyes shot to her, and all his former worries rushed to the forefront of his mind. So it *did* mean something for her to share herself so wholly, perhaps even giving up part of herself in order to gift it to him.

Elyria’s breath caught—just for a moment—and Cedric found he couldn’t stop himself from flinging his mental doors back open. He needed to understand what she was thinking, needed to feel her in his mind, in his bones, in his soul.

She’d already done the same, and the warmth and conviction and sheer *love* pulsing down the bond between them had the inner corners of Cedric’s eyes prickling.

“He has already changed me,” she said. “And only for the better. So long as it’s still what he wants—”

“It is all I want,” Cedric said quickly.

Tartanis exhaled—not *quite* a sigh. “You are very young. You cannot possibly know what it means to bind yourself to one of us forever.”

Cedric stood tall, rolling his shoulders back, and stepped forward to take Elyria’s hand in his own. “I know enough,” he said, and when he looked

down at their joined hands, he was met with the faintest golden glow.

Tartanis studied them both, understanding dawning on his face. "*Solimaeus*," he said, the word filled with awe.

"Yes, we are," Elyria replied. "Have more to say about that, do you?"

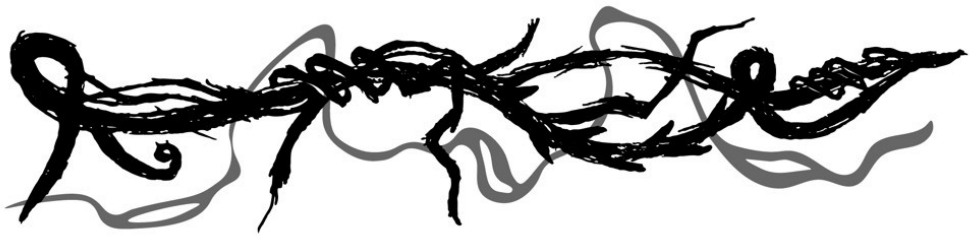
Tartanis shook his head. Closed his eyes. And when he opened them again, the smile on his face felt genuine. "No," he said softly. "No, I do not."

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DAYLIGHT

ELYRIA



THEIR TENT WAS LOCATED FARTHER FROM THE OTHERS THAN ELYRIA HAD expected. It was quieter, too. Not in an alarming way, for once. Not a sad one, either. This was not simply the hollow quiet of absence, but something intentional—like someone had taken care to hush the world just beyond the canvas walls. Elyria could still sense the camp beyond it, the thrum of bodies and magic and grief stitched together. But here, inside . . . it felt different.

Private.

"Your father set this up for us?" Cedric asked, voice rife with skepticism as he closed the tent flap behind him.

Elyria exhaled slowly and forced her hands to still at her sides. "I don't think he was aware of how it would be used at the time, but this is indeed where he told us to go, so . . ." Fucking stars above, the thought of her *father* setting up a stars-damned sex tent on the outskirts of his little refugee village for her had Elyria wanting to melt into the floor.

"Feels like your little reunion could've gone better," Cedric said, walking over and throwing his arms around her.

She leaned into him. "Could've gone much worse, honestly."

"I might just be starting to believe his main priority really is to make amends with you, because this"—he gestured to the space surrounding them—"really is *very* nice."

Elyria took a moment to glance around the large tent and couldn't help but agree. It made sudden sense why the outside world was so hushed. Thick tapestries hung against the canvas walls. There was a plush rug under their feet. Two separate braziers kindled in opposite corners, filling the space with warmth. A pallet was set to one side, covered with plush pillows and soft blankets. And across the tent sat a large oval basin filled with—

"Is that a *bath*?" Cedric asked, his chest shaking with an incredulous laugh.

Elyria darted over and immediately dipped a hand into the water. "Fuck me right over the Chasm, it's warm."

A table was set up next to the tub, folded towels, robes, and several colorful vials set atop it. Elyria noted the tray that held a small silver dagger and a length of silk rope and shook her head.

"Who knew such glamorous appointments existed in the middle of the woods?" Cedric said, drawing her focus back to him.

"Well, my father's always had a way of . . . procuring things. Say what you will of the man, but he knows how to put his money to good use. Solaris knows he's got enough of it."

"And who are we to look a gift horse in the mouth, after all?" She felt him come up behind her, sweep the hair off her neck, and dot a light kiss to the edge of her bondmark. "Go ahead. After the night . . . week . . . month . . . year . . . you've had, nobody deserves it more."

"Don't tell Kit," Elyria said slyly, pulling the hem of her blouse out from her waistband as she turned to look at him. "She'll be *so* jealous."

Cedric whisked his thumb and pointer finger across his closed mouth, then rotated his wrist like he was turning a key in a lock. "Your secrets are safe with me, Trouble."

The bath was the *perfect* temperature. Enchanted river rocks sat warm at the bottom of the tub, and Elyria could feel the stress lifting out of her muscles the instant she sank below the surface, submerging herself entirely. She'd had a hasty chance to wipe away the *sanguinagi* blood and general grime of battle after they arrived at the camp, but there was nothing like *actually bathing* to make oneself feel, well, clean. She needed this. Needed the water to leach away the lingering stain of all they'd endured during the attack on Elderglade.

Elyria held her breath underwater for another few seconds, enjoying the weightlessness, the blissful silence. Then, just as a pang of concern from

her ever-worrying knight pulsed in her chest, she surfaced.

“It’s big enough for two, Your Highness,” she said, scrubbing at her arms. “Fancy joining me?”

Cedric’s scarred lip quirked. “If you insist.”

The next thing she knew, he was naked and stepping into the tub behind her.

“It’s strange seeing you with nothing around your neck,” Elyria mused, sliding back until she was situated against his chest with his legs on either side of her.

“Is it? I admit it feels rather freeing. My mana token was a reminder of my limitations.”

“Your mother’s locket though?” She tilted her head to look at the small satchel that held the two halves of the crown, lying atop her clothing a few feet away. “Are you sad that it’s gone?”

She felt him shake his head, his cheek brushing against her hair. “What is there to be sad about? It’s not really gone. It’s just . . . different now. Changed.”

“And if that isn’t an apt metaphor for this night.” She exhaled a breathy laugh, then stopped herself. She sat up, drawing her knees to her chest and wrapping her arms around them.

Water sloshed around them as Cedric leaned forward, pressing his chin to her wet shoulder. “What’s the matter?”

“It seems so indulgent, doesn’t it? To be luxuriating in this, here, after what just happened? Knowing what is to come?”

“I think that’s precisely why it’s important. Tomorrow, we head north. We’ll repair the crown and, fate willing, the Chasm. We will face Malakar and his followers. Surely it is all right for us to take tonight for ourselves.”

Elyria heard the uncorking of a bottle, then felt strong fingers press into her hair a moment later. Cedric scrubbed at her scalp, lathering the soap against her skin, and she bit her lip to keep herself from moaning aloud as she slipped back into the water. “Stars above, you’re good at that. You and your hidden talents, Sir Knight.”

He chuckled but said nothing as he tipped her head back and rinsed her hair clean. She, in turn, said nothing as her backside brushed against the length of him, standing at the ready deep below the water’s surface. The time would come for that soon enough.

She got out first, toweling herself off before donning one of the linen robes while Cedric finished washing. The low-simmering coals sitting in one of the braziers were mesmerizing as she stared at them, trying not to think too hard about everything that was about to happen.

"Is there, uh, some kind of ceremonial garb or something we should be wearing for this?" Cedric asked a few minutes later, and Elyria turned to find him standing behind her, hair dripping onto the collar of his own robe, which he wore open and untied, his towel wrapped around his waist. "What are the rules here?"

She grinned at him. "There are no rules. Not for us, at any rate. And be glad of that—at least if it's just the two of us, nobody will be chanting."

Cedric blinked. "Chanting."

"Oh, yes," she said, her mouth tilting into a feline grin. "Traditionally, there'd be all sorts of people lined up around us, standing vigil. Witnesses, you know. They'd say their prayers in the Old Language and chant us right through the whole bonding. That's how your grandparents did it, as I understand."

"Stars above, woman, you must realize that's just about the last thing I want to hear right now."

"How lucky you are that we live in such *flexible* times, eh?" Elyria dragged her finger across the muscled planes of Cedric's chest as she passed him, crossing the tent to grab the silver tray from the table next to the tub. She set the tray down on top of the makeshift bed, then sat, sparing a moment to admire the braided length of rope—dark red silk shot through with metallic threads that glimmered faintly in the lantern light. Dawn caught in a web of shadow.

"What're those for?" Cedric asked, taking a seat on the bed next to her.

"Remember what I told you before? About how there's an order to things?"

He nodded slowly and lifted one hand to the bondmark over his collarbone. "A ceremony and vows and . . ." His gaze went to the knife on the tray, and his voice dropped to a whisper. "Blood. But I thought we had to—"

"One step at a time," she said soothingly. Then, across the bond, because she wasn't sure she could handle hearing his answer aloud if he had changed his mind, she asked, *"You still want this?"*

"More than anything," he replied, his gold-ringed gaze locked on hers.

Elyria released a breath, then reached for the silver blade. *“This first cut is like . . . slotting a key into a lock. We don’t need much. Just enough for our magic to meet.”*

“Like in the Sanctum?”

“Like in the Sanctum.” The memory of the power that had spread through Elyria when they’d merged magic before the third trial speared through her mind. The bond between them hummed, alight with anticipation. She sliced cleanly into her left palm without flinching, then held the blade out to Cedric. He mirrored her without comment, the only sign of discomfort in the way his throat bobbed.

“Take my hand,” she instructed, picking up the cord and looping one end of it around her wrist. Heat and cold surged the instant their palms pressed together, their blood mingling. She gasped as she looked down, saw the way her shadows had spread under her skin, darkening her veins. Cedric’s were the exact opposite—illuminated with a golden glow, streaks of sunlight running up his arms.

The jolt of power that ran through Elyria made her gasp.

Cedric’s breath stuttered. *“Elle—”*

“Still with me,” she assured him, her pulse racing. *“This is just the door unlocking. Nothing is sealed yet.”*

Even as she said it though, winding the rest of the cord around their interlaced hands, something settled in her chest. That overwhelming sense of rightness, of *home*, grew with every thudding beat of her heart.

She looped the other end around Cedric’s wrist with shaking fingers, then lifted her chin to look at him. “We speak our vows next, and we have to say them aloud.”

He tore his gaze from their bound hands, his brow furrowed. “What am I supposed to say?”

“Anything you want. It’s a signal of our understanding of what this means, of why we want it. And it doesn’t have to be elaborate, unless you want it to be. It just needs to be true.”

His expression softened. “Ladies first?”

She exhaled on a laugh, then sobered. “Of course.” Drawing in a slow breath, she attempted to steady the rapid beat of her heart, to calm herself against the flood of emotions already threatening to break her down. She could do this. She could say this.

He deserved to hear it.

“I bind myself with you, to you, Cedric Thorne. I choose you,” Elyria said quietly. “Not because of fate or prophecy and what we were destined to become. I choose you because you are mine to choose. Before you, without you, I was drowning. You brought me back to life, and were I faced with eons in this world alone or a single day together, I would choose you every time.”

The cord began to glow.

Cedric’s chest rose and fell sharply. “I bind myself to you, Elyria Lightbreaker,” he said, voice steady, unwavering. “You already know that, for me, there was never a choice to be made. I wish to be with you always, and not because of your power or your beauty, though those things are both so infinitely vast, it bewilders the mind to even attempt comprehending them. I simply want *you*. You, who are fierce and kind and terrifying in equal measure. Loving you is as easy and natural as breathing. It is like coming home. Never have I felt more at peace than when we are together. How could I not want that for eternity?”

Elyria didn’t realize she was crying until Cedric brushed a tear from her cheek with his free hand. “Repeat after me now,” she whispered, her voice close to breaking.

He nodded, his own eyes lined with silver.

“In darkness and in daylight, in peace and in ruin. What you carry, I carry. What you become, we become.”

Cedric smiled. “In darkness and in daylight, in peace and in ruin. What you carry, I carry. What you become, we become.”

Her throat tightened. *“I love you,”* she murmured down the bond.

“I love you so fucking much,” he replied. And then he kissed her.

It was sweet and loving and pure, and Elyria wanted so much more. But a slow-burning heat at her wrist had them breaking apart, looking down to see the cord fully luminous now—a bright ribbon of sunlight wrapped around their hands. It was warm at first, then hot—just for a moment. And then it melted away entirely, sinking beneath their skin.

They released each other’s hands, turning them over to find the cuts on their palms had healed, and their veins had returned to normal. From the outside, they looked exactly as they did before—as though nothing had happened at all.

Inside, though, Elyria’s chest felt like it was about to burst. Raw, unfiltered power was pooling in the cavern behind her ribs, an untamed mix

of shadow and wild and light, and it needed release.

She needed release.

Something in the air shifted. She squirmed on the edge of the bed, already seeking friction for the thunderous pulse between her legs. When she lifted her eyes to meet Cedric's, there was hunger behind his gaze.

She licked her lips, desire pressing in on her from all sides. Would she ever stop wanting him like this? she wondered. Would this feeling ever fade? She'd never felt such a fixation, such all-consuming desire, before. She'd never had someone who made her feel so whole and thoroughly shattered at the same time. And for a second, that made something a lot like guilt bubble up inside her chest. She and Evander were together for so many years. She really had loved him too.

It just wasn't like this.

"What now?" Cedric asked, his gaze darkening, his eyes trained on Elyria's mouth.

"Now we fling the door open." She leaned forward and ran her tongue over his bondmark. His whole body trembled. "Are you ready?"

"I think I'll die if we don't," he murmured, gently pulling her robe aside to reveal her own mark and tracing the crescents with the pad of his thumb.

Elyria whimpered into his hair when he dipped his head to place a kiss there, then gently scraped his teeth against her skin.

"I want all of you, always, Elle," he said, his voice a low thrum against her heated skin. "Every minute. Every second. I want the feeling of being inside you to be the first thing I experience every morning and the last thing I experience before falling asleep at night. And I want every single fucking soul on the stars-damned continent to know that you are mine, and I am yours, and we will *never* be taken from each other again."

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RECLAMATION

ELYRIA



IT HAPPENED SO FAST.

Like he was being fueled by a surge of instinct, driven by something feral and indefensible, Cedric's teeth closed around Elyria's bondmark. A euphoric spike of pain seared hot for a singular moment as his teeth pierced her skin. Heat welled along the side of her neck, a sensation that shot straight to her very core as he sucked, drawing her blood into his mouth with a low growl that made the pulsing sensation between her thighs explode in a flurry of desperate need.

There was only her own instinct now, nothing but the desperate need to know what he tasted like, to have his blood on her tongue and have him inside her—in all ways.

To bite back.

Her hand tangled with the soft brown hair at the nape of Cedric's neck, and Elyria tugged his head away from her. The thinnest rivulet of blood dribbled from the corner of his mouth, and his gold-ringed eyes were wild with desire as their gazes met. For a moment Elyria was transfixed at the sight of her *solimaeus* already so close to being undone, surrendering to his true nature—wild and free and *fae*.

And then she was yanking his head to the side, baring his neck and the soul-bonded mark she'd left on him all those months ago. Her mouth tipped up in a smirk before she clamped her teeth down, lights dancing across her vision as the first drops of his sunlit blood hit her tongue.

It was like a drug.

If *his* bite alone was euphoria, Elyria was sure that an entirely new word needed to be invented for the feeling coursing through her veins now. She could feel him *everywhere*—singing through her soul, wrapped around the bond between them, brighter than the aurora.

And she knew that for as much as their bond had already felt immutable, for as much as Cedric was already the very personification of her heart outside her body, they had just crossed into entirely new territory together.

She didn't need to voice what she wanted next—what she needed now.

It was what he needed too.

In a flurry of grabbing arms and tangling legs, of desperate kisses and clashing teeth, Elyria was on her back. The tray holding the silver blade clattered to the floor as Cedric stood over her, robe and towel discarded, his hard cock fisted in his hand.

Her eyes widened, wetness pooling at her center as she watched him stroke it—once, twice—before leaning forward to brace himself with his other hand next to her head, then notching himself at her entrance.

And then there was only bliss, only the exquisite stretch of him inside her as he sheathed himself in her dripping heat, filling her in a single thrust. She cried his name as he pulled back, then drove into her again, and again, and again.

She could feel everything. Feel all of him. His throbbing cock inside her, his breath on her skin, his murmurs in her mind, his magic in her blood. She didn't know where she ended and where he began. At some far-distant point in the past—incomprehensible to consider, really—there had been her, and there had been him. Now there was only them, and them, and them, and them, and—

"Cedric," she gasped, wrapping her legs around his waist, drawing him even deeper.

The groan that burst from him vibrated straight through her. "Elle," he breathed, hoisting her up and flipping their positions, seating himself on the end of the bed with her straddling him. His tongue laved against her bondmark, and that alone almost sent Elyria careening over the edge. As did the primal sound he made as he sucked more of her essence into his mouth. Cedric's fingers dug into her sides as she rolled her hips, feeling every inch of him against her inner walls as she dragged herself back, then plunged

forward again. Her shadows burst free, dancing across their skin, wrapping themselves in the wisps of sunfyre emanating from him.

Stars above, it was the most miraculous sight.

Shadow and sun weaving together, the darkness meeting the light. A whole new kind of braided cord—created just for them, *by* them.

Elyria's nails raked down Cedric's back as pleasure coiled tight and hot behind her navel, every sensation sharpening. There was the brush of skin on skin, the quiet grunts, the low whimpers he made, the way his grip tightened when her own breath hitched.

He felt it all too.

She knew he could.

Elyria dipped her head back to his neck, relishing in the power that shot through her as more of his drugging blood washed over her tongue. They were both so close, and that feeling in her core was spreading through her body, washing through her veins, her muscles, coursing down her spine, her shoulder blades . . .

And that's when Elyria felt it.

Felt *them*.

The magic that kept her wings vanished melted away.

They appeared.

But they were not loose and limp against her back.

Not an adornment or a decoration.

They were lifted up, flared wide over her shoulders—fluttering, undulating, like they meant to wrap up Elyria and Cedric both, cocooning them in glorious swaths of purple and green, a miniature aurora all their own.

That wasn't all, though.

That braided thread of shadow and sun snaked along each edge, ran across the surface of each stained glass wing.

Bolstering.

Tempering.

Strengthening.

Elyria couldn't speak. Couldn't breathe. Not as she flexed the muscles along her shoulder blades, and her wings *moved*.

A sob tore up her throat, that deep hollow place behind her ribs filling in, closing up.

Still buried inside her, Cedric froze. His gold-brown eyes were wide and his hands were tight on her hips as Elyria let her wings open and close, furl and unfurl, rise and fall.

They moved without effort, without strain—solid and responsive and *alive*, like they'd never been severed from her in the first place. She felt the drip, drip, drip of the tears spilling freely down her face, splashing onto her collarbone. And then she was laughing, the sound buoyant and joyous and free, and Cedric was burying his face in her neck, his shoulders shaking with happy sobs of his own.

Elyria leaned back so she could cup his face in her hands and bring his gaze to hers.

"*Solimaeus,*" she murmured into his mind.

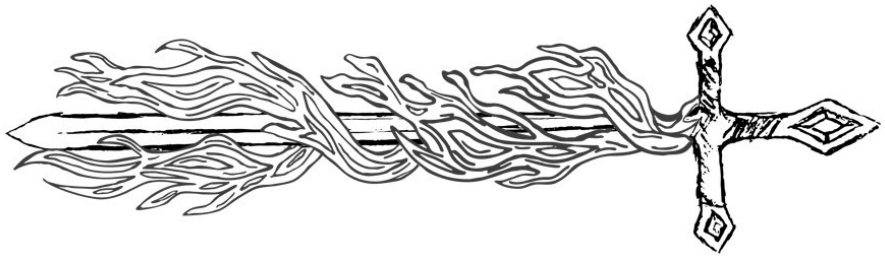
"*Solimaeus,*" he whispered back, before crashing his lips to hers once more.

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WHAT IT MEANS TO LIVE

CEDRIC



THERE ARE NO WORDS.

Nothing will suffice.

There is not a language known to man or Arcanian alike that could possibly be capable of accurately conveying this feeling.

I thought I knew what it was to live.

Thought I knew it as a child, carefree and well loved by my mother and father in our secret life.

Thought I knew it while I was training day and night to be the champion I thought Havensreach needed, to prove myself worthy of winning the Crucible and the crown.

Thought I knew it when I gave up on the very idea of living at all in order to give that crown—and to give a chance—to Elyria instead during the final trial.

And I thought I knew it when we came together for the first time outside of Elderglade, when our soul-bond first sparked to life.

Truly, I knew nothing before now.

I was *nothing before this. Right here, right now, in this moment, I am being reborn.*

Nothing will ever compare to this, to having her over me and surrounding me, her very essence inside me, as I'm inside her. I drive my hips up, my cock thrusting into her over and over as she releases the most delicious sounds. Her wings—stars above, her wings*—are fluttering,*

brushing against my arms as I wrap them around her waist, her back, keeping her body flush to mine as she rides me.

Her perfect breasts heave against my chest—I can't recall when either of us discarded our robes, but they are both long gone now. Did I burn them away? My flame dances over us, around us, but it's not scorching, not hurting. It's celebrating.

Our union.

Our reclaiming.

Our life-bond.

Like the magic understands exactly what this all means, even if I'm still in the process of discovering it all for myself.

What I do know is that I meant exactly what I said, what I've always said: I did not live until I met her, and I would choose her again and again. We have *chosen each other. Our lives are tied together now, and there is no end to me and beginning of her.*

There is only us.

And stars damn it all if that isn't the most beautiful thing.

Not more beautiful than her, though—my stunning, ethereal, perfect solimaeus.

Thinking it, acknowledging it, saying it feels so right. It's like I'd been searching for that word my entire life without even knowing. Like I needed it to exist just so I'd have the right word to describe this moment, this feeling, this woman here.

Mi solimaeus.

Light of my life.

Love of my heart.

Soulmate.

I say as much down the bond, filling my words with as much love and adoration as I can. It's still nowhere near enough, but as I lick a final drop of blood from the mark on the side of her neck, groaning once more at the sweet cherry-almond taste of her, I just have to hope she understands.

"I love you," *she replies, clawing at my back to draw me even closer. My cock is still buried deep inside her, the emotion pulsing through us both heightening every sensation. I can feel every quiver, every shake, and it's all I can do to keep myself from falling right over the edge.*

I don't want this to end yet.

I never *want this to end.*

I drag myself out of her slowly, until only my tip remains. The needy whimper that escapes her has pride blossoming deep in my core, behind my inner furnace, which is nearly overflowing with light and warmth and heat and power.

"I don't think anyone in the history of this wretched world has ever loved another person as much as I do you." I enunciate each word as I say them aloud.

Her mouth curves up into the most glorious smile, her emerald eyes glossy. "I can feel how much you mean it, so I won't argue with you. Even if you're technically wrong."

At that, I pull out entirely, and she lets out the sweetest mewl of protest.

"Hey!"

I laugh and scoot back an inch, though my tip is still notched at her entrance, her legs clamped on either side of me. "You're truly going to tell me I'm wrong right now?"

She's still smiling, and I wish I could freeze this moment forever. "You are, but like I said, I wasn't trying to argue."

"And yet here we are."

She releases a pleasured groan as I tip my hips forward and slide inside her once more—slowly. Just a bit at a time.

"Mmm, but aren't you the least bit curious who I was talking about?" she says with a gasp.

"Oh, I know exactly who you mean." I give a shallow thrust that has her bucking her hips to meet me.

And then her next words are uttered down the bond, because our lips are suddenly busy again. "Do tell."

"Why, Thraigg and his undying adoration for our missing nocterrian friend, of course."

And though it is somewhat lamentable that my comment has her breaking our kiss, pulling away to ram her forehead into my shoulder as she snort-laughs, I wish I could do it again and again and again. Because there is truly no better sound in all of existence than the evidence of her joy.

"You may just be right," she says, tears of a different nature lining those jewel-toned eyes. "But I don't think you'll be surprised when I tell you that I would prefer not *to talk about Thraigg and Nox or anyone else while you are currently sheathed inside me, Sir Knight."*

And then it's my turn to laugh, at least until our expressions grow serious again, the room filling with nothing but our panting breaths and greedy moans and the sounds of our bodies coming together.

She pushes me back until I'm lying flat on the bed, her hips rolling against me. Hot tension coils at the base of my spine. Tighter and tighter it twists, pulses. Spots flash across my vision as my eyes flutter closed.

It is indescribable, really, the way I can feel *her, can feel the exact way her pleasure climbs, can feel her heart beating in time with my own.*

Some instinct calls my attention back to the beautiful mark on my solimaeus's *neck, and I watch with rapt fascination as the small wounds left from my bite seal up, her double-crescent scar glowing golden. From the way her eyes are locked on my own mark, I have no doubt it's done the same.*

I thrust my hips up, words falling with equal abandon from my lips with each exquisite slide in and out of her. "I love you." Thrust. *"So."* Thrust. *"Fucking."* Thrust. *"Much."*

She's crying my name—a litany, a prayer—and I move the flat of my hand to her lower belly and press, *feeling the edge of my cock moving deep inside her. And with that, we both come undone, chasing our shared pleasure off the side of a cliff, falling, falling, falling . . .*

And landing together somewhere new. A place formed just for us, by us.

The ground rumbles, tiny vines breaking through the canvas floor of the tent as I spill inside her. Elyria's voice rings in my head, caressing my mind, my soul, with those three beautiful words over and over and over.

And I'm not even thinking as I move her off me, withdrawing my cock and taking the smallest second to appreciate the glorious mess I have made of her. I flip us both onto our sides, fitting her perfectly into the curve of my body as I shift us farther up the bed.

Her wings fold down against her back, and I am mesmerized by the way they're now laced with shadow and sunfyre, the astonishing proof of our combined power before my eyes. It only lasts a moment though, and then I am quick to bury myself inside her once more, some feral instinct urging me to push what had already started to leak out back in.

There's no arguing with the deep satisfaction that brews behind my ribs at the thought of keeping me inside her. I want her smelling like me, want to make sure no other man or woman or nocterrian alive would ever—could ever—question who she belongs to.

She doesn’t seem to mind. She seems to relish it, in fact, releasing the most heart-wrenchingly contented sigh as soon as I’m buried back in her sweet wetness.

Instinct is once again guiding me as I dip my chin and press long, lingering kisses down her neck, her spine, into the space between her beautiful, glorious, revitalized wings.

If I could, I would wash away every memory of their loss. I would pour every ounce of my love into the absence she once felt here. For a singular second, I think she might tense up again, might freeze. That it’s too new, and too overwhelming, and she’s worried that it won’t last, that they’ll be gone again when the magic bred from our bonding subsides.

But she only exhales softly, then reaches behind her to draw my arm around her waist, like she wants me to hold her even closer.

Her breathing begins to even as she toys with the silver ring on my finger, twisting it in slow circles until her hand eventually falls away, and I don’t need our bond to know she has fallen asleep.

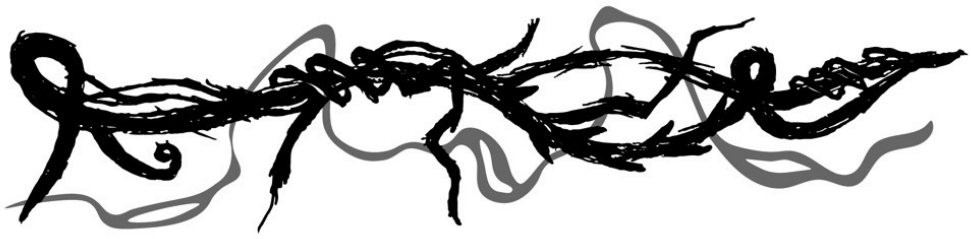
I bury my face in her periwinkle hair, inhaling deeply—cherry almond and smoky sandalwood mixing in my nose—and it isn’t long before I, too, am pulled into sleep’s embrace.

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BONDED

ELYRIA



"SO . . . ARE WE MARRIED NOW?"

Elyria released a breathy laugh, her head on Cedric's chest as they lay on the bed, a sheet drawn loosely over them. His hand moved in soothing, concentric circles along her back beneath her wings. Pale morning light was just breaking through the gaps in the tent's canvas, and Elyria yawned as she propped herself up on one elbow. "You're so adorably human sometimes. We can call it whatever you want."

"What do *you* want to call it?"

She smiled, a mischievous, beaming thing, while sending as much reassurance as she could down the bond. "Would it make you happy if I called you my husband?"

"Not nearly as happy as it would make me to call you my wife. But those were not marriage vows we said. And we have no rings."

Elyria laughed again, louder this time. "What kind of marriage vow could supersede the oaths we swore to each other last night? And you already have a ring."

She tore her adoration-laced gaze from his face to grab his right hand and lift it to her lips. Cedric inhaled sharply, stiffening when she drew his pointer finger into her mouth and hooked her teeth around the silver ring, pulling it off with a gentle sucking motion.

"There," she said, plucking the ring from between her lips and sliding it onto the fourth finger of his left hand instead. "Is that official enough for

you?”

Her knight squirmed on the bed, scooting back in order to sit up, and Elyria took an inordinate amount of satisfaction in the fact that he was quite obviously hard again beneath the thin sheet covering him. “What—” He cleared his throat. “What about you?”

Elyria couldn’t stop the slight roll of her eyes, even as her pursed lips quirked into a smirk. She twirled a finger in the air nonetheless, swiveling it around and around until a tiny loop of shadow had formed. It was very close to *almost* being solid, and when she sat up and picked it from the air, then dropped it into Cedric’s palm, she said, “So, are you going to get down on one knee, or . . . ?”

Cedric blinked at Elyria, then down at the shadow ring in his hand, which seemed to consolidate into a halo of shiny onyx before their very eyes. “Won’t it dissipate? Disappear?”

Elyria shrugged. “Sid never has. Well, aside from when she wants to, of course. And can’t you feel it?”

He frowned. “Feel what?”

“How different it all is now. How easy.” She flared her wings out behind her to illustrate her point. “It’s like your very power is pulsing in my blood. If I tried, I think I could make a dozen Sids, could send a hundred sparrows in any direction.”

Cedric chuckled. “There’ll only ever be one Sid.”

“That’s the stars-damned truth. But you know what I mean.”

He slid the ring onto her finger. “I really, really do.”

Elyria held up her hand, shifting it from side to side, and let out an appreciative whistle. “I think black’s my color.”

Cedric leaned forward to press a kiss to her temple before sliding off the bed and crossing the tent to where he’d left his trousers folded the night before. “I still rather prefer purple, wife.”

She grinned to herself, resisting the urge to flop back onto the bed and draw the sheet over her head. She knew there was no time to delay further, no letting herself marvel in this moment, in the aftermath of their fully sealed, all-encompassing life-bond. They had things to do. The road ahead would still be dark, with many horrors likely waiting at the end of it.

Still, as Elyria observed Cedric pull a clean tunic on overhead and buckle Ashrender at his hip, she could not squash the beam of hope simmering somewhere underneath the swirling beat of her power. There

was more than enough here to fix the crown. She knew it. There was a light at the end of that road, and she would find it.



"HOW DO YE RECKON IT WORKS?" Thraigg asked. The dwarf bounced on his heels, his thick woolen cloak swinging open to reveal the gaping neckline of his oversized tunic. Elyria smiled inwardly as she noticed that only part of the bandage that had covered his chest and shoulder yesterday was still in place.

Jocelyn, standing across from her, looked like she had nearly recovered as well. There was color back in her cheeks, and Elyria had personally checked on the wound she'd sustained during their escape from Elderglade. The relief Elyria had felt upon seeing how it was healing was . . . not small. Neither was Jocelyn's unbridled joy when Elyria had revealed the status of her wings to her.

There'd been a tiny, minuscule flicker of doubt, right before she told Jocelyn, wherein Elyria wondered if it would come across as cruel, like she was bragging. But her friend only pulled her into an uncharacteristically enthusiastic embrace, and that fear was quickly assuaged.

"This is how it was always meant to be," Jocelyn had said, and Elyria had to avert her eyes to keep from crying. Stars above, she'd cried more in the past few days alone than she had in her entire life beforehand. She *really* needed to get a handle on that.

The group stood in a tiny clearing between towering evergreens, a good thirty yards from the nearest tent. Elyria, Cedric, Thraigg, Kit, Jocelyn, and Shep all peered at the two crown halves, neatly laid on the snow-covered ground. Kit had placed them so they very *nearly* fit together, and without looking too closely at the jagged seam between them, the mark of Daephinia's magic when she split the crown in two, one might think it was a single piece already.

The group formed a circle around the crown, and with the dark color of the cloaks Tartanis's men had provided and their hoods drawn to keep out the winter chill, Elyria wanted to laugh at how they must've looked.

How they did look, she was sure, to her father, Raefe, and Sephone, who were not being particularly surreptitious about the way they observed

them from the main part of the camp.

“Feels like we’re members of the stars-damned Cult of Malakar, standing here like this,” Elyria muttered.

Kit snorted a laugh. “If you can’t beat ’em, join ’em.”

“Who says we can’t beat ’em?” Thraigg huffed.

“Excellent point, my friend,” Elyria said. “If anything, this is just us beating them at their own game. We’ll start our own cult. A better cult.”

“Shouldn’t be hard to come up with a better name, at least.” Kit tapped her chin in an exaggerated show of contemplation. “The Cult of Lightbreaker. Nice ring to it.”

Elyria shrugged. “It’s not my crown. ‘The Cult of Thorne’ sounds like the name of someone’s sarcastic gardening club though.”

“The Cult of Nero, then,” Shep offered. He turned to face Cedric. “That’s your namesake, you know. You could claim your grandmother’s name, easily.”

Cedric gaped at them all. “I’m no stranger to the more macabre brand of humor you Arcanians tend to favor, but I think I’m going to have to draw the line here.”

They all burst out laughing.

“Fair enough, Sir Sensitive.” Elyria grinned at him. “We’re obviously just teasing. I see you haven’t gleaned my tolerance for that from this little bond of ours.”

“I don’t think that’s how it works,” he grumbled.

“Back to the matter at hand, then,” Jocelyn said appeasingly, gesturing to the crown. “You’ve already tried channeling your power into it?”

Elyria nodded. “Tried channeling our magic, tried healing it, tried sending Ric’s sunfyre into the seam. Nothing.”

“And the elders don’t have any additional ideas?” Kit asked.

Shep shook his head. “This is just as new to them as it is to all of us. Elder Larkess . . .” His mouth curved into a sad smile. “She seemed quite convinced that your combined magic was the answer, but it isn’t as though the celestials left instructions.”

“Show us exactly how you tried, Ellie,” Kit suggested.

Blowing out a breath, Elyria bent down to sweep up both halves, then held them together in front of her. “I had them just like this—Ric behind me, his hands over mine. He channeled, I channeled, *we* channeled.” She pursed her lips. “I don’t really know what else to—oh, shit.”

Her fingers slipped, and one half of the crown began falling away from the other. Multiple hands shot out to catch it, but Cedric was fastest.

He hissed as his hand closed around the jagged edge and the sharp metal sliced into his skin. The scent of copper spiked through the air. But that wasn't what had Elyria's mouth gaping, nor gasps ringing out around the circle. It was the way that Cedric's blood glowed—then *changed*. Like it was transforming into liquid gold along the shattered edge of the crown.

"Of fucking course," Elyria breathed. "*Two bloods shall find their way,* right? They *did* leave fucking instructions; they just had to be as cryptic and useless and *celestial* about it as possible."

She dragged her finger along the broken edge of the crown half still in her hands, the metal like a serrated knife as it split her skin. The instant her blood made contact, it, too, shifted into something shimmering and golden—glowing bright.

"Quick," Kit said, "put them together and—"

There was no point. Before Elyria and Cedric could even lift their arms to piece the two halves together again, the metal began to quiver and shake. It vibrated down Elyria's arm, and the feeling was alarmingly similar to when she'd accidentally wielded the crown half at the end of the Crucible, when she'd brought Cedric back to life. In that moment, she'd been unable to drop the crown from her hand, like it had momentarily welded itself to her.

It was much the same now. And Elyria could only watch—in awe, in horror—as both crown halves began to *transform*.

Light bloomed from the jeweled spires, brighter and brighter and brighter, until each person in the circle had to turn their heads, averting or closing their eyes against the glare.

And when it subsided, when they each were able to refocus on the sight before them, Elyria and Cedric each held a crown—whole and complete—in their hands.

"Incredible, Ellie," said Kit.

The beads in Thraigg's beard jangled as he shook his head from side to side. "Un-bloody-believable. Can't believe Noxie's missing this."

"Two bloods indeed," whispered Shep.

Jocelyn's gaze was pinned on the twin crowns, her head whipping back and forth between them. "But . . . two? How? The prophecy tells of the reclamation of the One True Crown."

“Not the crown, then,” Shep said, a knowing smile tipping up the edge of his mouth as his gaze shifted from the headpieces in Cedric’s and Elyria’s hands, to Cedric himself. “But the Crown.”

“Now, hold on. Wait just a moment,” Cedric protested, but whatever argument he might have tried to make died on his tongue. Elyria felt the moment of his acceptance, the resignation and the spark of hope vibrating through their bond. They’d barely spoken about it, had barely acknowledged it, aside from her new favorite nickname for him and a few poorly timed jokes. But she knew this was the very thing he had been fighting against since he first found out about his lineage.

Cedric was born to be king.

He never wanted this to be his legacy.

He would take it up anyway.

He fell to his knees, the crown still clutched in his grasp.

The ground rumbled.

“Ellie?” Kit asked nervously.

“It isn’t me,” Elyria replied, and as quickly as the shaking had begun, it stopped.

Cheers sounded from the camp, but nobody could be bothered to look back. They could only look up, up at the brilliant streaks of color now painted across the sky—shades of violet and gold and green and blue.

“The aurora,” Kit breathed. “Aurelia has been freed from the Sanctum.”

Shep bowed his head. “The prophecy is fulfilled.”

The others followed suit, their hands clasped in front of them, their gazes dropped to the ground.

Elyria looked at the crown in her hands, then down at Cedric’s panic-stricken face. His chest was rising and falling, his breath uneven.

“It’s all right,” she said soothingly down the bond. *“It’s you and me. Together, still. Together, always.”* With a casualness she did not feel, Elyria placed the golden circlet on her own head, trying not to shudder at the instantaneous burst of power that filled her bones.

Cedric looked up at her, wetness lining the edges of his gold-ringed brown eyes, and gave her a slow nod. She leaned forward, pressed a gentle kiss to his scarred lip, then pried his crown from his fingers.

“Your Majesty,” she said with a wink, standing straight.

“I love you,” he said simply.

And she placed the golden crown atop his head.

He gasped at the rush of power, but there was no more spectacle. No more blazing light, no more quaking earth. Nothing but Cedric Thorne and Elyria Lightbreaker, the Phoenix and the Revenant, there among their friends.

Champions.

Victors.

Regents.

Cedric inhaled shakily as he got to his feet. “Now what?”

“Now we fix what once was broken,” Elyria said. “We repair your grandmother’s legacy. Fill the Chasms and heal the realm.”

“Ah, is that all? No pressure.”

She smiled. “Time to herald the dawn, Sunbringer.”

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PART IV

DEPTHS

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42

THE CHAINS THAT BIND

TENEBRIS NOX



THE RUMBLE WAS SO GREAT, IT CUT THROUGH THE IN-BETWEEN.

Tenebris Nox felt it ripple through the shadows like a stone cast into still waters. The tremor echoed along pathways that did not exist on any map mortals could draw, and the darkness shuddered.

Nox smiled to themself.

They did it.

The nocterrian stepped out of the shadows onto the ledge of the Sacred Mountain, their breath fogging in the frozen air. To their right, Lyrica, great, beautiful, magnificent creature that she was, had her head lifted to the sky. A sky that was illuminated in violent ribbons of gold, purple, green—woven together in a display so brilliant, it bled through the clouds.

It was as though the very world had ignited, the image so bright and bold, not even those who dwelled in the dark would be able to ignore it.

Aurelia had returned.

Finally gone were the bonds of the Celestial Sanctum, and the banished star god was free. Free to seek her true purpose again as the arbiter of balance . . . or free to exact revenge on those who had caged her.

Who was to say what path she would choose?

Of course, Nox had their suspicions.

As did, they presumed, their master.

Just then, from within the depths of the mountain, there was a roar so vast and furious, Nox had no doubt it could be felt on both sides of the

Hereafter.

The shadows misting around the nocterrian's feet tightened instinctively, drawing close as if bracing for impact.

It would not come.

Not tonight.

Eventually, perhaps, there would be hell to pay.

But for now, at least, they were quite sure the star gods were too busy reeling from the consequences of their own design to bother with one measly nocterrian's whereabouts. Too busy trying to figure out what it meant to have the Guardian of Balance among them once more.

Nox tilted their horned head, contemplating what the word "balance" meant in the world as it now stood. The scale was considerably more complicated now than it had been when Aurelia and her celestial siblings had first built it, after all.

There was so much more to this world than pitting humans against fae, than kings battling for land and mana and resources.

Nox blew out a slow, drawn-out breath, looking to the horizon. Somewhere out there, across both Chasms, their friends marched toward battle. They could feel it—the winds of change blowing through the air, the tugs on the threads of fate. It was as though Arcanis itself was waking from a long sleep.

And it would not wait anymore.

Neither, they decided, would Tenebris Nox. They could not sit quietly, awaiting their next assignment, the next time the Lord Noctis let them off their leash.

I should, they thought. *I should stay here. I should be . . . good.* They pressed their tongue against the sharp point of one of their fangs. *I should not tempt fate.*

They'd gotten lucky before, after all. They had already interfered, despite being explicitly instructed—commanded, in fact—not to. But it was worth it, they mused, to be able to give the Revenant her wings. To give back the crown, along with a warning that Nox hoped saved at least a few lives.

And it had been worth it to see *her* again, if only for a moment.

By the Five, when had they become so soft? Mortal connections had never held such allure before. And it wasn't *just* her, although her particular pull was, of course, fascinating.

It was Thraigg, stubborn and boisterous and unyieldingly kind. The sort of friend who would traverse at one's side to the very edge, ready to fight death itself.

It was the knightling and the Revenant—two halves of a prophetic pair, yes, but both of them good and righteous and whole in their own right. Two people worth following.

It was Tenny, bright and somehow both more fragile and stronger than she realized. The way she stood at the crossroads of grief and courage, the way she carried on, in spite of and despite all the many things that would drag down a lesser woman.

But then, in the end, it really was Kit, wasn't it?

Inevitable, tempestuous, mercurial Kit.

A symphony of contrast, a kaleidoscope of contradictions. Innate political savvy wrapped in the guise of a spoiled younger sister. Moonlit hair that fell against sunbaked skin. Even her eyes, one as green as a sprig of merryleaf, the other bluer than the shallows beyond Siren's Rock, were a paradox of their own.

Something tightened in Tenebris Nox's chest.

I should stay away.

They knew what awaited.

Knew the pain to come, the cost of choosing mortals over mandates, this silly idea of *love* over law. The chains that bound them were old, forged by a star god who, for all his occasional interest in the happenings of the world above, did not tolerate disobedience—no matter how righteous.

And yet.

Nox's shadows stirred restlessly around their boots, and Lyrica huffed a steamy breath from slitted nostrils as she tilted her head at them.

Perhaps it was worth it anyway.

Nox closed their eyes.

Just one time more, they thought. *Should time allow.*

Above, the aurora burned on, piercing through the clear blue sky.

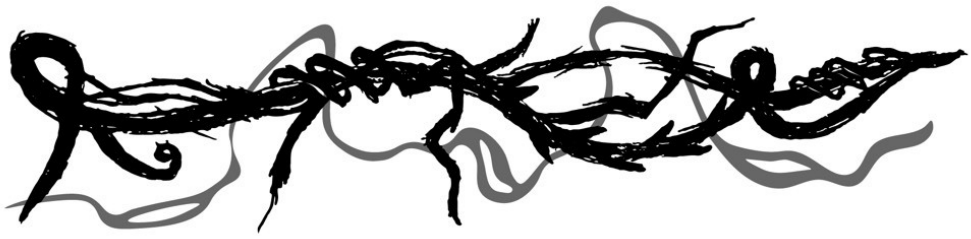
And Tenebris Nox stepped into the shadows.

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THE ASHEN PROMISE

ELYRIA



ELYRIA LIGHTBREAKER HAD NEVER BEEN ONE FOR GOODBYES.

It might've come as a surprise that it wasn't so much the sentimentality that she took issue with. That was tolerable. Understandable. A sad farewell was, after all, nothing but a mark of the impact one person made on another, and there was something kind of, well, nice about that.

No, the kinds of goodbyes she hated were the strategic ones. Those that came on the heels of plans and reassurances and people saying things like "Solaris be with you" and "See you on the other side," as if such a thing were ever determinable.

That was the real issue. All the *not knowing*. Not knowing if there would be greetings to be had on the "other side." Saying goodbye ahead of the vast unknown before them felt presumptuous. Like it cemented the fact that they were not, in actuality, likely to see one another again.

That was how saying goodbye to her father had always been, at any rate.

Tartanis's tent was located at the center of the largest cluster of them, many of which were already being dismantled. Near the tree line beyond, a handful of wagons waited in a line, with canvas covers stretched over barrels of supplies. Horses stamped their hooves, steam puffing from their nostrils in misty bursts as they tossed their heads, impatient.

They were all getting impatient.

Snow lay in shallow piles on either side of the narrow pathway that had been cleared in front of her father's tent. Elyria stared at the entrance.

Just go in, you coward, she scolded herself. They needed to get moving. Needed to head north, get to Tenny, Tristan, Ollie, and Zephyr in Kinsgaith. Needed to head off Malakar, keep him from getting to the Line.

Elyria tugged the thick cloak tight around her shoulders, though she didn't feel the chill the way she probably should have. Since completing the life-bond with Cedric, that singular speck of sunfyre in Elyria's chest had turned into a proper flame. It was as though his light had sunk into her blood, warming her bones, her very soul.

It mixed with her shadows and her wild magic and made her feel like she had been born again as something entirely new. She tried not to think about it too hard. Tried not to dwell on what it meant that it felt so natural, how immediately at ease she was. Like her body had been waiting for this all along. Like it was the very lack of him that was the cause of any wrongness she'd felt throughout her entire life.

She was meant to have this power.

She was meant to wield it with him.

Snow crunched behind her, and Elyria turned to see the very subject of her thoughts.

"You'll have to show me how you do that thing," Cedric groused, nervously fidgeting with the golden crown in his hands as he walked up.

"And you'll have to be more specific than that, I'm afraid," she replied with a soft smile.

He gestured loosely to the top of her head. "How to keep it hidden in the ether as you do. Like your wings."

Elyria grinned, and with the tiniest, meagerest burst of magic, her own crown rematerialized on top of her head. She marveled momentarily at how easy it was, to summon and banish it at will, along with her wings. There was just so much magic flowing through her, all the time now. She wondered if she would ever get used to it.

It was a dangerous thing, to feel so invincible.

She knew she was not.

Elyria plucked Cedric's crown from between his fingers and reached up to set it upon his head. Stars above, it suited him. His wavy chestnut hair curled around the edges of the headpiece like it had been grown specifically

to welcome its gilded weight. “Why do you want to hide it? Regality is a good look for you, Your Majesty.”

He fixed her with a pointed stare, then held up his left hand and wiggled his fingers. Winter sunlight glinted off his ring. “I’d venture to say it’s the same reason you choose to hide yours, *my queen.*”

Elyria rolled her eyes. “Hmm, queen consort, maybe. We can talk about all of that . . . after.”

Cedric’s scarred lip quivered, like he was trying very hard to hold in a smile. “*After.*”

“All right, then,” she said, burying the grin that threatened to spread across her face in response. She shut her mental doors tightly in anticipation of facing her father, cutting off the final echo of Cedric’s voice from her mind. “Let’s get this over with, shall we?”

Her boots dragged slush along the floor when she entered the tent. Someone handed her a steaming mug, and the scent of rich broth filled her nose when she dipped her head in thanks.

Tartanis was seated in an unsurprisingly plush chair near the center of the tent, sipping from a mug of his own. He looked thoroughly unbothered, unhurried, and most definitely *not* like he was about to shepherd a full village’s worth of displaced sylvans and mixedborns to safety.

Sephone and Raefe stood a few paces behind him, conversing quietly. They stopped as Elyria and Cedric approached, their eyes immediately snapping to the golden crowns atop their heads.

Raefe’s gray eyes were wide as they flicked from Cedric’s crown to Elyria’s, then back again. “Should we, uh, be bowing or something?”

“Please don’t,” Cedric muttered, just as Elyria said, “You? Absolutely.”

Sephone snickered, then let out a low whistle. “That’s a good look for you, Rev. Although, I suppose I should start getting used to calling you ‘Your Majesty,’ eh?”

“I believe we can save the honorifics for later,” Tartanis said, turning slightly in his chair. “When the dust has settled, Malakar has been stopped, and the two of you have reclaimed Castle Lumin and the Lost City.”

“That’s a rather lofty list of goals there, Father,” Elyria gritted out. “Let’s focus on the most pertinent things first, shall we? You three don’t look particularly ready to usher these fine people to said city.”

“Are we still sure that taking them there is the right choice?” Cedric asked nervously. “The Cult—”

“The city is half-empty,” Raefe said. “And from my time spent there, I can tell you with certainty that it isn’t as though every single person who has taken up residence is under Malakar’s thumb.”

“Yes, but they *are* still human.” Elyria gave him a pointed look. “You really think they will welcome all these Arcanians as their neighbors? It’s hardly a perfect solution.”

“There is no such thing as a perfect solution,” said Tartanis. “But this *is* a good option. Luminaria is not far. There is shelter and space. The humans will cope.”

“And those who can’t?”

“They can leave,” answered Sephone with a shrug.

Elyria glanced at Cedric, whose worry was evident on his perfect face. She bit the inside of her lip. “I suppose if my experience in Havensreach taught me nothing else,” she offered, “it’s that humans can indeed be convinced that we scary Arcanians are not, in fact, so frightening after all. They just have to, you know, actually meet some of us.”

“That’s right. Even the infamous Revenant won many hearts and minds in Kingshelm.” The furrow of Cedric’s brow relaxed, and internally, Elyria preened. “That’s how it was before the Shattering, when my grandparents ruled, was it not? How it can be—should be—again.”

Tartanis nodded approvingly, and Elyria raised her brow in surprise. He was certainly taking all this unifying talk in shocking stride, given his previously expressed concerns over Elyria and Cedric being together. His green eyes darted from their crowns to the rings on their fingers, and her eyebrow arched farther.

“My only wish is for our people to have a home,” said a thin voice, and it was only then that Elyria noticed Elder Jung sitting in a nearby chair, watching their conversation with something akin to amusement on his face.

Elyria’s expression fell. “I am sorry about Elderglade. It’s my fault your home is lost.”

The elder laughed softly. “Do you have a habit of taking on the burden of blame you have no reason to bear?”

“Yes,” said Cedric and Tartanis at the same time.

Elyria narrowed her eyes at them both. *Like you’re one to talk,* she wanted to say to Cedric. *Maybe you should practice taking on a bit more,* she wanted to spit at her father. But she held her tongue in both cases, letting Elder Jung continue.

“It matters not where our home is, only that it is at all,” finished the elder.

“But Elderglade was your safe haven, a sanctuary that stood for centuries before . . .” Elyria swallowed hard. “Before me. And it now lies in ashes.”

“When you stop the dark sorcerer”—the elder tilted his head at Elyria—“and when you take up the mantle and rule of these lands”—he tilted it at Cedric—“what need will there be for a sanctuary?”

“I do not mean to offend, Elder,” Cedric said softly, “but that feels shockingly naive.”

“And you know if *he’s* the one saying so, it really must be,” Sephone added with a devilish smirk.

Elyria shot her a silencing glare. The fae might not be wrong, but that was the sort of thing that was only acceptable for Elyria herself to say. She took a sip of broth to prevent herself from replying with something uncharitable. There was no point in starting a fight now, regardless of how much she might enjoy it.

“Is your party ready to depart?” Tartanis asked her.

“Is yours?” Elyria shot back, then pressed her lips together. “Sorry. Habit. Yes, we are. Cedric, Kit, Thraigg, Jocelyn, Shep, and I head north imminently, to reconnect with Tenny, Tristan, Ollie, and Zephyr. Along with a handful of others from Elderglade who have elected to join us.” She gave Elder Jung a deferential nod. “For which we are very grateful.”

“Less than a dozen Arcanians against the dark sorcerer’s forces,” Raefe tutted. “I understand that the two of you are powerful now, but—”

“But the two of *you* took on dozens by yourselves in Castle Lumin,” she said, waving her hand between Cedric and Raefe. “The village of Kinsgaith is small. How many cultists could there possibly be?”

“We had the element of surprise then.”

“Who’s to say we won’t have it again this time?”

Sephone laughed. “I appreciate your optimism, Elle, but I think the smarter play is to assume you most definitely will *not*. Even if you manage to shadowstep your entire party, horses and all, directly to Malakar’s door, it would be foolish to assume he won’t have some trick hiding up his sleeve.”

Elyria clenched her jaw. “Well, the three of you are welcome to come along if you’d like to bolster our numbers. But maybe you’re too scared to join the fight.”

Raefe bristled, and Sephone's expression hardened. Tartanis loosed a deep sigh. Tension fell over the entire tent, so thick, it was a miracle the canvas-lined ceiling didn't buckle.

"Our victory is all but ensured," Cedric said, a clear attempt to break the tension. "You all forget the most important thing."

Four quizzical fae faces turned toward him in unison.

"Why, we'll have Sid, too, of course."

Sephone and Raefe chuckled, but Elyria rolled her eyes. "So certain of that, are you? When's the last time you even saw her?" she asked, wishing she didn't have to do so aloud. *The inconveniences of having a mindwielding father, I swear.*

Cedric only winked at her, and Elyria bit the inside of her cheek as though doing so might help her hold on to her irritation. The way this man could calm the tempest of her mood with little more than a look was surely not natural.

"I would genuinely like to accompany you, daughter, as I am loath to cut our time together short," Tartanis said, drawing her attention back. "But at the very least, I do intend to make good on my promise to try to secure you additional aid. Miss Ravenswing has granted me letters for her uncle and mother. I depart for Aerithia directly."

Elyria swallowed. "This is goodbye, then," she said, mentally kicking herself for uttering the word.

"For now," her father replied.

"Don't you worry about us, or about the situation in the Lost City. We'll get these folks there safely," said Raefe, and though Elyria wanted to say something snide about how there was very little risk she'd ever be worried about *him*, she held her tongue. "You just stay focused on what may lie in store for you up north."

"Don't burn out getting there too fast either." Sephone inclined her head at Elyria's crown. "You'll need to keep some of that new power to seal the Chasm, yeah?"

Elyria gave a tight nod.

Cedric stepped closer to her, looping his hand around her back.

She looked to her father. "What if Lachlandris refuses again?"

Tartanis studied her for a moment. "Then he will be a king who chose grief over duty. Who chose comfort over the protection of his people." His voice went low. "And that will be a problem to solve another day."

Elyria ran her tongue along the inside of her bottom lip. Sucked on her teeth. Nodded.

"And for you?" Tartanis finally asked, after several moments of silence had passed. "What will I be to you if he says no?"

For perhaps the first time in her life, Elyria thought her father looked . . . tired. Granted, it had been decades since they'd last spent time together, but this wasn't a physical exhaustion. He still sat straight and tall, still had that air of polished composure. But there was a fatigue behind his eyes—eyes that matched hers so uncannily. And she had to wonder if all the lost years between them had taken more of a toll on him than she'd thought.

It would've been easier if he'd remained the same smug, cruel, blatantly self-serving bastard she'd thought he was. Easier to keep her hatred bright and sharp, something she could continue wielding to keep him at arm's length.

She still could. Should, maybe. Should nip this strange olive branch he was extending in the bud. Deflect him, cut him off again.

He braced for it like he thought she would. She saw it in the way he drew in a sharp breath, the way his fingers flexed at his sides. It was so odd, so unfamiliar—this singular moment of vulnerability from the man who'd gone her entire life showing her none.

A rush of images flooded Elyria's mind—flashes of moments from her childhood, the long years she'd spent at her father's side, under his thumb. Back when she was his dark star to be paraded about, leverage for his own climb to power. Back when she thought nothing would ever change.

But hadn't Elyria herself changed in the years since too? Hadn't she changed irrevocably in the past few months alone? Was she truly so stubborn, so prideful as to spit on this opportunity to let bygones be?

"What will I be to you if he says no?" he'd asked.

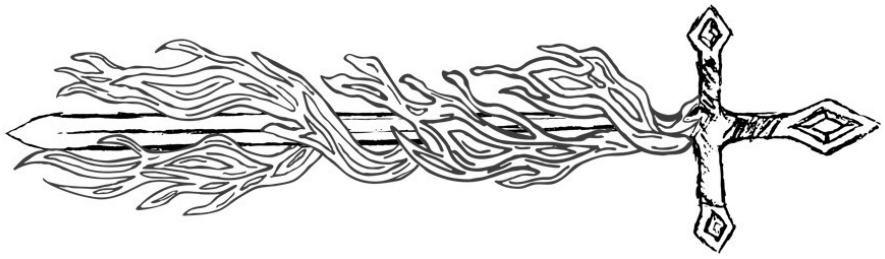
"A father who did not abandon his own duty," she finally replied, cracking open the door in her mind so he could see she meant it. "And that is no small thing."

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44

NORTHERN BOUND

CEDRIC



CEDRIC FOUND HER STANDING ON THE EDGE OF THE CHASM, JUST AS HE thought he would.

"Everyone doing all right?" Elyria asked without turning to look at him.

"They're managing. Thraigg might still have a few more rounds of retching to go, but I'm sure they'll all be right as rain in no time. It took me quite a while to get used to the feeling of shadowstepping, too, as you may recall."

Her amusement bounced down the bond. "Who could ever forget?"

Cedric wrinkled his nose at her, and she let out a quiet laugh. "At least the horses don't seem particularly bothered by it," he continued. "If I didn't know better, I'd say Polonius downright *likes* it."

A nicker sounded from behind them, where the rest of their party was still recovering from the latest stretch of Elyria's shadowstepping. Well, Cedric didn't know if that was actually an apt name for what she was doing anymore. It was less stepping through the shadows and more *sailing* through them. As though they were all standing upon a raft, and it was up to Elyria to navigate them through.

Cedric didn't remember the shadowy in-between being so vivid when he'd last traversed through it with her. Didn't know when his vision had become so clear nor his senses so sharp. He supposed it all made a certain sort of sense. When he and Elyria had merged blood—merged *lives*—in that tent, when her wings had been brought back to life in a glorious tapestry of

their woven magic, that wisp of her shadow that already lived within him had surged, swelled. It was like a waiting viper now, curled around his ribs, nestled behind his furnace of sunfyre, waiting for the perfect opportunity to strike.

It made him feel strong.

Especially when paired with the magic he felt pulsing through him thanks to the crown. He could still feel the weight of it on his head, despite the fact that it was now neatly hidden from view, just like Elyria's.

Still, all this power—new and old, gifted and grown—also made Cedric feel . . . strange.

Because even before they'd officially sealed their life-bond, Cedric had been feeling the slow creep of his power, hadn't he? Every day he'd felt more and more like his fae heritage was surfacing, like it had awoken the very moment Elyria brought him back in the Sanctum.

Would it take him over completely? Could he even say he was the same person now that he was then? Did he want to be?

Elyria sighed, and Cedric's attention immediately snapped to her. She was still staring ahead, into the Chasm that loomed before them, and at the village of Goldenvale sitting far on the other side. Cedric had been there before, of course—and recently too. He and Tristan had stopped there on their way to and from the academy at Paideus. He'd never seen it from this vantage before, though, and it was truly a breathtaking sight.

Between the setting sun and the aurora still painted across the sky, the world was lit in shades of orange and fuchsia. Mistwood trees lined the far edge of the Chasm, keeping most of the village's buildings tucked away, just out of sight. Winter had borrowed their leaves for the season, but their long, drooping branches still swayed mesmerizingly in the wind.

"Need s'more time, Rev?" The startle of Thraigg's voice as he came up from behind was the first sign that Cedric and Elyria had both lost track staring across the great abyss. "Or are we good to get crackin' again?"

"Isn't that a question better served for yourself?" Kit asked, skipping up beside the dwarf. Behind her were Jocelyn, Shep, and two of their new sylvan companions. "Seemed like that last jump did a bit of a number on you."

"Bah," Thraigg grumbled, waving his hands. "I'm heartier than a bowl of stonegrupple stew. Besides, we're just hopping 'cross the way to Goldenvale, ain't we?"

Jocelyn laughed. “The fact that we can now refer to crossing the eastern Chasm as anything remotely like ‘hopping across the way’ will never cease to baffle me.”

“He isn’t wrong, though,” said Shep.

“I suppose you’re right.”

A beat of silence passed.

“I could try, you know,” Elyria said, finally turning back to look at everyone. To look at Cedric. “*We* could try. To seal it. Here and now.”

“I have no doubt that you could,” Cedric said slowly, fully aware of the reactions of the rest of the group. Kit’s cloak fluttered, like her wings had sprung open from surprise beneath it. Shep shifted his weight back and forth on his feet. Jocelyn frowned thoughtfully. Thraigg scratched at his beard. “The question is whether we *should*.”

“You think it would take too much,” she said.

“I think we don’t know what it will take. We can presume that, as with all things, the crown’s magic is not limitless. When you brought me back with it during the Crucible, did it not expend its power? You said it yourself once, it was like it went dormant after that.”

Elyria shrugged. “We don’t know if all of that was the crown itself, or because of all the power granted by the sacrifices of the champions who had fallen before you, the blood spilled within the Sanctum.”

“Exactly, Ellie. We just don’t know a lot of things.” Kit stepped forward and took Elyria’s hand in hers. “You could start here and, sure, maybe it could seal the Chasm all the way from the Ironpeak Mountains to the Sea of Serenity.”

“Or,” said Jocelyn quietly, “you could run out of power before it seals up the part closest to the Line, and by the time you and the crown have regained your strength, Malakar could have already breached it.”

Elyria exhaled, long and slow. “And then sealing all of it won’t matter.”

They all knew it.

“Tomorrow,” Cedric said, taking Elyria’s other hand. “We’ll reach Kinsgaith tomorrow, and our real work can begin. Let us simply finish this leg of the journey first, yes?”

“All right, then. You all win. To Goldenvale first.” Shadows trailed Elyria’s boots as she started striding back toward the horses and supplies, Kit and Cedric following behind her. They exchanged a wary look, and Cedric knew that she was just as concerned for Elyria as he was.

Well, maybe not *just* as concerned. He would be kidding himself to think that anybody on this side of the Hereafter was capable of worrying about his *solimaeus* as frequently or as thoroughly as he did. Still, there was something reassuring in knowing he and Kit were on the same page.

Maybe it was good for Kit, too, to have somewhere to focus her own worry.

Cedric knew that thoughts of Nox plagued her. They plagued him, too. Could the nocterrian bastard not even be bothered to send one of their darkness-spun pieces of parchment to communicate that they were safe?

"All right, everyone. You know the drill by now. Stay close," warned Elyria, dragging Cedric's attention back just in time to see her shadows surge around the group. And like a blanket of silence had been draped over them all, swallowing sound and distance alike, Elyria pulled the entire group forward through the in-between.

The world folded.

Then, after a little while, it unfolded, and Cedric found himself standing at the top of Goldenvale's main road.

"Right," he said, clapping a heaving Thraigg on the back. "Who fancies a drink at the Walking Goat?"



IT WAS EVEN BETTER than he recalled.

The tavern was a squat, stone-built structure with wide windows and a cheerfully crackling hearth. Fortunately, the tavern master remembered Cedric, and within seconds of the group having entered, was ushering them past throngs of drinking, chattering patrons to a series of booths along the left wall.

Cedric had wondered, briefly, if sentiment toward him might have changed, given the new state of the world and his starkly Arcanian travel companions. But whether because the accords meant accepting the fact that Arcanians now could come freely to Havensreach or just because Cedric himself had garnered a reputation for being in Arcanian company, not a single person present had a sour word to say.

The only one who said anything to them at all, in fact, was the lovely Miss Sabrina, whom Cedric recognized from his previous visits. The poor

girl hounded Cedric the instant his rear touched his seat, immediately inquiring as to Tristan's whereabouts. The crestfallen look on her face when Cedric had to inform her that he was not, in fact, traveling with the knight this time was something that would surely feed his friend's ego for a month.

Best not to tell him for that precise reason, he thought, and Elyria's responding laugh bounced through his head. Their mind-to-mind connection was even stronger now in the wake of their completed life-bond, their inner thoughts that much easier to access. Cedric would have to be mindful of that.

"Oh, you will, will you?" Elyria said as she slid into the booth next to him, pressing close.

Cedric gave her an arch look. *"Evidently. I already have enough trouble not making a fool of myself around you. I tremble at the thought of what you'll do with unfettered access to my mind."*

Kit and Jocelyn exchanged a puzzled look when Elyria began giggling aloud.

"Four hells," Jocelyn muttered.

"Nope. *Still* not used to it," Kit said with a shake of her head.

The warmth of the tavern settled into Cedric's bones as the tavern master delivered metal tankards full of ale and a few platters piled high with biscuits and jams, dried meats and fruits.

"Any cider?" Elyria asked hopefully, and the degree to which her bottom lip had jutted out when the man shook his head made Cedric, Kit, and Jocelyn all burst out laughing . . . at least until Elyria kicked each one of them under the table.

It was odd, he recognized. To be laughing, drinking, to feel carefree and at ease, knowing what they could be facing tomorrow. His discordant feelings must have found their way down the bond, because Elyria took Cedric's hand under the table and gave it a reassuring squeeze. Like she was telling him it was all right to sit in this contentment. To allow himself the freedom to just be—here, now, in this moment.

And because, of course, they were all very aware it wasn't to last.

Cedric just didn't think it would come to a close *quite* so soon.

A series of gasps rang through the room, and Cedric's hand shot to Ashrender, which he'd leaned against the side of the booth. But the alarm suddenly singing from the tavern's patrons was not because they were under attack. Multiple things did happen at once, however.

First the tavern doors burst open.

Then the air over the table in front of Cedric shimmered and broke open, and a cub-sized Sid leapt out of the air onto the tabletop, deftly avoiding stepping in Kit's mug.

And before the rift in the air had sealed shut, out flew a small sparrow. It circled the table before landing on Elyria's outstretched hand.

Surprise had Cedric's mouth gaping open. "You sent a sparrow? When?"

Elyria nodded. "Early this morning, while we were *stepping* north. I wanted to give Tenny an update on how we were faring."

Kit's mismatched eyes widened the smallest degree. "How long does it take a sparrow to arrive at its destination?" she asked.

Elyria shrugged. "How am I supposed to know? I would assume it vastly depends on the destination. Faster than we are able to traverse through the shadows ourselves though."

"Amazing," Kit said, with Jocelyn nodding along proudly.

Cedric couldn't join the fae in marveling at his *solimaeus's* shadow mastery, at how simple it now seemed for her to do so many fantastical things. Nor could he do more than stop Jocelyn's drink from tipping over, a near casualty of Sid's tail as the shadowcat leapt off the table.

The sparrow opened its dark beak, and out came Tenny's high, bright voice.

"All blessings to the Five that we will see you again soon," she said. "And in such wonderful circumstances too. My update is that King Callum received my missive to reroute the forces he was sending to Luminaria. They have just arrived, and we now have the village surrounded. We await your arrival. Stars above, it'll be so good to see—wait, Tristan, leave it. I said, I have it—don't touch that!"

And then the sparrow cut off, dissipating in a puff of smoke, leaving everyone at the table gaping. Cedric could sense the tension shift perceptibly. Kit's eyes softened, even as she continued staring at the spot where the sparrow had disappeared. Jocelyn's lips pressed together, her eyes lifting to the ceiling as if in silent thanks. Directly behind her, Cedric could see Shep's shoulders drop, and he and the other sylvans occupying the next booth toasted with one another.

They weren't the only ones toasting, though.

It took Cedric a moment to remember the tavern door being thrown open. To realize that amidst the arrival of their shadowy familiars, someone else had entered the Walking Goat. Multiple someones, it would appear, from the sudden burst of boisterous noise coming from near the entrance. An entrance that was thoroughly blocked by the four, five, no, *six* heavily armored dwarves now clamoring for attention at the bar.

Thraigg's booming laugh rang above the din. "Rev! Ric! Kit!" he bellowed. "C'mere, I've some folks for ye to meet."

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ONE LAST TOAST

KIT



"OI, WHO'S IT YER TRYIN' TO PAWN US OFF ON, LITTLE BROTHER?" ONE OF the newly arrived dwarves hooked an arm around Thraigg's neck, pulling him into a choke hold.

"The best people ye'll ever meet, ye ugly bastard," Thraigg stammered out, his face turning red.

Kit leapt from the booth and dashed over to the bar, ready to throw Thraigg's sudden assailant on his dwarven ass. But before she could reach him, the dwarf released Thraigg with a guffaw.

"We may be ugly, and we may be bastards," said another one of the dwarves, hoisting his mug high in the air, "but ye'd still trust us with yer life, I reckon."

"Aye, I would at that," Thraigg said, straightening. He clapped the first dwarf on the shoulder, then reached over and stole the second dwarf's drink right out of his hand. "Nothing to it but to do it," he said in toast, then slammed the mug to his bearded mouth and drained it dry.

"Well, then," Kit said slowly, peering back at Elyria, Cedric, and Jocelyn, who hadn't moved from the booth. They gave her a shrug, then went right back to their own drinks. "Care to introduce your, er, friends?"

Thraigg used the mug in his hand to gesture to each of the dwarves in turn. "Kingsley, Scarper, Onyx, Ludov, Pious, and Georgie. Stonehold's finest." He set the cup down on the bar top with a *thud* before addressing his brethren. "Meet the Lady Ravenswing, ye mad lot."

Kit grinned. “Ah, but of course.” She turned to the dwarves, their intricately woven beards already wet with ale. “You’ll forgive me if it takes a bit to get you all straight.”

They laughed, almost in unison.

“We’d never expect ye to, my lady,” said the first dwarf, the copper rings in his black beard jangling as he bent into a low bow that had the rest of his compatriots snickering.

“Kingsley, is it?” she asked, the edges of her mouth tipping up at the corners. “I must admit, after the greeting you gave Thraigg, I didn’t expect such manners.”

“When manners are called for, manners are served, my lady. Kingsley Ironfist, at yer service.”

Kit’s eyebrows shot up her forehead. “Ironfist? So the two of you really are brothers, then?”

Thraigg laughed. “Not necessarily by blood, but yes—in the sense that all of Clan Ironfist are brothers.”

The other dwarves still standing at the bar had received their drinks now, including the one with a glorious red beard, who’d had his first mug stolen—Georgie, if Kit recalled correctly. Clanging rang throughout the tavern as they slapped their mugs together and began chanting, “Ironfist! Ironfist! Ironfist!”

“C’mon, then, brother,” Thraigg said, throwing an arm over Kingsley’s shoulder. “Let me introduce ye to a real king.”



“SORRY, repeat that just *one more time* for me?” Elyria was leaning so far over the table, Kit thought it might have tipped right over if not for the three dwarves packed in, hip to hip to hip, on the other side of the booth.

“I thought fae hearing was s’posed to be better than most,” Ludov whispered to Georgie, who snickered into his mug.

“It isn’t for lack of hearing that we’re having trouble understanding,” said Cedric from where he stood at the head of the table. Kit was typically loath to compliment *men* of all people, but she had to admit that the knightling had continued growing on her. He’d been quick to vacate his seat to make room for Kit when the dwarves wandered over. And with Jocelyn

opting to go see how Shep and the others were faring, Elyria and Kit found themselves sitting across from three of their new dwarven companions.

"Companions" was an apt choice of words, as it turned out, because it was certainly no coincidence that they were here.

"What more's there to say?" Georgie shrugged. The motion jostled Ludov's arm, making him spill ale down his front, and Ludov slapped the back of Georgie's head.

"Knock it off, ye loons," said Kingsley with a roll of his eyes—bright blue, just like Thraigg's. "We hear of a job, we show up for it. And this one paid better than most, I'll tell ye what."

Elyria blew a lock of hair out of her eyes with a huff. "Yes, but the one who hired you—"

"Yer Master Tartanis."

"He's not *my*—" Elyria shook her head. "Not the point. You're telling me that *Tartanis* hired you to come here, to fight with us?"

"Are they slow as well as deaf, d'ye think?" Georgie faux-whispered, and this time it was Ludov who snorted into his mug.

"All right, that's enough from the two of ye," barked Thraigg, ambling up to Cedric's side. "Out!"

Ludov and Georgie howled with laughter as they shoved their way out of the booth.

Thraigg took their place next to Kingsley with a heavy sigh. "Sorry 'bout them, Rev. I'll keep 'em in line. And I promise ye, on the battlefield, ye won't find finer folk to have at yer back. Or yer front. Or yer side, really."

Kit's mouth had been hanging open throughout the entirety of the conversation, since Kingsley first explained the reason that the dwarves—dwarven mercenaries, in fact—had come.

A thought occurred. "How did you get here so quickly?" Kit asked. "And how did you know to meet us here rather than in Kinsgaith?" She thought briefly about the geography of the human side of Arcanis. "You would have had to pass by the village in order to come here from Stonehold, wouldn't you?"

"Aye, well, that's an easy one to answer," said Kingsley. "We weren't in Stonehold, now, were we? The boys and I were just on our way home from another job down south when we got the notice."

"The notice from Master Tartanis," Elyria said disbelievingly.

“As I’ve said. He told us to meet ye lot here, so that’s just what we did.” Kingsley turned to Thraigg. “Feels like we could’ve avoided a lot of these damned questions if ye’d just told them, brother.”

“Hey, now, that would mean I had something to tell,” Thraigg protested quickly. He held his hands up placatingly to Elyria. “I swear, lass, it isn’t like yer father told me ’bout his grand plans. He just asked a few questions about the boys, that’s all. Clearly the man put together all the rest on his own.”

“Your father works fast, Ellie,” Kit said, slumping back in her seat.

“Evidently,” Elyria replied, though something that very nearly looked like wonder flashed across her face as she did. Kit imagined she would feel much the same in her position. She hoped she’d have the opportunity to—hoped that maybe, just maybe, her family might still pull through in the end.

Even if they didn’t, though, at least things looked remarkably brighter now than they had even a few hours prior.

They had King Callum’s soldiers.

They had their own forces, now bolstered by these dwarves, who—as messy and raucous as they might seem—would be foolish to underestimate. The marks carved into the armor they wore and the fierce-looking hammers they’d left piled by the door made as much clear.

It felt more and more clear to Kit that they stood a real chance of victory in Kinsgaith tomorrow, and that was a bolstering thought.

“There’s more, my lady,” Kingsley said, bowing his head.

Elyria sat up. “More?”

“That other job I mentioned? The one we were comin’ from? It weren’t a battle mission like this. It was a reclamation job.”

“A what?”

“Old fort farther south,” he said. “Abandoned years back. Armories were still intact, though, and full of decent weaponry just waitin’ for new homes. So we dwarves got to do what we do best—piled our wagons high and were on our way back when the message found us. We split our party, sent a few folks up to Hammerfell with the majority of our spoils. But Tartanis paid us extra to bring the best pieces right to you.”

“You have armor for us? Weapons?” Cedric asked, and Kit could nearly see the stars in his eyes.

Boys and their toys.

“Aye.” Kingsley tapped his fist against the table. “Won’t make ye invincible by any means. But it might help keep some of ye breathin’, should the fighting get dirty.”

Kit flicked her gaze to Elyria’s face, and she had to stifle another laugh at the look she found there.

“Show us what you’ve got,” said Elyria, a fervor in her voice that rivaled Cedric’s. Not *just* boys who loved playing with new toys, then.

Kingsley’s attention snapped to her, and something like respect flickered in his eyes. “Aye. Gladly.”



THE SETUP of the wagon parked just outside the tavern was impressive. As was, apparently, the dwarves’ confidence that nobody would come by looking to pilfer their wares. Or perhaps it was simply confidence that whoever would dare commit such a crime would not get far before paying for it. In the flickering torchlight outside, the battle scars carved into the dwarves’ armor—and into their skin, Kit realized—looked somehow much more severe. They might drink a good game, but there was no doubt that these were warriors.

The clink and clang of metal being sorted rang through the cold night air as Georgie hopped up onto the wagon and started dragging pieces out to show the rest of the group.

There was . . . a lot.

Not just swords and daggers and axes, though there were plenty of those, with edges honed to a sharp taper and sheaths made from sturdy leather. There were breastplates and bracers, gauntlets and pauldrons. Several sets of chain mail and a stack of beautiful, mixed-metal shields.

Elyria stood at the edge of the wagon, scanning the assorted pieces on display for a moment, then stepped back.

“Nothing catching your fancy, Ellie?” Kit asked. “I’ve got my eye on that pretty set of pauldrons on the left myself.”

“Better snag them before anyone else sees,” Elyria replied with a laugh. “But for me? I’ve got my own armor.” Her shadows misted over her skin as if to make a point. “Still, I’d thought maybe if they had a good-looking staff . . .” She shrugged.

“Sorry, my lady,” Georgie said sheepishly, leaning against the edge of the wagon. “Got nothing of the sort, I’m afraid.”

Kingsley slapped Georgie’s hand, and the dwarf yelped. “It’s ‘Yer Majesty,’ to that one, ye eejit.”

Kit chuckled.

Elyria groaned. “I promise you, Elyria is *just fine*.”

She looked like she wanted to say more, but the clopping of hooves down the cobblestone road had everyone’s attention turning at once. There was a snort and then a whinny—high and frantic—as a magnificent champagne-coated horse came to a stop in front of the group.

“Fjaethe!” Elyria exclaimed, dashing for the horse and running a soothing hand down the side of her neck.

Elyria’s mare stood there, riderless on the street, her chest heaving, coat splattered with mud. Fjaethe let out a low, distressed nicker as Elyria pressed her forehead to the horse’s.

Kit’s heart dropped into her stomach.

“Tenny,” she said, voice cracking over the name. “Tenny took Fjaethe to Kinsgaith. If she’s here now, then—”

“Then something is wrong in the village.” Elyria’s voice was as sharp and cold as an ice-forged blade. “Something must have happened. We need to go.”

“But we *just* heard from her,” Cedric said, though the tremble in his voice belied any confidence he might have otherwise meant to project. “She said the king’s soldiers are there, that they have the entire village surrounded. Surely—”

“Nothing is sure when it comes to *him*,” Elyria said. “Nothing is certain. Tenny could have sent that sparrow on its way hours ago. Do you really think Fjaethe’s being here is some coincidence? We cannot afford to be wrong.”

The tavern doors swung open one final time, and Sid moseyed out onto the street, still somewhat cub-sized, though larger than she’d first been when she popped out from the shadows. With barely a glance at Elyria, the shadowcat hopped onto Fjaethe’s back and curled up in a ball behind her withers. The horse calmed instantly, her breath slowing, misting evenly from her nostrils.

“So much for that final night’s rest,” Thraigg lamented. “We didn’t even get to make one last toast.”

“We can toast to Malakar’s demise on the way,” Elyria said sharply. “We move for Kinsgaith *now.*”

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REUNION

TENNY



TENNY FELT IT BEFORE SHE SAW IT—A SHIFT IN THE AIR, A PRESSURE behind her ribs, a prickle running down her spine. She'd thought at first it was just the lack of sleep getting to her, the weight of this nebulous time of night, just before dawn was to break.

It wasn't as though anyone else had been able to sleep either.

Tenny looked up from where she was cloistered around a small table with Tristan, Ollie, Zephyr, and Captain Gaius, the leader of the contingent of King Callum's forces that had joined them here in Kinsgaith.

Joined them just in time, as it turned out.

Malakar's sudden appearance yesterday still clung to the air, a sickening, smothering reminder. Tenny could not scrub her mind of the way his magic had torn through the southern edge of the encampment, leaving soldiers scrambling to hold the line, horses whinnying as they broke loose and escaped in the chaos.

They had regained control eventually. Closed ranks. Rallied the men.

But not before the dark sorcerer had cut his way through to get to the village.

And not before some things had been lost—Fjaethe being one of them. Concern for where the animal had run off to sat heavy on Tenny's shoulders, but the sting of her absence was nothing compared to the air of death that hung over them all. Nothing compared to the sacrifice of the

soldiers who'd had the grave misfortune of being in exactly the wrong place when Malakar had shown up.

Tenny swallowed and pushed the memory down. She did not have the luxury of reliving it now. Not the way Malakar had looked—wearing her father's body, familiar and wrong. Not the way he had ripped through those soldiers, shadows and bloodred whips of magic tearing off limbs the way one might tear into a crusty loaf of bread.

Tenny shuddered, then turned her head, looking toward the top of the eastern hill overlooking the village. Where the air itself seemed to be rippling, shadows peeling back from nothing.

For a heartbeat, she forgot how to breathe.

And then, all at once, she remembered.

And she was running.

Because there they were, lit by the setting moon and the aurora sweeping across the sky.

Cedric was astride Polonius, one hand gripping the reins, the other resting on Ashrender's pommel. His eyes were alert and assessing as he checked the area. Surrounding him stood the rest—Jocelyn and Thraigg and Young Shep and Kit—*Kit*—along with a whole slew of people Tenny didn't recognize but was grateful to see, nonetheless.

Horses stamped and snorted. Carts full of supplies materialized out of the ether behind them. And there, at the forefront of them all, shadows still misting over her skin, was Elyria Lightbreaker, the Revenant, sitting strong-backed and tall, mounted upon—

"Fjaethe!" Tenny's heart beat unevenly as she scrambled up the hill, nearly tripping over her skirts. Shouts rose behind her—alarm, recognition, joy—and boots crunched against the frozen, snow-covered earth as others followed.

Tenny barely had time to suck in a final breath before warm arms closed around her and she was being crushed against leather, surrounded by warm, familiar, rosemary-scented strength.

"You're here," she whispered against Kit's shoulder. "You're really here."

She pulled back to find the fae smiling at her with something unreadable in those bewitching blue and green eyes.

Cedric dismounted from Polonius in one smooth motion and swept Tenny out of Kit's arms and into a crushing embrace that knocked the

breath from her lungs. “Stars above, Ten. It’s so good to see you,” he said, voice thick. And then a laugh burst from him as Tristan ran up beside the two of them, his arms surrounding them both.

“You wily motherfucker,” Tristan said, clapping Cedric on the shoulder twice. He left his hand there, gripping his friend tight, like he meant to keep him in place, like he wanted to prevent him from ever leaving again. “Better late than never, I suppose.”

“As if you’re one to lecture me on punctuality, Tris,” Cedric said, though his warm brown eyes were glassy when they met Tenny’s gaze again. She had no doubt hers were too.

“She lives!” Ollie’s cheerful voice cut across the group, and the fae had a broad smile on his face as he flitted past Cedric, Tenny, and Tristan. Elyria didn’t even get the chance to slide from Fjaethe’s back—quartered hell, it was *such* a relief to see that horse—before Ollie pulled her into the air, sweeping her into a wild hug.

“Put me down, you lunatic!” Elyria yelled, laughing as they spun around and around, Ollie’s ice-blue wings flapping behind him.

And then it was like the world stopped.

Because Elyria wasn’t just hanging on to Ollie as the two of them floated above the group. She was flying too, her aurora-colored wings flared wide as she continued hugging her friend.

“By the Five,” Tenny murmured, eyes immediately going to the edges of Elyria’s wings, where their purple-and-green hue faded into a sparkling misty black, like someone had wrapped her shadows in threads of gold.

“They’re so beautiful, Ellie,” Kit said as Elyria and Ollie landed, their wings disappearing as they folded back under their cloaks. “I hope I never stop being amazed at seeing them like this.”

The tears that had been threatening to spill over finally cascaded down Tenny’s cheeks while she nodded in agreement. Her final memory of Elyria had played on a loop in her mind these past months. Tenny had been unable to forget the look of searing pain on Elyria’s face as a resurrected Malakar had used her own shadows to slice her wings clean from her back. Had been unable to forget the way they’d looked, bloody and limp and *alone* on the floor.

To see them again now, not only back where they belonged but somehow even more majestic, healed something deep inside Tenny, something she hadn’t even realized had been cracked.

“I’m so s-sorry for what he did,” Tenny blurted out, her voice breaking as she tried—and failed—to hold in a sob. She didn’t know when Kit had stepped closer again, but as a warm hand tugged at her wrist, then intertwined with her fingers, Tenny’s racing pulse began to settle.

“Nothing he did was your fault. You know that, right?” Elyria’s emerald-green eyes were piercing as she held Tenny’s gaze. “It’s important that you know that.”

Tenny released another broken sob.

“Thank you for holding down the fort,” Elyria said. “First in Kingshelm and now here.”

Tenny could only give a shaky nod in return.

Elyria surveyed the rest of the scene around them. Her smile brightened as she locked eyes with Tristan, then wavered slightly as Zephyr came forward and gave a small, tenuous wave. She inclined her head at the sylvan—not a warm greeting, perhaps, but an acknowledgment, and that alone seemed to make Zephyr’s shoulders drop in relief.

“All right there, Zeph?” Thraigg said, a goofy grin plastered on his face as he hooked elbows with two dwarves on either side of him. “I’ve some folks ye should meet.”

Tenny waved at the entire line of dwarves as they passed, scooping Zephyr up into their procession and trailed closely by Jocelyn, Young Shep, and the other sylvans who’d arrived with them. The group began making their way toward the encampment, dragging horses and wagons down the hill, and soon, only Elyria, Cedric, Tenny, Kit, Tristan, and Ollie remained at the top.

“What the—” Tenny yelped as something brushed against her leg, and when she pulled her cloak aside, a black nose and two dark ears were poking out from beneath her skirt.

“Sid, get out of there,” Elyria scolded, though her amusement was evident in her voice.

The shadowcat emerged with a huff, and Tenny gasped.

“She’s so small,” she whispered, like it was a secret.

Kit grinned, giving Tenny’s hand a reassuring squeeze before releasing it. “You’ll get used to it.”

Elyria tilted her head. “Yeah, apparently that’s a thing she does. Not to worry. She’ll size back up when it counts.”

Tenny released a disbelieving laugh as Sid bounded down the path after Thraigg and the others. The levity lingered for a few more moments, with Tristan finally releasing his grip on Cedric to lean affectionately into Ollie, but it wasn't long before the atmosphere among them shifted into something more serious.

Cedric's gaze swept across the encampment below. "How many soldiers did the king send?"

"Two hundred, more or less," Tristan said.

"Less, after Malakar's visit," Ollie added darkly.

"What?" Elyria's head whirled toward Ollie so quickly, Tenny thought it might spin right off her neck. "Malakar *is* here, then?"

Tenny pursed her lips, her gaze falling to the ground. "He arrived yesterday. Just moments after I sent back your sparrow. King Callum's men had only just finished setting up the perimeter around the village when he did."

"He was singularly focused on getting into Kinsgaith. Barely noticed the rest of us, save for the unfortunate souls who got in his way." Tristan looked away, disgusted.

"And now?" Elyria said, her voice almost manic. "He's still down there?"

Ollie nodded. "We haven't seen him since he made it past our line. But we can't follow inside, because he threw some kind of blood-runed barrier up around the village. You can't see it, but believe me, it's there."

Cedric grimaced. "Yes, he's got a penchant for those kinds of spells, it would seem."

"You haven't seen him since?" Elyria repeated, pacing back and forth in front of them now. "He's made no attempts to reach the Chasm?"

"None," Tristan answered. "We've been vigilant in watching the border."

"If anyone tried to breach the edge, we would know, Elle," Ollie added.

Elyria turned sharply, her eyes snapping to the scar of the Chasm, easily visible from the hilltop. "Would we? What if we're already too late? Four *fucking* hells, I knew we should've—"

Cedric reached for her, snagging one of her hands to slow her pacing. Their gazes connected, and there was a long, prolonged period of silence during which their facial expressions ran the gamut from anger to panic to melancholy to understanding.

“You’re right, Ollie,” Tenny whispered. “That is *very* odd to witness.”

“You’re telling me,” Tristan agreed.

Cedric shrugged at the two of them as he finally broke his attention from Elyria. “Another thing you’ll both have to get used to, I’m afraid,” he said simply, and the soft smile curving his lips had something warming in Tenny’s chest. As did the ring she saw glinting in the aurora’s light from his fourth finger. Both their fingers, she realized, taking in the ring of black on Elyria’s hand.

Congratulations would have to wait, though.

“We can’t risk Malakar slipping down to the Line,” said Elyria. “We need to seal the Chasm now.”

“You can do that?” Tenny asked, surprise speeding up the beat of her heart.

“They can,” said Kit softly, and Tenny watched with astonishment as both Elyria and Cedric waved their hands in unison and the air above them shimmered. A fraction of a second later, twin crowns appeared on their heads.

Ollie gasped before Tenny had the chance to. “Two . . . ? But I thought —the prophecy . . . ?”

“We were just as surprised as you,” said Elyria. “But here we are. And we can’t wait any longer.”

“Shouldn’t you rest though? Or get yourself some sustenance, at least?” Tenny said, the words tumbling out in an overeager rush. It all seemed so sudden. Dawn was only barely starting to crest on the horizon.

“Don’t worry, the tavern master in Goldenvale made sure we were well fed before leaving,” Kit said. “Gave us everything, down to his very last rasher of bacon, upon *someone’s* instance.”

Elyria squared her shoulders, a smug smile tipping one side of her mouth. It disappeared a half second later, though.

“I wouldn’t get in her way when it comes to this, Ten,” Kit continued, lowering her voice. “When it comes to stopping *him*.”

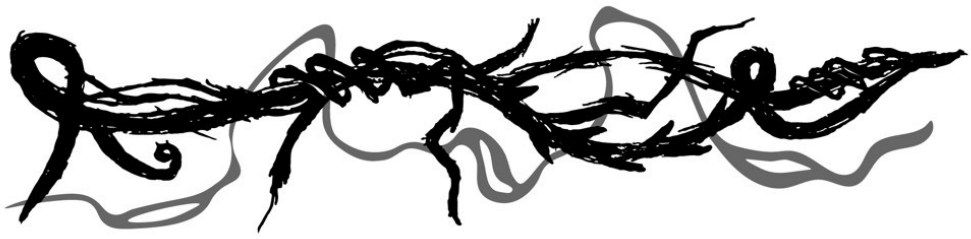
Tenny swallowed thickly. “All right,” she said, turning back toward the encampment at the bottom of the hill. “Follow me.”

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THE SEAM OF THE WORLD

ELYRIA



FEAR WAS NOT THE THING THAT HAD ELYRIA LIGHTBREAKER'S FINGERS trembling as she stood at the edge of the mist-covered Chasm. No, it was anticipation. The hope and eagerness and expectation wrapped up in knowing what she was about to do.

What she thought, maybe, somehow, she'd always been meant to do.

Dawn had turned the sky behind the aurora a pale shade of gray, hiding the stars from view. Cedric's hand was warm as it found hers, their fingers threading together in a way that felt so simple, so familiar now. The bond between them flared, a heartstring shining with their shared strength. She felt him in her blood, her soul, like a current at the base of her spine.

Elyria let herself breathe with him for several long moments, his power flowing through their life-bond, the power of the Crown of Concord seeping into her from where it sat boldly atop her head. Her wild magic ran rampant in her veins, seeking an outlet, ready to *move*.

She turned to glance behind her and Cedric. Dozens upon dozens of soldiers had formed an audience—lines of them craning their necks for a better vantage. They weren't who Elyria was looking for, though. At their front stood Kit, Tenny, Tristan, Ollie, Zephyr, Thraigg, Shep, and even a large-again Sid, all of them watching with varying expressions—tense, wary, hopeful, awestruck, and in Sid's case, somewhat unimpressed.

Elyria smiled to herself, then turned to face forward again. To face the beckoning Chasm.

“Are you ready?” Cedric asked, his voice blanketing her mind with love, pride, reassurance, and just the barest hint of fear.

Elyria tightened her grip on his hand. *“Yes.”* Then, just to herself, blocking the thoughts from their bond because she didn’t want to add to that thread of fear, Elyria prayed.

Not to any of the star gods in particular—not to Solaris or Lunara and *certainly* not to Aurelia or Noctis. Not even to the Earth Mother herself, who probably had the most cause to be invested in what they were about to do. Elyria didn’t know if any of the celestials bothered to listen anymore. She didn’t care if they did.

She prayed to the deep roots of the world, to the mana she knew flowed throughout Arcanis, the lines from which all power sprang. *Please,* she thought. *Please work. Please let us protect you. Protect* this.

She raised her free hand, fingers splayed, palm facing the earth as if she might draw additional strength from the soil. Darkness seeped out around her ankles, covering her and Cedric’s feet in black smoke. Tendrils of shadow crept over the ground, diving over the edge of the Chasm, sinking into rock and frost-hardened soil—seeking, searching.

“Follow the trail of my magic,” she told Cedric, and she felt the prickle of recognition down their bond. He, too, remembered the first time she’d spoken those words during the Crucible, the very first time they’d ever used their magic in tandem. Back when the task at hand was crossing a flaming lake, not stitching the world back together.

Still, there really was something so familiar about this now, even with the excess of power flowing through them both. Elyria’s crown was hot on her brow—pulsing, vibrating—as, together, they channeled wild and shadow and sunfyre, all braiding together in a glorious mélange of magic.

She did not consciously know what she was doing as she let that magic seep down, down, down, until it wrapped around roots so thick they felt like they were the very thing holding the world together. All she heard was Cedric’s sharp intake of breath. All she saw was the endless dark looming in front of her. All she felt was the hum of power, the terrible might of the crown skittering through her bones, eager to heal the yawning wound that gaped open before her.

Vaguely, Elyria understood that gasps were ringing in the air somewhere behind her, that awestruck words were being exchanged. But it all seemed

so far away. For her, there was only Cedric, only their linked power, and only this.

Elyria *pulled.*

Roots burst from the side of the Chasm, tearing through the rocky walls. Not the delicate vines of merryleaf that Elyria favored when her mood was light, nor the thick, thorny brambles she used against enemies. No, to call these “thick” was to do them a massive disservice. These were pillars, ropes nearly as wide as a sylvan was tall—things of colossal heft. And as though the Chasm itself was a loom, they shot across it, forming a sort of lattice that stretched, suspended, over the abyss.

The land shuddered as the roots slammed into the walls on the opposite side, embedding themselves deep within the stone. Chunks of rock rained down, swallowed soundlessly by the void.

That was where the soundlessness ended, however, as shouts of alarm filled the air and the very world let out a groan. And then every single soul standing on the edge of the Chasm outside Kinsgaith was moving—not of their own volition, but because the earth itself had begun to shift beneath their feet, bringing them along with it.

Bright light filled the edges of Elyria’s vision, and she knew without looking down that it had to be coming from them—from her and Cedric both. She imagined how they must have looked to everyone standing behind them—two living luminaries, sunfyre and shadow wrapped around them from tip to toe, knitting the sundered world back together.

Two bloods, finding their way to heal the realm.

Elyria widened her stance and planted her feet. In her mind’s eye, she saw a torn cloak, golden thread woven across either side of a ripped seam. She pulled on that thread, and ever so slowly, stitch by stitch, the tear began to close.

Before her, the gap narrowed.

And narrowed.

And narrowed.

And narrowed more, still.

Elyria grunted, and beside her, Cedric’s breathing became labored.

Her shoulders burned. Her palms tingled.

Still, she kept pulling.

Pain lanced through her skull, the crown suddenly burning too hot, its weight too heavy. As if it was pulling from Elyria, rather than the other way

around. As if it wanted to pour them both straight into the wound of the world.

She tasted copper. Her vision blurred.

More, the magic seemed to croon. *More. Use it all. Heal it all. Close every scar.*

Elyria's breath hitched. She could do it, couldn't she? Close the rift from here to the southern sea. Close the western Chasm, too, while she was at it. She could flatten mountains, bury mana springs, or create new ones altogether.

She could do anything.

She was power incarnate.

Cedric's hand tightened around hers, his voice brushing her mind. *"That's enough, my love."* The words were faint, like someone shouting through a rainstorm. But Elyria heard them. And the reminder of his presence, the fact that he was there with her, in this *with* her, was all she needed. She might be willing to crumble herself to ash in order to heal the world, to burn through every last cell until there was nothing left of her but a speck of shadow on the wind . . .

But she would never burn through him.

The very prospect of it was so suddenly sobering that Elyria stumbled in place. But Cedric was there, his grip still firmly locked on her, keeping her afloat.

Elyria's heart slammed against her ribs as she turned her head to look up at him. Her *solimaeus's* gold-filled eyes looked back. They saw *everything*.

"I can—" she began, throat raw.

"But you don't have to," he said, and she heard the strain in his own voice, the effect of his power being pulled and stretched in tandem with hers. "Not now. Not today."

His free hand went to her chin, and he bent to graze her lips with the gentlest, tenderest kiss, before he turned her face back toward the Chasm. She forced herself to look down at the remaining gap, the narrowing seam. It was only a few feet wide now—short enough to leap over.

They would not close the entire Chasm in one fell swoop, but they would seal it here, now, and they would prevent Malakar from getting to the Line.

Enough, she told herself. *It has to be enough.*

She squeezed Cedric’s hand. Nodded. And with one final, controlled pull, the remaining sliver of the Chasm sealed.

The world stilled.

For several achingly long moments, there was silence—nothing but Elyria’s own heartbeat thudding in her ear and Cedric’s pride pulsing down the bond between them. Elyria swayed on her feet, and in a flash, Cedric’s arm was around her, steadying her, anchoring her against his chest. She pressed her forehead to his pauldron-clad shoulder, her lungs burning.

And then it was as though Gaia herself breathed a sigh of relief.

The deed was done.

The wind picked up, a slice of icy air cooling the sweat that had gathered on the back of Elyria’s neck. She sucked in a crisp, wintry breath. And the crowd behind them erupted in thunderous applause.

“We did it,” she rasped.

Cedric’s hand slid up her spine, steady and careful. “You did it,” he said softly. She wanted to cry at the warmth in his voice, even as she could tell the task had taken its toll on him, too.

Her crown was not hot anymore. It felt like . . . well, like a crown. As they had suspected, the power held within the Crowns of Concord did not appear to be infinite. It was not gone entirely, not empty. But it was sleeping once more.

Elyria lifted her head, blinking hard, forcing her eyes to focus. The sight before her was not particularly pretty. A jagged, uneven mound of land marked where the two sides of the Chasm had sealed together. It stretched to Elyria’s left and right, and though thick morning mist covered the ground and made it difficult to see more than a few hundred feet in any direction, she knew in her bones that it went on for miles.

She wondered what it looked like, where the scar began to tear open again. Was it like a ripped seam on a pair of trousers, widening ever so slightly, inch by inch? Would it be the same every time, to pull that thread and seal it up?

She supposed she would find out soon enough. There would be time to fix the rest later, when the crowns awoke.

For now, they still had a far more pressing problem to solve.

Tristan and Ollie had already approached, the two of them grinning as they clapped Cedric on the shoulder. Elyria turned to see Tenny’s luminous face, her cheeks shining with fresh tears. Beside her, Kit exhaled so

forcefully, her entire torso seemed to cave in on itself—like she'd been holding her breath the entire time they'd been at work.

Jocelyn was smiling as she gave Elyria an approving nod, while Shep and Zephyr had their hands clasped in front of them, their heads bowed in reverence, like they were praying. Elyria shook her head at that and walked over to where they stood with the other sylvans.

"None of that now," she said with a breathy laugh. "I am the last thing you want to worship, believe me."

Zephyr bit her lip as she straightened. "Elyria, I—" She inhaled sharply through her nose. "I truly am sorry. For everything. You must know that—"

Elyria stopped her with a lift of her hand. "I understand why you did it. What you were trying to save."

Zephyr's forest-green eyes grew glassy.

"That doesn't mean I might not still get surly about it every now and again," Elyria added quickly, folding her arms over her chest. "But fuck it all. I don't want to bring grudges into the Arcanis we're trying to build. So let's just . . . not. Yeah?"

"If that's what you want," Zephyr replied, throat bobbing, "then of course it is what I want too."

"Oh, fine, if *you're* going to be all magnanimous and forgiving, I guess I can try too," Kit grumbled, slinging an arm across Elyria's shoulders and giving Zephyr a quick nod. "Damn fine bit of magic there, Ellie. Just in case nobody's told you yet."

"It really, really was," Zephyr said softly, her eyes darting to the sleeping crown still gleaming atop Elyria's head. The look in the sylvan's eyes was once again so alarmingly *reverential* that Elyria was quick to vanish the headpiece with a wisp of magic.

None of that, she thought. She was still just Elyria, after all.

"Do you think there was a lot of damage done to the villages that border the Chasm?" she asked.

Kit gestured to Kinsgaith behind them. "You tell me. Sure doesn't look like it. Felt no worse than a mild earthquake. I'm sure the fine people of Havensreach will be able to manage cleaning up a few potentially shattered dishes or overturned tables."

"A small price to pay for a healed land," offered Shep.

"Aye," shouted Thraigg from where he and the other dwarves were laughing among themselves. "Nothin' more than the damage we'd've

caused at the Walking Goat, had we remained there last night.”

Elyria was still contemplating this when she felt Cedric step up behind her. She turned to look at him, taking in his brutally beautiful face and noting that he had already banished his own crown from sight.

He was a quick study, that *solimaeus* of hers.

“Where’s Sid?” he asked, pursing his scarred lip to one side.

Kit released Elyria, her silver eyebrows drawing together. “She was, ah, right here the whole time you were—where *did* she go?”

The conversational murmurs from the soldiers still standing nearby shifted into something that felt much more akin to alarm, and Elyria spun to see new shadows forming atop the freshly sealed seam of the world.

Multiple gazes shot to her as she watched the rapidly expanding pool of dark smoke with wide eyes. “It isn’t me,” she said warily, just before Sid popped out of the shadows.

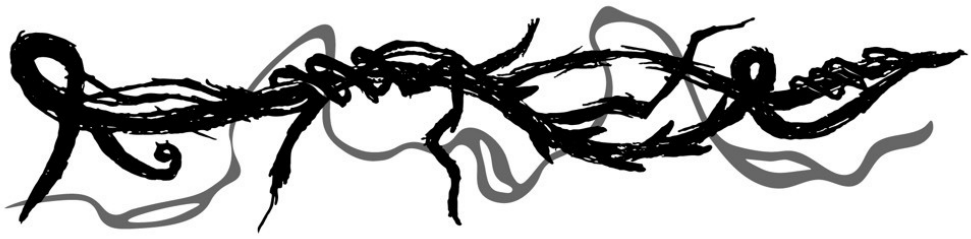
But the relief was momentary—just a flash. Because the shadowcat wasn’t the only one who appeared.

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48

THE NIGHT RETURNS

ELYRIA



"Nox!"

Cries of surprise rang through the air. Many of the soldiers backed up, giving the group a wide berth as they surged toward the absent nocterrian, who was even taller than Elyria's memory had painted them.

"You are well, Elyria?" Nox asked softly, so much uncharacteristic emotion in their voice that her throat felt suddenly tight. Had they ever even called her by her name before? She could only offer a tight nod in response.

Sid brushed against Elyria's legs, her volacarnii wings folded against her back. The shadowcat's tail flicked in the air as she padded away.

Elyria smiled at Nox. "My cat find you drifting through the shadows?"

"Something like that," they replied, and Elyria thought they might have said more, but someone else stole their attention.

"Tenebris," Kit breathed, a mix of relief and consternation and worry and something else written into the creases around her mismatched eyes as she approached.

Elyria did not miss the way the nocterrian's crimson-black gaze softened, but the two of them did not get the chance to exchange further words.

Tenny skidded to a stop next to Kit, a stunned sort of delight on her face. "You came," she said, chest heaving.

"Fuck me over the . . . Four bloody hells, what am I to say now? Jus' fuck me, I guess," Thraigg said, the new armor he wore grating against

itself as he jogged over. “Took ye damn long enough to get back to us, ye blue-horned bastard.”

“My apologies,” said Nox, a hint of white fang flashing against their lips. “It is a . . . long story. One best suited for later.”

Elyria thought she saw something dark flash across their face, but before she could register it fully, Nox continued.

“As much as I would enjoy lounging in the knowledge that you all missed me this much,” they said, and several low chuckles filtered into the air, “I am afraid there is a larger problem at hand.”

They pointed a long indigo finger back toward the village. Elyria’s gaze followed it . . . and her stomach dropped.

The streets of Kinsgaith were no longer empty.

Figures poured out of doorways and from beneath awnings, draped in bloodred cloaks that dragged along the cobblestones. Dozens of them. More.

Pewter medallions glinted from their chests in the brightening daylight, and Elyria would’ve bet a thousand pieces of gold that there was a sharp wolven face on each and every one.

They converged on the main street and began walking in unison toward the encampment, which was already a flurry of motion as soldiers ran about, strapping on gear and pulling their weapons from the racks on which they rested.

“Motherfuckers,” muttered Thraigg, dashing back over to join his dwarven brethren as the lot of them handed out the remaining pieces of armor and weaponry from their stash. Jocelyn was with them, helping some of the soldiers buckle on their armor.

Elyria palmed the handle of her new dagger—the one item she’d ended up snagging from the dwarves’ offerings—in its sheath against her thigh. Her tempered shadows misted over her skin, a comforting embrace as she eyed the swarm of cultists. The crowns might have spent their power, but Elyria still had plenty of her own.

Cedric placed a bracing hand against the small of her back, and Elyria’s magic roiled. Her shadows turned as solid as the ring on her finger, forming plates that locked against her skin—a suit of dark armor.

She looked up, surveying the sea of red cloaks that filled the village street. *Come try to take us,* she wanted to shout at them. Only, they weren’t

oncoming so much as . . . approaching—leisurely. Slowly. And then, once the first ones reached the top of the main street, stopping altogether.

"What are they doing?" Elyria asked. "What are they waiting for?"

"That's where the edge of Malakar's barrier is," Tristan said, the words sending a chill down Elyria's spine.

The full scene snapped into focus. The cultists had come to a stop just beyond the last row of cottages. From there, they'd still have to descend from the main street down the sloping road that led away from the village, then go past the encampment to reach the frozen meadow—the former location of the Chasm—where the soldiers were now gathered.

"They're waiting for him to drop it," Kit said with a sneer.

"Where is he?" Elyria spat. "Does anyone see him?"

"I don't," Tenny said. Elyria's heart cracked a little at the mix of fear and hope in Tenny's amber eyes as she scanned the cultists, presumably looking for some sign of her father's form.

Kit grabbed Tenny's forearm, pulling her attention to her. "You'll stay back, yes?"

"Of course she will," Nox said.

Tenny bristled at the two of them. "I know perfectly well how to fight." She gestured to Tristan and Ollie, who both immediately averted their gazes. "I've been practicing."

"Training, Ten," Tristan said with a groan. "You've been *training*."

"Semantics," she hissed. "Either way, I can fight."

"It isn't a question of whether you *can*, love," Kit said, tucking a strawberry curl behind Tenny's ear. "But healers are in far shorter supply than soldiers."

Nox tilted their head at the exchange before shifting their gaze to the gathering forces. "Some of these men are bound to get hurt," they said. "Conserve your mana, and be ready to put those saintly skills to good use, hmm?"

Tenny's throat bobbed. "All right."

Shep walked up and held out a slight green hand to her. "Come on, Tenny. We'll set up a triage tent at the top of the hill. The perfect spot from which to watch their backs, yeah?"

Elyria didn't hear her answer as the two of them walked away, moving to join the other sylvans and a few more saints who were waiting some yards back.

“Not going with them?” Kit asked Zephyr, who still lingered nearby.

“I think you’ll find I have more proactive ways of contributing.” There was a flash of green light and then a high-pitched shriek as a massive green-feathered eagle lifted into the air.

“Well, I’ll be,” Kit said, her head swiveling as she tracked Zephyr’s path, circling high overhead. “Really wishing she hadn’t hidden that talent of hers during the Crucible. Would’ve made things a whole lot easier.”

“It certainly might have made a difference when it came to that fyre wyrm, I will grant you that,” agreed Nox.

There was a tense moment of silence, and then, as a group, Elyria, Cedric, Kit, Nox, Tristan, and Ollie headed for the front of the line. The throngs of soldiers parted as they passed, their heads dipping in acknowledgment.

Not just acknowledgment, though. Deference. Respect. And though there was surprising acceptance in their gazes as they nodded at the Arcanians walking among them, the lion’s share of that respect was aimed, Elyria noted with pride, at Cedric.

To these men, he was still Sir Cedric Thorne, champion of Kingshelm, the Victor of Havensreach. A leader.

They finally reached their destination, and Cedric turned to Captain Gaius, standing at the front of the line. “Shield-bearers here, forming a wall,” he said. “Spears behind them, with archers at the back.”

“Very good, my lord. And the horses?” Gaius asked.

Cedric turned to his companions. “Should we mount up?”

“There are hardly enough of them to make for a cavalry,” Tristan said.

“And with what we know of *sanguinagi* magic, of how they fight, it will likely only endanger them,” Kit added.

“Agreed,” said Nox. “Leave the horses for Tenny, Shep, and the others to be able to provide quicker aid.”

Gaius nodded and immediately began shouting orders down the line. Minutes passed as the soldiers arranged themselves accordingly, quickly getting into position. They were well trained, Elyria thought. Prepared. Despite the fact that this was surely not what they’d expected to be doing when they departed Kingshelm. This company had been formed to secure a city, not face off with Malakar’s cultist army.

Then again, nothing that had happened since Elyria’s first glimpse of the morning star before the Crucible began had been as expected, had it?

And at least these men were here.

"No word from Aerithia, I take it," she said to Kit. "From my father?"

Kit shook her head. "It's only been a few days though. Perhaps—"

"It doesn't matter," Elyria said quickly. Her eyes drifted to where Thraigg and his dwarven company stood in a tight formation at the edge of the line of soldiers. She wondered if her father had truly ever thought King Lachlandris would budge. Based on the fact that he had preemptively sent the dwarves, she didn't think so. But that he went back to try again anyway . . .

Well, they would have much to talk about whenever they saw each other next, wouldn't they?

"Besides," Elyria said, cracking her knuckles as she returned her attention to the cultists still patiently waiting—and staring—from their village cage. "How many of them could there be? Fifty, sixty?"

Ollie's ice-blue wings fluttered as he lifted several feet into the air, eyes locked on Kinsgaith. "It's hard to tell with all that *red*," he grumbled. "But less than a hundred, to be sure."

"Still nowhere near our numbers," mused Tristan.

Elyria grinned. "So, there you have it. This should be simple enough. We do this the old-fashioned way."

"I think I have something that might help with that." Jocelyn broke through the group of soldiers standing to Elyria and Cedric's back, her armor-clad arm extended. "Here, Elle."

Elyria looked down to see a single seed lying in the palm of Jocelyn's hand. She arched a quizzical brow at Jocelyn, whose lips curved up before she blew on the seed, sending it soaring onto—*into*—the frozen ground.

It didn't stay that way for long.

The soldiers behind Elyria shifted in alarm as the ground cracked open, and out poked a tiny sapling. Well, tiny only for a moment. Because it was quickly growing, stretching, careening up in front of Elyria until, before she knew it, a goldwood sapling as tall as she was stood before her.

"Joss, you—"

Elyria didn't have time to finish the sentence before Jocelyn was slicing both hands through the air. The sapling broke at the root, the branches fell away, and then all that remained was its amber-barked trunk—about the width of Elyria's wrist.

“It isn’t as fancy as the ones you typically wield,” Jocelyn said, placing the goldwood staff in Elyria’s hand. “Not quite fit for a queen. But it’ll do to teach these monsters a lesson.”

“Not fit for a queen?” Elyria repeated blankly, fingers flexing around this new staff—this gift. Shadows spilled from her hands, wrapping the shaft in ribbons of black. “You’re right. It’s *better*.”

Jocelyn was smiling as she slipped back into the line of soldiers.

“There!” Ollie had floated a few yards down and was pointing at the village. Elyria followed the path of his finger past the throngs of cultists cloistered at the entrance, to the chapel that sat atop the hill behind them. Or, rather, to the black-robed figure standing upon said hill, arms spread wide.

Between the lingering mist and the hood drawn low, Elyria couldn’t see their face.

But she knew.

Knew it had to be *him.*

“He’s mine,” Elyria growled, her wings flaring behind her. Let him try to take her power now. Let him try to hurt her. Hurt any of them.

“He’s ours,” Cedric said, the words piercing through her soul from where they echoed in her mind.

The man dropped his arms.

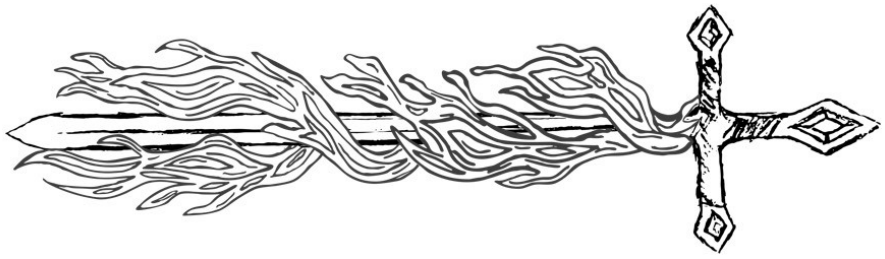
And the barrier fell.

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49

STAND

CEDRIC



THE SOUNDS THAT CAME FROM THE ONCOMING HORDE OF CULTISTS WERE not ones of fury or fear or defiance.

They were screams, cheers, *cackles*—mad, irrepressible, and unhinged.

The enemy began closing the distance between themselves, and the soldiers lined up in the field just beyond Kinsgaith. From the village road, they came—in a tumbling flood of red, boots crashing thunderously against the frozen ground.

Armor creaked as the soldiers behind Cedric braced themselves, shifting in place, wariness pulsing off them. He felt for these people. They'd been rerouted to this quiet village only to have the dark sorcerer of legend tear through them immediately after their arrival. And now scores of his blood mage followers were charging at them.

Still, they were men and women of Kingshelm. Cedric had trained with many of them. They had survived Lord Church's betrayal, had rallied despite King Callum's slow return to leadership. They were strong, and they could fight, and now was not the time to falter.

Not for them and not for him.

"Steady!" Cedric called. He locked eyes with Elyria, drinking in her emerald stare before she shot into the air, gripping her new staff tightly.

"Two hundred yards," she warned him, mind-to-mind.

Cedric already knew. The enemy wasn't running, but they moved quickly and as one massive unit, still hooting and screaming, a terrifying

cacophony drawing ever nearer. A metallic scent hit Cedric's nose as cultist after cultist smashed their palms against their chests, cutting their hands open on the wolven medallions hanging from their necks. Red crystal weapons bloomed in their hands.

Fear was scrawled upon many of the soldiers' faces as the *sanguinagi* approached.

That would not do. These were his people, all of them. His to command and his to protect. His to remind.

Cedric drew Ashrender, the blade catching a glint of the aurora overhead. "People of Kingshelm, stand!" he shouted, his breath misting in the frosty morning air. "You were promised the honor of defending a city. Fate has instead placed you here. Here, where you bore witness to the healing of a realm, the breaking of a new dawn. Cheers spring from our enemies throats because they think they have already won. They scream with joy thinking it will force your fear. They are *wrong*."

A ripple went through the lines of soldiers. Shields were pulled tight to chests. Swords were drawn. Above them, an eagle screeched.

"The Crucible has been won. The accords have been signed. And just this morning, you witnessed us seal the Chasm itself. Arcanis is healing. Those who come at us would rather break the world back into pieces than see us forge a better future together. *Do not let them.*"

Cedric looked up, looked at Elyria—a beautiful specter, a shadowed blade against the ever-brightening morning. Pride pulsed down the bond between them. They could do this. They could end this.

Together.

"So stand, my brothers and sisters!" he shouted, pointing Ashrender to the sky. "Stand for the realm, for kingdom, and for glory! Stand for Arcanis—a *whole* Arcanis. And let us show the enemy what true joy sounds like!"

Cheers rose up—just a few strong voices at first, roaring into the dawn. Cedric looked to his right to see Thraigg, Kingsley, and the rest of the dwarves rattling their axes and hammers high above their heads. And then there was more, a swelling chorus, a furious clangor.

It echoed across the field, and with an answering yell of his own, Cedric turned toward the enemy swarm . . .

. . . and raced forward to meet them.

Elyria was a periwinkle blur soaring ahead of Cedric and the soldiers following close behind him, her eyes locked on the hill where they'd spotted Malakar. Now it stood empty, and she let out a curse as she dove down into the rush of *sanguinagi* cultists, brandishing her staff in front of her like a divining rod she hoped would lead straight to *him.*

The swirling shadows she had wrapped around the length of the staff concentrated at its tip, growing sharp, spiked—lethal. She swung it like a mace, sending an entire row of cultists sprawling. But whatever she did next, Cedric did not see.

He could barely see anything but the madness in the eyes of the first *sanguinagi* he reached—a man whose hood fell back to reveal a shaved head tattooed with runes. The man thrust his blood-crystal spear at Cedric's chest, but with a quick sidestep and a whirl of his wrist, Ashrender came down in a smooth arc, and steel met flesh.

The cultist fell hard, his body striking the dirt with an all-too-familiar sound.

And then came another.

And another.

Cedric fought. He slashed and he sliced and he parried, moving through Malakar's army like each blood mage was little more than a nuisance. He was so much faster now. So much stronger. Crystal shields shattered under Ashrender's touch. Cultists fell, left and right, one after the other.

He was not alone.

Soldiers followed him through the throng, hacking away at ribbons of *sanguinagi* magic and blood-forged weapons with no hesitation. Steel flashed in disciplined bursts, cutting down enemy after enemy. Farther down the line, hammers shattered shields and axes cut through limbs as Thraigg and his dwarven brothers charged fearlessly into the fray.

Several yards ahead, Kit and Ollie flew over the clashing throng, raining shards of ice down upon the cultists, while Jocelyn and Tristan clashed with them on the ground. With another screech, Zephyr's massive eagle form swooped low, talons digging into flesh as she pulled a cultist off Ludov, hauling the *sanguinagi* into the air before letting him fall, screaming, back to the snow-dusted earth.

Cedric pulled Ashrender from a fallen cultist's chest, then watched with fascination as shadows swelled on the ground next to the body. Tenebris Nox stepped out of the darkness just long enough to drag a cultist back in

with them. A feral growl sounded from above his head, and Cedric ducked just as Sid swooped low, pouncing on a cultist woman he hadn't noticed at his back. She screamed as the volacarnii bit into her wrist, forcing her to release the crystal dagger she'd been clutching. There was a burst of greenish light, and then sage fingers were nimbly plucking the dagger off the ground and flinging it deep into the cultist's gut.

"Volacarnii," Zephyr said, under her breath, like a reminder to herself. But Cedric, of course, had no time to ask her what she meant, because another cultist was upon him.

And so it went.

Blood sprayed across the dirt.

Curdled screams cut off in a wet gurgle.

And slowly—sometimes one at a time, sometimes several at once—Malakar's army fell.



THE MASSACRE WAS OVER SO FAST, it almost felt anticlimactic. Tenny, Young Shep, and the other healers never even needed to come forth.

Cedric stood in the aftermath—chest heaving, Ashrender dripping with dark blood. Bodies lay everywhere, pools of crimson leaking onto the frozen ground.

Cedric knew their forces had outnumbered the cultists, but to have them felled so rapidly, so instantly, one after the other after the other . . .

Something prickled in the back of his mind—a loose, unformed thought he couldn't quite grasp. Because still, with all the bloodshed and carnage and crumpled bodies, there was no sign of the dark sorcerer himself.

Cedric didn't need to see in order to know. He could feel Elyria's swelling rage pulsing in his own head like the beat of a drum.

A low, pained groan sounded from beneath one cultist's corpse, and Cedric ran over, flinging the body aside to find a woman lying there, head against the ground, red cloak twisted around her neck, her leg pinned beneath her at a terrible angle.

Pebbles scattered when Elyria landed beside Cedric, the force of her descent blowing the matted blond hair off the woman's face.

“Where is he?” Elyria hissed, slamming the end of her staff into the dirt. “Where is your blood king?”

The woman’s lips pulled back to reveal bloodstained teeth. “Silly little pixie,” she said, cackling. “Don’t you know you’re far too late? We give ourselves freely. Our blood will herald a new age under the rule of *mi sanguinexos.*”

She said the final two words like they were the most reverent prayer, a liturgy falling from her lips.

Cedric’s stomach turned.

The cultist’s gaze slid past him—past Elyria’s furious face, past the line of soldiers bristling in the wake of the slaughter—and fixed on something in the distance. But when Cedric turned, there was only the empty, mist-covered field where the Chasm used to lie, and the Midlands beyond it.

“Answer what we ask,” Cedric said, “and we will heal you. We can *help* you.”

“Stupid, stupid boy,” hissed the woman. She turned her gaze to the aurora-filled sky, her eyes rolling back slightly. “We don’t want to be healed.”

And then she moved, quick as a viper’s strike.

There was a flash of red crystal at her wrist, a blood-forged knife forming where there wasn’t one before. Cedric jolted, reaching for Elyria.

But that was not who the cultist aimed for.

No, she took her *sanguinagi* dagger and drove it into the soft flesh beneath her own jaw.

Elyria lunged. “Don’t—”

It was too late.

The woman dragged the crystal blade across her own throat, the wet sound of tearing flesh one that Cedric would carry to his grave. Blood surged from her wound like a waterfall, gushing from her neck and pooling beneath her.

She tried to laugh again.

It came out as a gurgle.

And her eyes went blank.

Elyria froze where she stood, her face twisted in horror, dark mist pouring off her shadowy armor.

Somewhere behind them, a soldier retched. Another screamed.

Because the woman wasn’t the only cultist who had survived the onslaught.

And she wasn’t the only one now taking her own life in some twisted final act of defiance.

“What the *fuck*—” Tristan’s voice cut off as the remaining survivors severed their throats and wrists, as they ripped through their own skin and let their blood pour, steaming as it touched the frozen earth.

“Fools!” Kit’s voice was a strangled, furious shout as she came up behind Elyria and Cedric. “Why would they do that?”

Cedric’s heart slammed against his ribs. *Why, indeed.*

This all felt familiar, somehow. A scene flashed through his mind—Elyria cutting her way through a room full of cultists, their blood pooling on stone, filling deep runes that had been carved specifically to catch their sacrifice. When Varyth Malchior had set his trap for Cedric in the tower at Seastone, he’d used Elyria and Cedric to cut down his followers, ones who had willingly sacrificed their blood—and their lives—to his cause.

But there were no runes here. There was only this field, the seam where they’d healed the Chasm, the first part of their freshly fixed world.

Cedric staggered back a step.

It wasn’t the blood. He’d seen blood. Spilled plenty of it.

It was the willingness.

The *hope* on their faces as they performed this final act.

There was more to this than death. This was an offering.

And he knew exactly to whom this gift was being bequeathed.

He just didn’t know *why*.

Around him, soldiers backed away from the bleeding bodies as though the mania that had driven these cultists to take their own lives was contagious. But aside from that, everything was quiet, still.

Too fucking still.

The hush that descended over the field was nearly as thick as the mist covering it. Cedric tightened his grip on Ashrender, forcing his lungs to draw in even, steady breaths.

Elyria’s head snapped up at the exact same instant Cedric felt the pressure shift.

“Ellie? What is—” Kit cut herself off as Elyria whirled toward the seam of the Chasm . . . and to the parting mist on the other side. Because that’s what it was doing—parting, right down the middle of a wall of cloudy

white, like curtains being drawn. It wasn't dispersing into the air, pushed out by the rising sun, the way mist should.

It was revealing what had been hidden beyond.

"Quartered hell," Tristan breathed. "Is that what I think it is?"

Cedric didn't answer. He couldn't. Because somewhere inside his mind, a terrible understanding was taking shape—for him and Elyria, both, if the horror he felt emanating down the bond was any indication.

They hadn't been fighting Malakar's army.

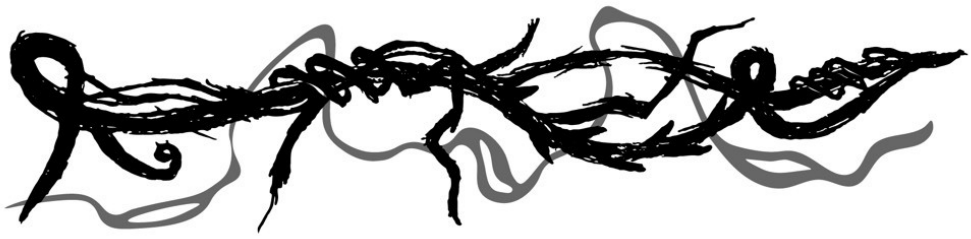
They'd been preparing his altar.

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JUST REWARDS

ELYRIA



ELYRIA HAD SEEN MANA SPRINGS BEFORE, THOUGH SHE RARELY VISITED them up close. And aside from one misguided visit to Foxfire Hollow when she was younger, she'd never even been to the northern parts of the Midlands. So while she was aware that a spring did exist in the center of the continent, near the foothills of the Ironpeak Mountains, its proximity to the eastern Chasm and, thus, Havensreach's border made its location so inconvenient that few of her people had ever seen it.

Until now.

And it was incredible.

An oasis blooming in the middle of the snow-covered field.

Raw mana swirled in a spiral that had been cut into the earth, shimmering a rich, radiant turquoise. The ground that the mana touched was not frozen or desolate or bare. It was lush and green, with palm fronds sprouting from tall grass and bushes blooming with sun-yellow sideralis flowers—a veritable cornucopia of *life* bursting from the soil that Elyria's wild magic itched for.

It was vibrant and vital and *alive*—and so, so beautiful.

Less beautiful, however, was the sight of the scarlet-robed *sanguinagi* cultists spaced evenly around the spring—twelve of them, like the markings on a clock.

No, not twelve.

Eleven crimson-cloaked cultists . . . and one who wore black.

Malakar turned to face Elyria, Cedric, and the others. The spring was perhaps two hundred feet from where they stood, from where the blood of his fallen followers soaked into the wintry ground, and Elyria had no problem making out the expression of manic glee on his face when he pulled his hood back.

Elyria saw red. Instinctively, reactively, she darted forward, taking several steps toward him.

The dark sorcerer took several toward her in return.

Still, he was far enough that she shouldn't have been able to hear him clearly when he opened his mouth to speak. His voice cut through the distance between them as though he were standing right behind her all the same.

"We have missed you, *regina*," he said, the words slithering into her ears. "We are so pleased you could make it. Thank you for coming."

Elyria's shadows roiled under and over her skin, a fire lighting in her veins. For a single, flashing, fleeting moment, she was back in Castle Lumin, blood dripping down her sides, *him* at her back, crooning in her ear. Her breath caught in her throat.

Cedric's concern shimmered down the bond, and she blinked as he came up behind her.

She wasn't there.

She was here.

That part was over.

But whatever *this* was . . . it was only beginning.

"Thank you *all* for coming," Malakar repeated, opening his arms wide, as if welcoming every Arcanian and human standing on the field. "You performed so brilliantly. Efficiently. We should thank you for that too, we suppose."

Elyria fought the urge to shudder and quickly realized everyone around her was doing the same. Cedric tensed. Kit's jaw was tight. The soldiers at her back shifted warily. They could *all* hear him, and it was with a jolt that Elyria realized the blood at their feet was acting as a conduit for his words.

"What is he talking about?" Tristan asked quietly, and the way Malakar's cruel grin widened confirmed Elyria's suspicion that he could hear them just as easily as they could him.

"Don't listen to a vile word slithering from his mouth. He is a madman. He just likes to hear himself speak." Cedric's voice was like a splash of cool

water. It blunted the edge of the rage-filled inferno that was quickly taking Elyria over, just long enough to unblur her vision, gather her bearings.

"Move away," she said, dashing another ten feet forward herself. When nobody responded, she turned and repeated, louder, "Move away from the bodies. From the *blood.*"

Nervous murmurs trickled through the groups of soldiers as everyone on the field began distancing themselves from the bleeding corpses of Malakar's cultists. Cedric, Kit, Nox, Jocelyn, Tristan, Ollie, Zephyr, Thraigg, and the dwarves shuffled to the left, joining Elyria where she had whirled back around to face the dark sorcerer.

Vaguely, she could tell that Captain Gaius was yelling orders to the men, urging them to move more quickly, to form ranks, to get ready to fight once more.

She barely heard them.

The only sound she could focus on was the slow clap of Malakar's hands echoing across the field.

"Very good. You always were so quick to figure things out, weren't you, *regina?*" He spoke louder now.

"Stop *fucking* calling her that." Cedric gripped Ashrender's pommel so tight, Elyria wondered if it would snap.

Malakar's expression darkened. "We will call her what she is, Sunbringer. Just look at her, after all. A queen of shadow. A true queen, unlike your traitorous grandmother."

Cedric balked.

"Oh yes, we know who you are, Cedric Thorne, Sunfyre Heir. We know the claim you seek to make on this world."

"I seek nothing but your quick and violent end."

Malakar chuckled, then tilted his head, black eyes burning into Elyria. "It truly is a shame that it all had to happen like this, *mi regina umbra*. We could have done great things together, you must realize."

"You will feel greater shame when you can no longer form words at all," Cedric said.

Malakar's brow creased with his unspoken question.

"Because I will rip your fucking throat out if you don't stop speaking to my wife."

"*Tsk.* Such unbecoming behavior for someone like you, Sunbringer." There was a pause, wherein Malakar nodded to himself. "Boorish.

Uncouth.”

Discomfort swam down the bond, and Elyria felt something oddly like familiarity flickering with it. Something about the way Malakar spoke those words had Cedric’s heart racing, but she didn’t fully understand why.

Cedric shook his head, as though he might rid himself of the thoughts Elyria could not sense. Raising Ashrender with both hands, he began marching toward the dark sorcerer. Their forces followed.

“You’ve lost, Malakar,” Cedric shouted over the sound of shuffling boots and scraping shields. “It’s over. We have sealed the Chasm and cut you off from the Line. Eleven misguided fools still follow you, yes, eager to do your bidding. But look how easily we cut down those who came before. Even aided by your might, you cannot defeat us all.”

They were halfway to him now, but the dark sorcerer did not so much as move. He did not turn to call his cultists to his side. He did not summon his shadows, nor bleed himself to craft a weapon in defense.

He *sighed*.

“We do find explanations so tedious. Please tell us we don’t have to enlighten you all ourselves.” Malakar paused. “*You* understand, don’t you, *regina?* You can see it. We know you can.”

Elyria stopped in her tracks.

When Cedric noticed, he did, too, and so did the entire army behind them.

“What is it?” he asked down the bond.

Elyria did not answer.

She could only stare with her brow furrowed—not at Malakar, nor at his cultists, but at something glinting from the middle of the spring. A metal canister set directly in the center of the spire.

“You *do* see it,” Malakar said with glee. His gaze shifted to Cedric. “You are right, Sunbringer. You did seal the Chasm. But your mistake was thinking we ever needed it open. Or thinking we needed it at all.”

Elyria’s grip tightened on her staff. Her wings rustled against her back.

“It turns out there are many things we did not end up needing. Including that insignificant speck of our power you seem so determined to keep, *regina*.” His chin dipped. His fingers splayed. “Consider it a gift—my thanks for making such swift work of my *sanguinagi sacrum.* For bringing them all the closer by healing that bothersome rift. For granting us all we need to pierce the Line and fulfill our glorious purpose.”

Red waves of power pulsed off the dark sorcerer as he slowly lifted his arms, palms to the sky.

“Enjoy your reward.”

Confusion rippled in Elyria’s chest, coming from her and Cedric alike. Kit swore under her breath. Ollie and Tristan exchanged perplexed glances.

And then came the first shout from behind.

The first *scream* soon followed.

And Elyria thought she knew what she would find when she turned around.

She thought wrong.

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ABOMINATION

KIT



IT WAS TOO EASY.

The battle had been too simple. There had been too few casualties, too little loss on their end.

They should have known.

They would all learn quickly now.

Kit flitted into the air, rising above the lines of panicking soldiers to see what was causing such distress. She watched in horror as the bodies of the cultists they'd battled began twitching—*moving*. Sickening sounds ripped through the air as torn flesh knitted together, as bones popped and wet moans fell from slack mouths. Eyes snapped open, glassy and unfocused.

And the dead rose.

Kit had seen soldiers frightened before.

She had never before witnessed an entire army come undone at once.

Panic spread through the gathered men like contagion. Despite the shouts from Cedric and Captain Gaius and Tristan alike—calls to steady themselves, to hold formation, to remember their oaths and their training—the lines broke quickly, soldiers scrambling to get as far away from the risen dead as possible.

They moved slowly, blood still streaming from their wounds. But it was no longer crimson. It was black as tar.

The red blood that had already been spilled was streaming too—but along the ground, like a hundred crimson snakes suddenly slithering out

from all the places it had pooled. The blood carved streaks of red into the snow as it crept toward Malakar. As he *called* it to him.

“We should have burned the bodies,” someone yelled, their voice cracking, hysterical. “Why didn’t we burn the bodies?”

The desperate cry seemed to spark something in Cedric, who was sprinting through the scrambling soldiers, running straight for the line of reanimated *sanguinagi*.

Elyria followed after him, her wings flaring wide, calling his name. “No, Cedric, don’t! You’ll—”

Ashrender lit up with a burst of sunfyre, the blade blazing as Cedric reached the nearest corpse, thrusting the sword into its gut and setting it alight.

It did not scream as it burned, as white-gold flames consumed it.

It only fell—first to its knees, then to the ground.

And an unearthly sound gathered in Kit’s ears as the bodies surrounding the burning corpse began to snap and twitch anew.

Bloodied limbs lengthened.

Fingers became claws.

Skin darkened and split, peeling back over bone.

Muscle and fascia and sinew rearranged, *re-formed*, crafting new appendages that burst from necks and shoulders and backs in a horrifying, ghastly display.

Horns that curved from temples.

Long tails that ended in a wicked, scythe-like blade.

Membranous wings topped with a sharp spike at each joint.

The sacrificed *sanguinagi* were men and women no longer.

It was as though someone had leafed through a textbook on all of Arcanis’s most nightmarish beasts and hand-selected all the worst, most terrifying, abominable traits to combine.

Because that’s what they were now—abominations.

Even more monstrous versions of the beastly creatures Cedric had fought off in Elderglade.

Kit’s stomach turned. Surely there was no way *this* was what Malakar’s followers wanted for themselves when they pledged themselves to him, when they sealed their oaths in blood.

It did not matter now.

The deed was done.

And Malakar’s horrific creations attacked.

Men ran screaming as the monsters leapt into the air with bone-chilling shrieks, then descended on the scattering soldiers. Some dove into the crowd. Some flew ahead, then circled back, cutting off those who were trying to retreat.

Claws slashed, carving deep gouges into plate mail. Horns gored. Panicked yells cut off in curdled screams.

And soldier after soldier fell.

Cold ran through Kit’s insides as she called shards of ice to the palms of her hands—frozen throwing daggers with tips as sharp as any blade. She flung them into chests and limbs, let them tear into the creatures’ wings, sending them careening back to the ground.

Not everyone was running. Rallying cries came from the ground, where Tristan and Captain Gaius were both trying to re-form the lines from opposite sides of the chaos, attempting to rally the humans to arms. Two monsters that had been chasing after a group of fleeing soldiers eyed them, reversing course in midair. They split, each one zooming after one of the knights.

Kit’s heart seized as the one that had marked Tristan dove, and the knight narrowly leapt aside as the monster lunged for him. Tristan slashed back, black ichor spraying when his blade connected with the creature’s side. Brambles shot up through the blood-spattered snow, reaching, trying to snag the monster’s feet and pin it in place as Jocelyn came to Tristan’s aid with her own sword held high.

The abomination flew up, tearing itself from Jocelyn’s hold. It circled once, then dove again.

And this time it was not alone.

But neither were Tristan and Jocelyn.

Ollie was a storm soaring over the chaos. Water spouts launched from his hands—high-pressure whips that tore into multiple monsters, blasting them back—as he cleared a path to Tristan and Jocelyn. Ollie drew his short sword from his waist just as Tristan ducked out of the way of another set of slashing claws, plunging it deep into the beast’s back as he collided with it in midair.

Gaius was not so lucky.

The monster that had set its gaze on the rallying captain descended with an otherworldly cry. It hooked its ragged limbs under Gaius’s arms,

sweeping him into the air with inconceivable speed. Kit's stomach lurched as she flew forward, reaching for him, but she wasn't fast enough. The creature dropped the captain, and he was still shouting, still trying to marshal his soldiers as he fell to the earth, his body breaking with a heart-stopping *crunch*.

Launching herself at the abomination, Kit pulled twin daggers from the sheaths at her sides and stabbed at its back, its wings—everything, anything. The creature screamed as it careened out of the sky, landing directly in the middle of the fray below.

Kit watched in horror as the monster leapt up from where it landed, black blood leaking from the holes she'd ripped into his leathery wings, and thrust its scythe-tipped tail through Scarper's chest. The dwarf was still bellowing a war cry as he swung his axe and cleaved the tail from the beast's body, then fell to his knees with a final, wet breath. Nearby, Thraigg roared, swinging his hammer with crushing force that caved in the abomination's skeletal face.

He swung again, the hammer whirling around his stout body, a tornado that slammed into monstrous limbs, cracking knees and elbows. Kingsley, Ludov, Georgie, Pious, and Onyx each fought at the perimeter of Thraigg's wild swings—a circle of dwarven fury.

But it wasn't enough.

Georgie's scream was bloodcurdling as a creature grabbed hold of his arm, claws digging into his forearm, then ripped it from its socket. Onyx and Pious leapt on the creature, battering it back, as Ludov dragged a half-conscious Georgie back, blood gushing from his shoulder.

"Over here!" Hooves thudded as Shep barreled through the chaos on Polonius's back, green light already spinning from his hands. He dove off the horse's back, one hand immediately shooting to Georgie's wound to stem the bleeding. Together with Ludov, the two tried to shove the wounded dwarf onto Polonius's back, but the horse was tall, Georgie was heavy, and both men's hands were slippery with blood. Kit quickly descended, sheathing her daggers to snag the wounded dwarf around the waist and haul him atop the horse.

With no time for anything more than a nod, Shep leapt onto Polonius's back and cantered away.

Kit sucked in a breath. It seized in her lungs. Because—*quartered fucking hell*—if Shep was here, then where was *she*? Kit shot back into the

air, her gaze raking manically over the field as she searched for Tenny.

She didn't find any sign of her, not a glimpse of strawberry hair nor Fjaethe's champagne coat, and that might have brought Kit relief, if not for what she *did* find instead.

Cedric and Elyria were still fighting at the front of the line—her above, him below, wielding her shadow-spiked staff and a blazing Ashrender, cutting and cutting and cutting. The enemy was driving them farther and farther apart, multiple monsters descending upon them as they fought to get back to each other.

Kit could see the panic crest on Elyria's face when a particularly huge monster that Kit had already knocked out of the sky, one wing half-torn from its back, descended upon Cedric. But two more enemies swarmed Elyria as she defended a group of scared soldiers, and she could not get to him.

Not that Cedric knew it. The knightling's back was turned, Ashrender embedded to the hilt in the shoulder of another beast.

The abomination reared back.

Elyria screamed Cedric's name.

Kit gasped.

But just as Cedric spun to see claws raised over him, the monster went sprawling, and a humongous black volacarnii stood snarling in its place.

Not quite black, actually, Kit realized. The beast's dark fur had a slight greenish tinge. And when *another* volacarnii landed next to the first, the two of them standing vigil at Cedric's back while the knight returned to slicing through another monster, Kit understood.

Zephyr and Sid spread their feathery wings wide, the latter leaping back into the sky to head off another beast, the former turning toward the enormous monster she'd just saved Cedric from. The creature had recovered from her initial hit. In fact, it now seemed more enraged than ever, reaching back with grasping claws to rip the remaining fragment of its own wing clear off its back.

Zephyr's volacarnii jaw opened to reveal sharp teeth already coated with black blood. She roared.

The monster roared back.

And they collided.

Teeth ripped and claws sliced as the two creatures sparred. Zephyr clamped her jaw down on the monster's neck, daggerlike nails raking down

its chest, and with a flap of her wings, she lifted them both into the sky. The abomination howled as Zephyr took them higher and higher, then released it with what could only be a smirk of satisfaction on her volacarnii maw.

It wasn't to last.

Because just as the monstrous beast fell away, its one remaining wing failing, fluttering uselessly, its tail lashed out. The sharp, bladed tip connected with Zephyr's wing, and green-black feathers were suddenly drifting through the air.

The ground shook when the massive abomination hit the ground.

It did not shake when Zephyr followed, careening into the snow a few yards down. Cedric's face was horror-struck as, with a flash of viridian light, Zephyr's volacarnii form shimmered back into her sylvan one, and she lay there, crumpled on the ground.

Cedric hauled the sylvan into his arms, screaming for aid. And Kit knew it was terrible; she knew it was perhaps the worst thing she'd ever thought, but she really wished he hadn't.

Because fuck it all, *there* was Tenny, urging Fjaethe through the chaos toward them. Kit could not hear the words Cedric murmured as he thrust a limp Zephyr onto the horse's back, but relief spooled through her body when Tenny nodded, one hand already lifting to her token, and galloped away.

That relief was short-lived.

Just as Kit tore her eyes from the scene below, a wall slammed into her.

Pain radiated down the entire left side of her body as she spun through the air, her wings flailing. And then she was falling, bracing herself for the impact of frozen, rocky ground.

It did not come.

Kit fell into a pool of shadow, like a cushion of air. She plummeted through the in-between for a singular moment, then popped back out a few feet from where she would have hit the ground.

And stumbled right into the firm, steady body of Tenebris Nox.

There was no time to marvel at them.

No time for thanks.

No time to dissect the expression on the nocterrian's face as they looked at Kit.

Not when the abomination that had slammed into her landed before the two of them.

As did another.

And another.

The three monsters surrounded the pair, folding their demon-like wings against their backs. From somewhere across the field, there was a surge of power that Kit felt in her bones, and she didn't have to turn toward where Malakar still stood to know it was coming from him. Whether the blood that the dark sorcerer had been gathering from the field had finally reached him or this was a result of whatever his followers were doing with—to?—the mana spring, Kit didn't know. What she did know was that when the burst of magic washed over the battlefield, something shifted in the already overwhelming fight.

It was *not* in a good way.

Scales of red crystal erupted over the monsters' skin, locking into place like plates of armor. Their claws lengthened. The black skin around their mouths stretched, flaked, like their very jaws were unhinging as they released a terrible scream in triplicate.

Despite herself, Kit felt a wild, hysterical laugh claw its way up her throat. She bit it back.

Nox widened their stance, twin batons brandished, shadows swirling at their feet.

"If we get out of this," Kit hissed from between clenched teeth, a long spear of ice forming in her hands, "I have *so much* to yell at you about."

Agony bloomed down the left side of her body as she sidestepped one monster's lunge, narrowly avoiding its wild, thrashing claws. Nox batted the other two back with a broad sweep of their batons, and Kit slashed at the first with her spear. The blow she'd sustained in the air made her slow, though, and she staggered as a long claw caught her side, slicing at a gap in her armor.

She darted back with a pained hiss, one hand immediately bracing her hip. When she drew it away, her fingers were stained red.

A growl rumbled from Nox's chest when they saw. "I long for the day when you thoroughly and deservedly eviscerate me," they said, voice low and chillingly even. "But I am afraid I must first add one more grievance to your list."

"What are you—"

The world disappeared. Kit's spear fell from her grasp. And when she once again felt solid ground beneath her feet, when she emerged from the

shadow . . .

“Kit?”

No.

“Kit, where did you just—”

Tenny’s voice barely registered as Kit clutched her side and frantically searched the field below, looking down from the hill where she’d emerged in front of the makeshift healer’s tent.

No, no, no, no.

Tenebris Nox was locked in battle with all three abominable creatures, *stepping* in and out of the shadows as the monsters whirled and screamed, tails and claws lashing at the nocterrian. Kit recognized the clear blue sheen of her own icy spear bursting from the chest of one of the beasts as Nox appeared behind them.

It went down with a gargled cry.

Twenty feet or so away, Ollie, Tristan, and Jocelyn fought several armored beasts of their own, aided by some of the remaining soldiers. More humans had banded together in clusters, defending against the seemingly endless barrage of viciousness. Surrounded by Thraigg, Kingsley, and the remaining dwarves, archers shot their arrows into the sky, where only a handful of the monsters were still airborne.

Across the field entirely, Elyria was a blur of sunlit shadow, golden light emerging from her and Cedric both, finally reunited and battling no fewer than ten raging monsters together. The dead bodies of a dozen more surrounded them.

They were more than holding their own, but . . .

From this vantage, Kit could see everything.

Every fallen body.

Every torn limb.

Every spray of blood.

Every face contorted in pain.

So much hurt.

So much death.

So much *loss*.

Her heart clenched as she saw Onyx’s bloodied body amidst a group of felled creatures, the dwarf’s blue eyes open and unseeing. How much more of this could they sustain? The monsters were relentless, like Malakar’s burst of power had reinvigorated them, given them new purpose.

Worse still, the dark sorcerer himself remained completely untouched, continuing his machinations by the mana spring uninterrupted.

That would have to change.

Kit swayed as she rolled her shoulders back, readying herself to take flight. Elyria would likely be pissed at her, but she was busy at the moment, and somebody had to stop the madman.

If they both survived, she would forgive her. Eventually. Probably.

"Kit!"

Tenny's panicked voice gripped Kit's heart in a vise.

"What is it? Who's hurt?" She whirled toward the human, eyes roving to where the other healers continued to work on the injured with blood-covered hands. Zephyr groaned in pain as she lay prostrate on the ground nearby. Next to her, a bloody shroud covered a dwarf-shaped corpse, and Kit's heart sank. Georgie.

"Who's hurt?" Kit repeated.

Tenny's amber eyes swam with some emotion Kit couldn't place. "You are," she whispered.

Kit finally looked down.

"Oh," she said.

And then Tenny was screaming for aid as Kit fell to her knees, one hand loosely pressed to the gaping hole in her side.

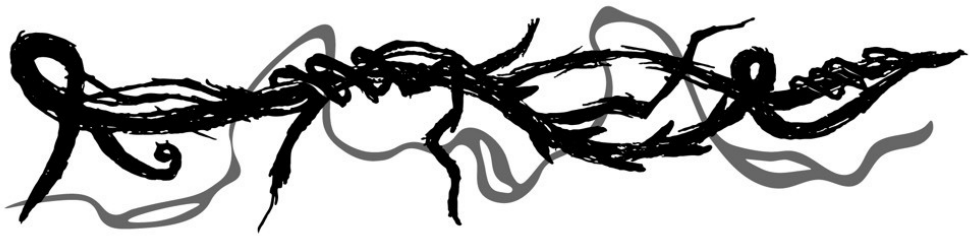
And Kit wasn't sure if it was the blood loss or the strain of the battle or simply the lunacy of all the day had already held—it was still *morning* for fucking celestial's sake—but as darkness crept into the edges of her vision, all she could think was what a shame it would be if she never did get that chance to yell at Tenebris Nox.

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THE NIGHT IS DARKEST

ELYRIA



IT WAS ENDLESS. A HUNDRED HUMAN CULTISTS THROWING THEMSELVES UPON swords and spears was one thing. That same number returning from the grave as these abominable beasts? It was another thing entirely.

Elyria swore loudly as another one of the horrifying creatures, now bedecked in some kind of slick *sanguinagi* armor, swooped down on a pair of fighting soldiers. She and Cedric descended upon the monster together, her swinging her shadow-spiked staff at its horned head, him slashing Ashrender at its knees.

The beast came apart in three pieces.

But there were still so many more. And Elyria could barely see anyone else with the swarms of monsters continually coming at her and Cedric, drawn to the blazing power of the Sunfyre Heir. She certainly couldn't get to Malakar like this, and the creeping dread that kept prickling the back of her neck was only getting stronger.

Whatever the dark sorcerer was doing, he was getting closer to accomplishing it—Elyria knew this with nauseating certainty. And as she was forced to engage with yet another snarling, slashing creature, she also knew that she would not be able to stop him.

The thought was almost enough to bring her to her knees and make her give up right then and there.

Almost.

But, of course, she was not the only person on the battlefield today.

To her left and to her right, groups of battle-weary soldiers fought on, defending against monsters that they had only ever imagined in their darkest nightmares. And maybe not even then.

They had recovered from the initial panic, the fear that had scattered their forces across the field, and those remaining now fought bravely, proudly, hacking away at tearing claws and goring horns. For each man felled, another two swung in to take his place.

But they were growing so tired and had already lost so many friends, and these creatures outmatched them so vastly in strength and size and power.

They kept fighting, though.

And somewhere else on this field, so did the rest of Elyria's friends—Kit, Tristan, Ollie, Jocelyn, Thraigg and his dwarven brothers. Even Tenebris Nox had returned to help defend against Malakar's madness.

Elyria would never stop fighting.

These monsters had already shed too much blood, taken too many lives. She would not give her own up so easily. And she absolutely, indisputably, unequivocally would not let them take her king's.

Cedric fought with the kind of glorious skill that would make its way into storybooks, into legend. His veins were lit golden beneath his skin as Ashrender cleaved through wings and tails and shredded limbs. Bursts of sunfyre flew from his hands, setting the wicked creatures ablaze.

Elyria dipped the tip of her shadow-laced staff into the white-gold flames still burning through one of the monsters on the ground. It wrapped around the shaft, twining with her own ribbons of darkness—a braided rope of shadow and sun. She swung her staff overhead like a giant baton, and the rope lashed out, catching several of the surrounding beasts in its path. They hissed and screamed as pieces of their flesh were torn away by the daynight whip, their attention diverting from the soldiers they'd been hunting.

Elyria grinned and, with a flap of her wings, she was back in the air, ready and waiting to take more of these vicious creatures down. Except . . . Her eyes darted away from the nearest monster for the briefest of seconds, that prickle at the back of her neck driving her to search for the mana spring, to look for the dark sorcerer there.

He was—as were his other red-robed followers. They still stood in a perfect circle around the mana spring, that canister in the center catching

the light of the winter sun and the aurora both. And each one of them, Malakar included, had their hands lifted to the sky.

The distraction cost her.

Cedric bellowed Elyria's name—in her mind, in her ears—as a spindly, claw-tipped hand grabbed hold of her boot and yanked her back to the ground with a vicious pull.

Elyria slammed into the frozen earth, her staff skittering away. The monster was already on top of her. She withdrew the dagger at her thigh in an instant, thrusting it up into the beast's throat, then tearing it down to its clavicle. Black blood spilled from the wound, spraying across Elyria's face, dripping onto her shadowy armor. She drew up her legs beneath her and kicked, sending the half-dead abomination sprawling through the air.

She didn't realize that there were three soldiers fighting another beast directly behind when she did. Soldiers who now stood in the direct path of the monster as it spun in the air.

It would crush them.

And Elyria could only watch as—

As nothing.

The soldiers fought on.

Beast and man did not collide.

They could not.

Because huge talons had closed around the monster's flailing body, plucking it out of the air and soaring away with it.

"Gryphons!" shouted one of the soldiers. Gasps and cheers rang out among the men as Elyria, still on her back, looked to the sky.

And indeed, there were gryphons soaring over the field—six of them. The first one sent the abomination it had snatched up into a copse of snow-covered evergreens at the edge of the field, slamming into a trunk so hard that the entire tree shifted at the root.

More miraculous than the sight of the majestic creatures soaring over the field and knocking monster after monster onto their backs, though, was the fact that each one carried a rider.

Elyria knew these riders.

"Quartered hell," shouted Cedric, wiping Ashrender free of the black blood coating its blade with the tattered red cloak he pulled from one of the cultist-turned-abomination's bodies. "Is that who I think it is?"

For one stunned heartbeat, Elyria thought her mind was breaking under the strain of the day—that the madness of battle and the sealing of the Chasm and the relentless use of her magic had finally tipped her into hallucination.

But then a fireball hurled over her head, the heat nearly singeing her temple before lighting up one of the monsters before her, still engaged with the trio of embattled soldiers. Raefe's blond hair peeked out from over the top of a mottled gray gryphon as it landed swiftly, knocking the flaming beast over.

Something bright flashed in the periphery of Elyria's vision, and she whirled to see a bolt of lightning shoot through the chest of another abomination. The sleek black gryphon Sephone was riding went in one direction, already in pursuit of a third beast, and the fae went in another. Her striped black and gold wings sparkled under light of the aurora-backed sun when she landed next to Elyria with a grim expression.

Sephone extended her arm. "Need a hand?" she asked, then hauled Elyria to her feet.

Elyria darted over to retrieve her staff from where it had fallen. She plunged the end into the ground and braced herself against it, sucking in a deep breath. Stars above, she hadn't realized how much she needed this momentary reprieve. She would not waste it, especially since it was evident that she and Cedric were the only ones who would get one.

Sephone's black eyes raked over their surroundings, narrowing on the pockets of combatants still bloodily engaged on the battlefield, and Elyria followed her gaze. Thraigg, Kingsley, Pious, and Ludov had surrounded one particularly feral-looking beast and were brandishing their axes with resounding bellows. Jocelyn was crouched low, offering aid to someone on the ground. Tristan and Ollie fought, back-to-back, with a group of six soldiers halfway down the field.

The remaining gryphons soared overhead, spears of magic raining from their riders as they swooped in to assist those still fighting. Elyria exhaled when she saw one take down one of the *multiple* beasts Nox was fighting alone. And her relief tripled when she noticed Sid rip through the sky, barreling into an airborne monster and sending it directly into the path of an oncoming gryphon, who made quick work of it.

At least half of Malakar's monsters had been cut down . . . but so had their own forces. And Elyria couldn't let herself think about the fact that

there were so many unaccounted for. If she started wondering where Kit was, if Zephyr was all right, how Tenny and Shep were faring, she might never recover.

“Fuck, this is a right mess, isn’t it?” Sephone said grimly. Without looking, she sent a bolt of lightning over her shoulder, and a monster’s pained cry filled the air.

“Certainly wouldn’t have minded you getting here earlier,” Elyria replied.

“Rather rude way of saying ‘thanks,’ Your Majesty.”

Despite herself, the edges of Elyria’s lips quirked.

“Thank you,” said a breathless Cedric as he came up beside them. “Stars above, thank you for coming.” He dipped his head briefly before taking off in the direction of where, despite the arrival of their allies, Tristan, Ollie, and the other soldiers were quickly becoming overwhelmed.

“See? Now, *he* has manners,” Sephone said.

“Fine, I’ll try again.” Elyria couldn’t help rolling her eyes. “Better late than never?”

“I could not agree more.”

It was not Cedric’s voice Elyria heard in her head as talons and paws touched down on the bloodied snow behind her. She already knew who she’d find when she turned.

Aster Tartanis dismounted smoothly from a majestic white gryphon, already drawing his sword from its scabbard as he approached.

“Father,” she said breathily, and the sheer amount of gratitude she felt as she said the word took her by surprise.

Tartanis’s gait faltered for a moment, and it was clear that he, too, hadn’t expected to hear her say it like that. Perhaps he hadn’t ever heard her say it like that.

Elyria’s heart clenched.

“Daughter,” he said softly, eyes combing over her, lingering on her blood-spattered hair, the way she leaned into her staff.

“Not my blood,” she said with a dismissive wave of her hand. Then, swallowing past the tightness in her throat, continued. “I . . . You came.”

“I did.” Tartanis offered a stiff nod, then gestured broadly. “We did.”

“The king?”

He shook his head. “A problem for another day.”

“Kind of feels like a problem for us right now,” called Raefe from the back of his gryphon. With a whistle, the glorious beast launched back into the air, and the flamecaller was once more lobbing balls of fire at the battlefield below.

“Who could’ve known we’d be flying into . . .” Sephone’s lip curled in disgust as she sent another spark of lightning flying from the palm of her hand. “What exactly *did* we fly into here?”

“Malakar had the entire village of Kinsgaith under his thrall—they threw themselves on our blades, spilled their own blood for some ritual he’s performing to get to the Line. He turned them into these creatures.” Elyria straightened, her daynight-trimmed staff once again tightly gripped in her hand. “He must be stopped.”

“What do you need us to do?” Tartanis asked.

Elyria swallowed, her gaze going to the full field of monstrous battling that lay between her and the mana spring. Unearthly bellows sounded as swords and blood-forged crystal clashed, as gryphons and abominations attacked each other midair.

“I have to get to Malakar,” she said, the words sparking the raging well of power in her chest as she pointed at the dark sorcerer and his final followers. “Help me get to the spring.”

It had to have been a coincidence. A remarkable accident of timing. But the *exact, precise instant* Elyria said the words, it was like the entire world shivered. Time hung suspended as her shadows rippled—over her skin, in her veins—with anticipation, a dark eagerness.

With a deafening *boom*, a colossal shudder rocked through the field, and the spring cracked open.

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53

INTO THE VOID

ELYRIA



ELYRIA GAPED AT THE SPOT WHERE, JUST *SECONDS* AGO, SHE'D BEEN pointing at the beauty and majesty of the mana spring.

Now it was gone, and in its place was an ugly, rocky crater—a void. Where before there had been a glorious spiral of life, the richness of wild possibility, there was now only the absence of it.

Elyria's wild magic mourned.

She knew where that crater led, though.

Malakar stood at the edge, his head turned just enough for Elyria to catch a glimpse of the wicked grin on his face. She would have sworn he *wanted* her to see it.

Because the next thing she knew, the sorcerer stepped off the ledge and fell into the dark.

Elyria didn't think.

She just *flew*.

Her wings pumped once, twice, and she was high in the air, careening past monsters and men alike.

Shouts cut through the whipping wind. Words like "Don't!" and "Wait!" echoed in her ears as she soared, weaving serpentine through the midair clashes of talons and claws, avoiding arcing arrows and bolts of blood magic.

She ignored them all.

There was only one voice she could hear, each remembered word making her blood pulse faster, her magic burn brighter.

"Do not fear, mi regina umbrae. *Soon you will forget all about him. . . . We will be so much more."*

Elyria's skin crawled as she recalled the feeling of his hands on her, the way he'd taken hold of her power, the helplessness. Black tinged the edges of her sight—a deep, dark rage swelling behind her ribs.

Never again.

Never *fucking* again.

He would not remake the world to his vision.

He would not steal another ounce of power.

She would make sure of it.

"Elle!" Cedric called down their bond, and she felt his panic, felt his fear—she could even feel the impact shuddering through his bones as he continued to fight. But she couldn't stop even long enough to see where he was. She wouldn't.

She couldn't let *him* get away.

Elyria shut the door in her mind.

She was close now. Close enough that the eleven remaining human cultists noticed her approach. With sneers and yells, bows of bloodred crystal materialized in their hands, and their own arrows were now shooting at her, trying to bring her down.

Elyria's shadows misted off her staff, flattening into a long, body-blocking shield, which she used to deflect them. With every *clink* against her shield, Elyria's inner smile broadened. She could do this. She could get to him.

Still, eleven was not a small number of *sanguinagi*. And as she soared ever closer, she realized with unfortunate clarity that there was a reason these ones had been selected to help their blood king wound the world. Why they remained to defend the crater, to ensure their dark leader was able to make his way to the Line.

It happened so fast, with her focus was so single-mindedly bent on getting to the crater that Elyria didn't even register the flash of pain at first. She might not have noticed at all were it not for the spiky red fletching dancing in her periphery as she waved her hand, trying to summon her wild magic to attack the cultists below. And even with that, she might not have cared that she had an arrow *sticking out of her fucking hand,* except for the

way it dispersed in a bloody mist that seemed to instantly crawl inside her wound.

It was *agony.*

Like her very veins were being ripped apart from within, a fever searing through her hand, her arm. She screamed, her joints locking up, her bones on *fire*. Her staff and shield fell away as she clutched her hand, her free hand's fingers digging into her palm like she could carve out the pain.

She couldn't.

And Elyria Lightbreaker dropped from the sky like a falling star.



"GET THE FUCK UP, ELLE!"

Huh, Elyria thought groggily. That sounded a lot like someone she knew. Someone who didn't swear very often. Who rarely lost her composure. Who—

Elyria's eyes snapped open, and she found herself staring at a scarred, wingless back. Jocelyn stood in front of her in a wide, braced stance, knees bent, a sword in both hands. And in front of *her*, standing between Elyria, Jocelyn, and the crater, eleven glaring *sanguinagi* cultists approached.

The hatred on their vein-stricken faces was visceral. Their eyes gleamed, their irises all the same shade of dark orange-red. Blood dripped from open wounds on their palms, filling the air with a coppery stench as blood-spun weapons sprouted in their hands.

Elyria sat up with a groan, every muscle in her body aching from the impact of hitting the ground. Her eyes immediately darted to her hand, which was free of its puncturing arrow, and free of the excruciating pain that had felled her. The agony-inducing blood-spell that arrow had carried had been blessedly short-lived, and with a tiny wisp of healing magic, Elyria sealed the gash it left behind.

"Now, Lightbreaker!" Jocelyn shouted, and with protesting limbs, Elyria got to her feet. Her staff had fallen a few yards away, but she didn't need it. Dark mist flowed down her arms, swelling over both her hands. It lengthened, sharpened, until each of her ten fingers closed around the hilt of a shadow-forged blade.

Together with Jocelyn, she lunged.

They fell into rhythm without speaking—Elyria striking from above, her shadowblades plunging down, hacking away at red crystal swords, maces, shields.

Below her, Jocelyn fought with lethal grace, her own swords flashing in precise arcs. Thorn-covered brambles erupted from the ground, and Elyria honestly wasn't sure which of the wildshapers was responsible for summoning them, but it hardly mattered. They wrapped around boots, tore into legs—pinning half the *sanguinagi* in place with anguished cries.

But quartered hell, there were just so many of them. And with every spray of blood that did not take the cultist completely to their knees, they only seemed to grow stronger. Like the spilling of their own blood made their magic surge.

Bloody ribbons streamed from fingertips, sharp as razors, slicing through the brambles. The cultists rushed forward, a swarm surrounding Elyria and Jocelyn both. . . .

And then the enemy's blood-forged weapons were clattering to the ground, their hands suddenly clutching the sides of their heads. The cultists' mouths fell open with silent screams as a beautiful white gryphon flew into sight, circling low, before Aster Tartanis slid from its back.

Elyria's father had both hands held aloft, a furious expression on his face. The air around him rippled with power as his mindwielding magic tore at the *sanguinagi's* minds.

One broke free, a man whose tortured eyes were now singularly focused on the dark-haired fae now facing Elyria.

Tartanis had his back turned when the cultist charged.

She started to scream a warning.

She needn't have bothered.

The cultist froze mid-run, limbs locking as if seized by invisible chains. His strangled cry cut off abruptly, red eyes rolling back as blood leaked from his nose and ears.

A heartbeat passed, and the man collapsed bonelessly to the ground.

"Thank you," Elyria panted, her shadowswords dissipating into the ether.

Tartanis grunted in acknowledgment, running his green-eyed gaze briefly over Elyria as if checking her for injury. Then he turned his attention back to the remaining cultists, still clutching their heads, writhing in pain. Sweat beaded at his temple, and his hands shook as he grunted, "Go."

Elyria's staff floated at the edge of her vision, and she turned her head to see Jocelyn holding it out for her. "Go, Elle," she repeated. "Your father will not be able to hold them for long."

Elyria flew for the crater.

But it turned out that "for long" was even less time than any of them could have hoped, because just as she neared the opening, ready to follow Malakar down into its depths, blood-magic ribbons were suddenly curling around her legs, hauling her back, pulling her down.

Stars-damned motherfuckers. She *really* hated that particular manifestation of their magic. With a frustrated scream, the threads of shadow and sunlight wrapped along Elyria's staff sharpened into long, razor-like strips, and she hacked away at the bloody ribbons.

"Fucking pixie whores!" yelled one of the cultists, rushing Elyria with a red crystal scythe held high before she had a chance to get herself back in the air. She didn't even have time to rebut that thoroughly unimaginative insult.

Because it was an entirely different enemy who blindsided Elyria, tackling her to the ground.

No, not an enemy.

Jocelyn hauled herself off Elyria's body, apology written into the creases of her face, even as her gaze immediately snapped back toward the crater.

And Elyria understood why she'd just been unceremoniously blasted aside.

The monsters had caught up.

And one stood, red-plated chest heaving, exactly where Elyria had just been.

Tartanis's gryphon screeched as a second abomination barreled into it, the two beasts tumbling away in a tangle of talons and claws. Her father was fighting to keep the rest of the *sanguinagi* down, even as a third beast, its wings little more than a shredded cape dangling from its back, loped unevenly toward him.

Jocelyn's attention was on the approaching beast, her back to Elyria, when it happened.

A cultist burst from the side, crazed eyes bleeding, a crimson glaive held with both hands. She thrust the weapon forward, and it punched

straight through Jocelyn’s armor, the curved tip of the blade emerging between the parallel scars on her wingless back, dripping blood.

Elyria screamed.

Shadows flared as she leapt on the cultist. Dark, glistening spikes curved out from her knuckles as she slammed her fist into the side of the *sanguinagi’s* head, piercing her temple, crushing her skull. And then she leapt on the abomination roaring nearby, tearing into it without thought, without restraint.

Elyria just kept hitting.

She hit and she hit and she hit until nothing recognizable remained.

And the only thing that pulled her back from the edge was Jocelyn’s wet cough and low grunt as she fell to her knees.

Elyria was kneeling too, her hands shaking as she caught Jocelyn before her body tipped back entirely. The red weapon stuck in Jocelyn’s chest dissipated in a burst of mist, and for a horrifying, paralyzing moment, Elyria thought that Jocelyn would be subjected to that same agonizing pain that had torn her from the sky.

But there was no pain on Jocelyn’s face as her hazel eyes met Elyria’s.

“No,” Elyria whispered, pressing her palm uselessly to Jocelyn’s chest, wisps of healing magic skittering over her body. They did not go anywhere. They did not do anything. It was too late, and the damage was too great.

“No, no, no—stay with me, *please*,” Elyria begged.

Jocelyn’s breath hitched. “It’s . . . all right,” she said brokenly. Her face was already so pale.

Elyria shook her head, tears blurring the world around her. Vaguely, she could hear the sounds of continued fighting, the pained cries of the cultists, her father’s labored grunts, the screeches of gryphons, and yells of others who must’ve finally arrived to help.

She kept her gaze on Jocelyn. “It’s not,” she whispered. “I—I can fix this. I just need—”

“You can’t,” Jocelyn said gently. “And that’s . . . all right.” Her hand found Elyria’s wrist, her fingers surprisingly strong when they wrapped around it. “This is how . . . it was always meant to be.”

The words were sharper than a knife as they carved away a piece of Elyria’s heart. She hated the reminder of the last time Jocelyn had said them to her, right after Elyria had gotten her wings back, when they’d still had hope, when they’d still thought they might possibly win.

Jocelyn smiled then—a soft, serene thing. “You will not lose that hope, Elyria Lightbreaker,” she said, and Elyria couldn’t even be shocked at the fact that she’d voiced her fears aloud. “You’re going . . . to win,” Jocelyn continued, the rise and fall of her chest growing shallower. “You’re going to . . . make something better . . . out of all of this.” She took a final, shaky breath. “It is the one thing in this world I know to be true.”

Her grip loosened.

Then fell away entirely.

And Elyria’s heart fractured right down the middle.

Somewhere in her mind, or maybe in her soul, there was a pounding, a beating of fists on a door, frantic and frenzied.

Elyria did not open it.

She only bowed her head, bringing her forehead to Jocelyn’s for one lingering moment before laying her friend’s body in the snow.

Then she stood, retrieved her staff, and blinked—once, twice. The battle in front of the crater roared back into focus with brutal clarity. Cultists clashed with soldiers and fae. Gryphons and monsters collided.

And Elyria walked to the edge.

Movement snagged her gaze, and her eyes went to her father, several yards away. His face was pale, his expression drawn. Blood trickled from his nose, and when Elyria’s eyes dropped, she saw it was trickling from a wound in his side, too.

Her fractured heart cracked further.

Her eyes narrowed on a cultist that must have just recovered from the onslaught of her father’s power, because his eyes and ears were bleeding as he crawled toward him. Elyria turned from the edge of the crater, shadows pooling in her hands.

“No.” Tartanis’s power broke through her mental door, blowing it open, and the flood of emotion that came with it—distress and anguish rushing down the bond from Cedric—made Elyria stagger.

The cultist lunged for her father, piercing his shoulder with a crystal rapier before someone else wrestled the *sanguinagi* back. Tartanis fell to one knee, his emerald eyes meeting Elyria’s.

She cried out, one arm reaching for him.

He inclined his head, something like a smile on his lips when he splayed his fingers and his mental power blasted Elyria back.

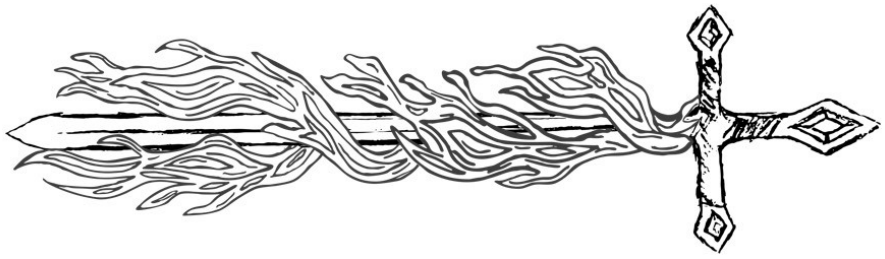
And she fell down, down, down, into the depths of the world.

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54

WHERE YOU GO, I WILL FOLLOW

CEDRIC



CEDRIC WAS ALREADY RUNNING WHEN ELYRIA FELL INTO THE CRATER.

For one frozen heartbeat, the entire world narrowed to that single image—her face twisted in a shout, one arm outstretched, the other clutching her staff as she was blasted off her feet. Her wings had flared, she soared backward, and the darkness swallowed her whole.

He needed to go faster. Fuck, why wasn't he faster?

He surged forward, his heels digging into the snow-covered ground as he willed his limbs to move, willed the sunfyre pumping through his veins to push him farther, faster. The crater was *right there*. He was so close.

A still-blazing Ashrender clutched in his trembling fingers, Cedric ran . . .

. . . and slammed straight into a wall of teeth and claws.

Sunfyre flared as Cedric slashed Ashrender up, down, left, right. "I. Don't. Have. Fucking. Time. For. This!" he yelled, and the abomination let out an inhuman squeal as it came apart in pieces.

But, of course, it wasn't the only one.

And it wasn't just monsters he had to contend with now either.

Cedric ducked, narrowly avoiding a bolt of crimson power as it tore through the air at him. The *sanguinagi* who had fired it let out a frustrated cry, then launched herself at him, a crystal chain whip forming from her bleeding hands. It lashed out, snagging on Ashrender as Cedric threw the sword up to defend himself, knocking it from his hands.

Cedric’s heart squeezed when the blade went skittering across the frozen earth, amber stone glinting in the sun as it tipped right over the edge of the crater . . . and fell in.

The cultist woman laughed, the blood-forged chain whip dangling from one hand, a spark of scarlet lightning dancing between the fingers of the other.

And then a different kind of lightning speared right through her chest, leaving a charred hole in her robes—and her torso—large enough to see straight through.

From the other side of the grotesque window, Sephone wiggled her fingers. “Lose something?”

Cedric had never been so stars-damned grateful to hear anyone’s voice.

Well, that wasn’t true. There was someone else he would give *anything* to hear right now. But there had only been that one precious, fleeting moment after Elyria’s mental doors had opened when he’d heard her—her anguish, her fear, her despair . . . before she vanished into the crater and their bond went quiet again.

Just an effect of being so close to the Line, he told himself. He refused to think there could be any other reason.

“Much appreciated,” Cedric said, flinging the now very dead cultist’s body aside.

“Stay alive, Your Majesty.” Sephone shot into the air, trailing after a gryphon that was soaring away with someone’s collapsed body thrown over its back. Cedric couldn’t tell who it was, though. Not when another abominable creature was suddenly before him, upon him, preventing him from getting any closer to the crater’s edge.

Panic gripped Cedric’s chest when he glanced down at his empty hands. He’d lost his daggers while fighting with Tristan, Ollie, and the other soldiers earlier, had left them behind the instant he felt Elyria’s walls come down. And now with Ashrender gone . . .

Cedric knew that he certainly wasn’t powerless, but he was unaccustomed to fighting without at least the presence of steel in his hand. It made him falter, made him slow. And with the monster bearing down on him and all others on the field engaged with enemies of their own, Cedric could not afford to be slow.

The creature threw itself at Cedric with slashing claws, and he was only a hairsbreadth from having half his face ripped off when he leapt out of the

way.

“I like the scars you already have. I would prefer it if you didn’t collect any additional ones.”

They were words Elyria had said to him in Kingshelm the night before they went to Seastone. The night before every quarter of hell broke loose, and she was taken from him. Even the memory of her voice bolstered him, had the furnace of power in his chest sizzling. Heat warmed Cedric’s hands, and the creature hissed as white-gold flame erupted from his palms.

Cedric grinned and, recalling what Raefe had done back in Castle Lumin during Elyria’s rescue, clasped his palms together. He willed his fire to wind tight, braid itself together. And when he drew his hands apart, a rope of pure sunfyre was strung between them.

Cedric flicked his wrist, and the attacking beast’s scream was blood-curdling as the fiery whip wrapped around its waist. The revolting scent of seared flesh filled Cedric’s nose as he pulled on the rope, cinching it tight, and for one awestruck moment, Cedric thought he had it.

But this monster still had its wings. It shot into the air, dragging the rope—and Cedric himself, who did not know how to let go—up with it. Fear gripped every part of the knight as he was pulled higher and higher, the battlefield around the crater becoming fully visible as his vantage changed. The terror of flying through the air was temporarily abated in favor of the anguish that took him over when he spotted Jocelyn lying a few yards from the edge, her eyes closed, her body draped over the blood-soaked snow.

But he could not focus on the heartbreaking image for long. Not when the abomination was suddenly jerking in the air, Cedric’s sunfyre rope like a garrote around its waist. It pulled tighter, tighter—burning through flesh and muscle and nerve and bone, until with a sickening squelch, it cinched right through the monster entirely, separating the beast’s torso from its lower body.

The two halves fell away, and Cedric might have been impressed by the unique, if unintended, means of taking down one of these abominable creatures—had it not occurred in midair, with him becoming a direct casualty of his own magic. Because then he was falling, his face contorted with a soundless scream, his arms and legs flailing as he fell, and fell, and fell.

He closed his eyes as the ground rushed at him. Of course this was how it would all end. He always knew gravity was the real enemy.

The impact hurt. Pain bloomed over Cedric's ribs as he fell on his side. But it was not the bone-crushing force he'd expected from his body splattering on the frozen ground.

Because Cedric had not collided with the ground at all.

Feathery black wings stretched out on either side of him, smoky shadows misting off them, as Sid descended with a shocked Cedric caught on her back.

"Four hells, Sid," Cedric said, his breath stuttering with pain when she landed hard and he rolled inelegantly off the shadowcat. "You saved me again." Another thing she and her mother had in common, evidently.

For a moment Sid looked like she was preening, her chin lifting, her eyelids drooping. But then she wobbled, one paw slipping out from beneath her, and the shadowcat collapsed in a pile of feathers and fur and misty shadows.

"Sid!" Cedric roared, dropping to his knees. His ribs screamed, agony pulsing through his bones, and he wondered how many of hers she had broken by cushioning his fall. "Stars fucking damn it."

"Oh no." Tenny's soft voice behind Cedric was so unexpected, so miraculous, he nearly collapsed as it filtered into his ears. His vision filled with strawberry curls and amber eyes turned down with concern. One hand was on her token, her other palm already glowing with healing light as she skidded to a stop beside Cedric.

She ran her hand over Sid's fallen form, her shoulders sagging with relief. "She's all right," she breathed. "Just in shock. She'll be fine. You need to go."

"How did you get down here?" He craned his neck, looking for a sign of Fjaethe or Polonius, nausea rumbling at the thought of one of the monsters still on the field tearing into the horses.

"Nox," Tenny replied. "They are at the healing tent with Kit now, and I demanded they send me down."

Cedric paled. "Kit? Is she—"

"She will live," Tenny said tightly. "But I don't know if that will remain true for us all if you stay here and keep talking to me!"

Sid's eyes fluttered open, and her emerald gaze fixed on Cedric. *Go*, she seemed to say, even without words.

Cedric hesitated. "I have no weapon."

Tenny released a shrill laugh. “Cedric Lysander Thorne, are you a stars-damned sunbringer or aren’t you?!”

He blinked at her. His recent attempt at fighting with his magic alone had certainly not gone as planned. He was still reeling from it. His magic felt untethered behind his ribs, his furnace rattling, boiling over, breaking. Behind its magical veil, the crown was heavy on Cedric’s head. He didn’t know how to direct his power, how to best use it. All he’d really been able to do on the battlefield so far was mimic Raefe and other flamecallers, and doing so clearly had its limitations.

And there were still so many enemies standing between him and the crater.

The rest of their remaining forces were continuing to catch up, rallying toward the former location of the mana spring. Cedric swiveled his head to see Kingsley crouched low, Ludov charging at him with a warrior’s cry. The dwarf leapt upon his brother, who rapidly stood, launching Ludov into the air. He careened toward one of the abominations, dropping onto it from above, and Cedric heard the distinct sound of bones snapping as the beast buckled to the ground. Nearby, four soldiers had one of the *sanguinagi* mages surrounded, their swords slicing through the cultist’s scarlet whips.

But more monsters had caught up too, swooping in from above, sprinting through the snow with feral, beastly snarls.

Quartered hell, there were just so many. How were there still so many?

The bond in Cedric’s chest pulsed, urgent and sharp.

He took in a long breath through his nose, and the world slowed for just a moment.

Yes, Ashrender had fallen to the abyss. Sid was barely conscious. Cedric had scarcely begun to understand his power, let alone master its use.

But Elyria was somewhere down there, confronting the dark sorcerer that was single-handedly responsible for all this death. She was fighting to save a world that had already been so cruel to her. Fighting to give all the peoples of Arcanis the chance for a better life.

She was fighting for *him.*

So, yes, many enemies stood in his way, keeping him from her.

But Cedric was the Sunfyre Heir.

And it was not just his own magic blossoming behind his ribs now.

Cedric stood.

Dazzling light burst from his hands, so blinding that the monsters rushing toward him had to turn away, hissing as they covered their tar-stained, skeletal faces with claw-tipped hands.

Not Cedric, though.

He stared straight ahead as he kindled the daylight in his palms, feeding it, letting it grow. It started to take shape, lengthening, broadening—an enormous white-gold silhouette. He added the barest spark of Elyria's wild magic, something he held deep in his chest, nestled against his heart like the precious thing it was.

Cedric flung his arms wide.

His magic ignited.

And a brilliant, beautiful, terrifying sunfyre dragon flared its wings and roared.

It leapt into the air, tail sweeping a fiery path through the abominations nearest to Cedric, Tenny, and Sid, knocking the creatures back, setting them ablaze. Golden flames danced down the length of the dragon's body, smaller and sleeker than Lyrica but just as beautiful, just as formidable, as it reared back and sprayed a long stream of sunfyre across the field.

The monsters screamed as they burned.

And Cedric reveled in the magnificent manifestation of his power—of *their* power.

Even if he couldn't maintain it forever.

Sweat slicked his temples, dripped down his armor from the back of his neck. The dragon released one last burst of glorious white-gold flame before sweeping down over the battlefield with widespread wings of fire and dissipating back into the ether with a flare of shimmering light.

But the stretch of the field between Cedric and the crater was clear, for a moment.

And so, he ran.

I'm coming, Elle, he thought.

He was.

And he wasn't.

Because stars *fucking* damn it all, six of those powerful *sanguinagi* were still standing, spread in a semicircle in front of the crater.

They did not attack.

They did not approach.

They did not conjure blood-crystal weapons capable of inducing varying amounts of pain.

They only stood there, smiling, while blood dripped from their fingers into the surrounding snow.

Cedric swallowed, summoning a ball of sunfyre to one hand, and rolled his shoulders back. He didn't need to slay them all. He just needed to get past them.

He just needed to get to her.

"Time to taste steel, ye bleedin' sons of bitches!"

Thraigg's shout was a simultaneous balm and fuel for the terror gripping Cedric's heart. It was clear these final cultists were of a different ilk than those they'd cut through before. And for all his bravery, for all his skill with a hammer and axe, Cedric could tell Thraigg was fatigued. The dwarf swayed slightly as he bounded up beside Cedric, his massive hammer discarded in favor of a small hatchet gripped tight in his hand.

"What say ye, Ric? Feel like ending this madness today?"

"From your lips to celestial ears," Cedric replied, bracing his weight on his back foot, readying himself to launch forward.

"What, and let you two hog all the glory?" There was a flash of ice-blue at the edge of Cedric's vision, and Ollie flitted into view. "I think not."

"Forgive them, Olyndor," Tristan said, sword coated in blood as he came up on Cedric's other side, chest heaving with spent breath. "They've clearly succumbed to madness themselves if they think they can do this without us."

"You're right, of course." Ollie flashed a brilliant grin at Tristan, and orbs of water began dancing in the air between his swirling hands. "You always are."

But whatever cute quip was clearly about to spill from the knight's mouth in return would have to wait. Because now faced with not two foes, but four, the *sanguinagi* did move—all six of them converging on Cedric, Thraigg, Tristan, and Ollie.

"Go!" Ollie's voice cut through the thick layer of dread settling on Cedric's shoulders. "We will hold them." The tideweaver threw a wall of water up between the advancing enemy, then parted it down the middle. The cultists were pushed to either side, opening a path that led straight to the crater.

Cedric shook his head. "You can't—they're too—"

“We can and we will,” Tristan said, voice rough. He gripped the handle of his sword with both hands before stepping up beside Ollie.

“Aye,” said Thraigg, spinning his hatchet in his hand. “Two for each of us. More than fair, I’d say.”

Cedric looked at the trio, a lump forming in this throat.

“Tits up, Ric,” Tristan called over his shoulder. “You’re king of the realm. Go and get your girl.”

Cedric ran, turning his head to see Ollie release the walls of water with a thunderous war cry the instant he was through. They collapsed in a wave that knocked the enemy cultists off their feet, and the three of them ran forward.

The toes of Cedric’s boots touched the rough edge of the crater.

The abyss yawned before him, nothing but endless black, a hollow void. No light, no sound, no sign of where the bottom might be—or if there even was one at all.

It was his worst nightmare.

But his every dream was already down there, already fighting.

He would fight for her too.

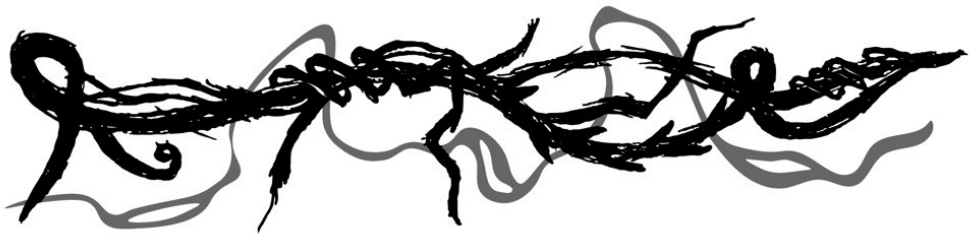
So, breath hitching, Cedric hooked himself onto their shimmering, golden bond and followed Elyria into the dark.

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A CHOICE OFFERED

ELYRIA



THE WIND SCREAMED IN ELYRIA'S EARS AS SHE FELL, PLUNGING INTO darkness. She flailed for several heartbeats, her eyes locked on the gaping maw of the crater above her, her mind still caught on Jocelyn's final goodbye, on the look on her father's face when he'd thrown her into the void.

Not in vain, she thought. *It cannot be in vain.*

She twisted in midair, her staff—Jocelyn's final gift—still clutched tight in her hand as she flared her wings and caught a current beneath them. For a single, sustained moment, Elyria floated there, letting her eyes adjust to the dark. It was like being in a long, vertical tunnel. The rocky walls surrounding her were flecked with specks of white crystal and interspersed with veins of luminous silver. And then she was soaring downward again, and the tunnel widened, the walls falling away, pouring into a vast cavern—a grotto at the center of the world.

Here, it was not dark.

Here, brilliant turquoise mana ran in a thick torrent across the ground, rushing, churning, bubbling. A river of magic.

The Line of Origin.

Rocks floated above it, pebbles and boulders and wide, vein-streaked platforms made of stone, suspended at varying heights in the air. Like this entire place had its own sense of gravity, its own magnetic pull. They

drifted back and forth, caught in the swell of the waves of magic ebbing and flowing from the Line.

Elyria felt it too.

Felt the sheer *power* here.

It had her wild magic stuttering in her veins, the sunfyre kindling by her heart flickering. It peeled away her protections, her defenses, turning her armor back into skittering, misting shadows—uncontrolled and awestruck.

The magic veiling the crown on her head was unwoven, and an echo ran through the gilded circlet, making Elyria shiver.

It knew this place.

It came from this place.

All magic did.

And Elyria knew with a strange sort of certainty that if she was not careful, if she did not keep her wits about her, the tide would pull her under.

She could not let it.

Not when there, at the center of the cavern, standing on a floating dais of shining, glossy—*fuck it all*—obsidian rock, was Malakar.

His back was to her, the hood of his robe lifted over his head. Nothing but a man-shaped swath of black, sucking the light from his surroundings.

She wished she didn't know that shape.

She landed hard on a floating platform of silver-streaked marble, the end of her staff striking the stone with a *thud* that echoed through the cavern. "You're done, Malakar," she spat. "This is over."

"So you all keep saying." He did not turn around. "Does the word have some new meaning we are not aware of? Because from our vantage, *regina*, this is anything but over."

Elyria exhaled her annoyance. "If you want to spend your final moments arguing semantics, that is your choice. It won't save you."

"Though, speaking of things being repeated," he continued, as though he didn't hear her at all, "we would be remiss not to point out the poetry of being in this place together. Do you not see it? Feel it? The power we could have had?" He paused, his hood shifting as he tilted his head to one side. "What we still *could* have. It isn't too late for you to join us. You desire a whole Arcanis, a healed Arcanis? We can give you that. Arcanians and humans alike will grovel at your feet, *mi regina umbrae*. We can rule over them all . . . together."

Elyria huffed out an exhausted laugh. “You think I would allow you to poison the Line and rewrite the world? Would let you enslave the oppressed and kill those who oppose you just so I can play at being empress of the bones?”

“Poison?” he echoed, amusement woven through the word. “No, *regina*. We are the antidote. We are the *cure.* These so-called celestials make claims about balance, about righting the ways of the world—the world *they* created. And yet, when the time came to truly tear down the ways of old, to plant the seeds for a balanced future, they abandoned us.”

“How is the future you desire any different?” Conviction boiled in Elyria’s blood. “You offer nothing but death and silence. A world where the scales are tipped, with you on one side and everything and everyone else on the other. And *that* is an imbalance even the celestials will no longer be able to ignore.”

Malakar’s head tilted farther, his hood falling back to reveal the barest sliver of his pale face as he looked over his shoulder at her. “Then it is a good thing no celestials shall remain to protest.”

Elyria blinked. She took one shocked step forward. “What are you saying?”

Malakar’s shoulders rose and fell in a silent laugh. “The Line is only the ink. If we want to rewrite the world, we first must eliminate its authors.”

“You would challenge the celestials themselves?”

“We would kill them. We *will* kill them. Empowered by the magic of this place, we will crush them and take their power. And *then*, yes, *regina*, we will shape this world anew.”

Elyria sucked in, then blew out, a deep, slow breath and leaned against her staff. “You know, when all this started, when you had me trapped in your tower and pinned to your table, there were moments when I truly feared. Not necessarily for myself, not because of what you were doing to me. But because of what you could do—would do—to the rest of Arcanis. I feared what you would turn this world into if given reign over it. How frightening, I thought, to realize that the sublime sorcerer of darkness himself, this brilliant, evil man had returned. The same one who, unwittingly or not, had already long been the architect of my misery.”

Elyria eyed the obsidian platform beneath Malakar’s feet and sucked back the ribbon of shadow that was wrapped around her staff, tucking it

inside herself. Now only the barest hint of Cedric's sunfyre remained twisted around the weapon, embedded in the wood like a golden thread.

Safer this way, she thought. She did not want her shadows igniting the volatile stone, and even more, she did not want to risk Malakar taking hold of them again. She knew she was stronger now. Knew that her shadows were different. That they were no longer his, nothing *close* to his.

But still, there was the memory of how it had felt to have him seize them, the way he'd used them against her. It crawled over her skin, a film she could never quite seem to scrub clean.

Elyria cleared her throat. "So, yes, I feared you," she continued, shifting her weight to her back foot. "Because I thought you some diabolical mastermind plotting to take over the world. But that's not exactly the case, is it? You are not some genius, some savant. You are simply a man who was given too much power, and it has driven you mad."

Malakar was so still, it was like he had frozen in place. He stayed like that, unmoving, his arms stiff at his sides, his head turned just a fraction, as Elyria rose with a great flap of her wings and launched herself at the dark sorcerer.

But then it was not Malakar who was frozen.

It was Elyria, clutched in some invisible vise, suspended in midair like the useless rocks drifting around her. Power pressed in on her from all sides —crushing, diminishing. Her arms and legs were forced wide, her fingers compelled to straighten. Her staff clattered to the obsidian at the dark sorcerer's feet.

It wasn't her shadows he'd taken hold of. Wasn't ribbons of blood or darkness that curled around her limbs, squeezing her, slicing at her. It was raw, pure, unfiltered, indefensible magic that held her, her limbs stretched out, a dark, unnatural star spread-eagled in the air.

The blood drained from Elyria's face when Malakar finally turned to face her. Mana dripped from the corner of his mouth. Silver veins spread under his eyes, streaking down his cheeks, his jaw, his neck.

"Too much power," the sorcerer mused, his voice raw, rasping. "No. If anything, it is not enough."

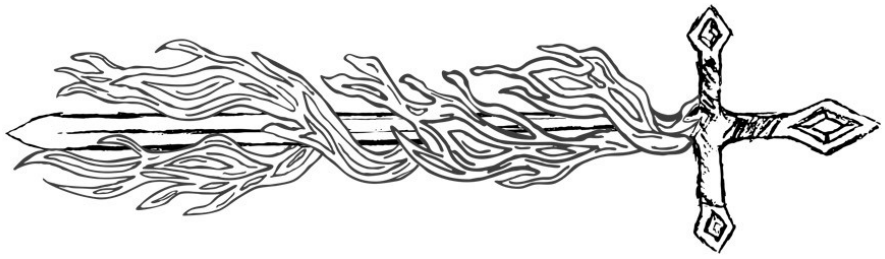
And he leapt into the Line.

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AN OFFER MADE

CEDRIC



THE BOND WAS EASY TO FOLLOW. CEDRIC STALKED THROUGH THE DARK, HIS very consciousness trailing that golden thread through the shadows until his feet touched solid ground once more.

It should have brought him relief, to emerge from the in-between and see Elyria in front of him—alive, safe.

Well, maybe not safe.

But she was unharmed. Because as Malakar leapt off the floating platform and dove down into the rushing river of mana below, whatever force had been restraining her seemed to dive with him. She exhaled as her locked limbs moved freely and her wings fluttered at her back.

But those few heartbeats when Cedric had seen his *solimaeus* suspended in midair—her arms and legs extended, the muscles in her neck straining—had sent him into a roaring, violent rage. He was single-mindedly focused on getting to her, barely even registering the fact that his crown had reappeared on his brow once more as he leapt from rocky platform to rocky platform, closing the distance between Elyria and himself.

He only felt her once he got close.

As if the power and magic pulsing through the cavern—and quartered hell, was there *a lot* of it—interfered with their connection. It was still there, still strong and bright and gleaming. But until he had closed some of the distance between them, she had been dulled, fully muted, like instead of

a single door standing between them, it was a hundred long hallways, with a dozen locks on each one.

But as Cedric neared Elyria, as he stepped foot on the obsidian dais that Malakar had just leapt from, she came into focus. Like the first perfect note of a songbird's tune, he could hear her. He could *feel* her. Cedric felt her surprise and panic and worry and relief of her own as she perceived his presence.

Elyria immediately flew to him, hovering a foot above the glossy black rock as she leaned down to scoop up her staff. *"You came,"* she whispered through their bond.

"Did you think I wouldn't?"

"I hoped."

Cedric didn't know if she meant she'd hoped he would or she'd hoped he wouldn't. He didn't get the chance to ask.

A titanic wave of power burst from the Line below them, sending the obsidian platform careening toward the side of the cavern. Cedric leapt from it, tucking into a roll on the rocky ground right before the platform collided with the wall, shattering into pieces.

Shards of stone rained down on Cedric as he got to his feet, now on the same level as the Line. Liquid mana rippled a few yards in front of him, ebbing and flowing like soft waves on a sandy shore.

"Be careful," Elyria said, landing deftly next to him. *"The obsidian. If shadow touches it—"*

"Oh, I remember." He buried a grimace at the memory of how he'd been blasted into that lake of fire during the third trial, when Elyria inadvertently touched her shadows to the stone.

But obsidian was the least of their worries now.

Blue-green light swelled from the Line, the middle of the river now a churning vortex.

Elyria's breath hitched as she gripped her staff tight. The ground rumbled as she called her wild magic forth. *"He could be anything now."*

Cedric straightened, the furnace in his chest simmering. *"He will die like any other man."*

Light surged violently upward, a geyser of power that forced Cedric to turn his head in avoidance of the glare. Something glinted at the corner of his vision when he did, and shock pulsed through him when he turned a fraction more. Because there, lying on the crystal-flecked ground, was a

long silver sword with a winged crossguard and an amber stone set in its pommel.

Cedric dove for Ashrender just as Malakar rose from the Line.

The dark sorcerer wore no robe. No wolven medallion hung from his neck. Like the mana had burned it all away, along with his former self.

Cedric had seen this before.

Malakar was a star-swirled expanse now, wrapped in sheets of white light. Pure, unfiltered *magic* solidified before their eyes, settling its shape as fabric that hung over his shoulders, draped over his frame—a celestial vestment, similar in sheen and weight to the robes Aurelia and Noctis had worn when he met each star god.

Because that was what the dark sorcerer was now, wasn't it? He had the same aura of power, the same night-stained skin. It was dotted with gleaming constellations—the midnight sky captured on flesh.

But, then, perhaps some differences still remained.

No nebulas burst in Malakar's eyes. No, those were black as the void—no pupils, no irises, no surrounding white.

Silver veins, thoroughly *un*cosmic streaks, carved down his midnight face.

And when he opened his mouth, no multitudinous, layered voice came out.

It made Cedric's skin crawl, nonetheless.

"Sunbringer," said Malakar, a smile creeping over his face. "How good of you to join us." He hovered above the Line now, untethered from the ground, floating with no wings.

Cedric scoffed. "Did you expect I would not? You deserve to die a hundred burning deaths for the destruction you've wrought today. And then a hundred more for everything you did to *her*."

Malakar's shoulders rose and fell in some bastardized version of a shrug. "Progress requires sacrifice. Those whose lives were lost today will have helped forge a better future for all Arcanis. We receive their gratitude gladly."

"No one is offering you thanks," Elyria snarled.

The smug expression on Malakar's face fell. "They will."

Cedric took a single step closer to the Line. "You will not live long enough to find out either way."

“And what makes you think you can destroy a god, little king?” Malakar’s black gaze locked on the twin crowns atop Cedric’s and Elyria’s heads. “Once, we craved that power you wear too. No longer.” He lifted a hand, dragging his pointer finger through the air. When he dropped it, light stained the space in front of him in the shape of an eight-pointed star. Malakar swiveled his wrist, curling fingers in toward his palm, and the star shimmered—solidifying, curving.

The dark sorcerer plucked a shining silver crown from the air and set it upon his own head. “Look at us,” he hissed. “We can create a thousand Crowns of Concord. We can do *anything*. We will take what we want—from this place, from the celestials, from the world entire.”

“You took my wife.” Cedric’s voice shook with barely restrained wrath. Glowing orange-red color crept along Ashrender’s length, the sunfyre blazing in his palm as hot as any forge. “You made her bleed.”

“*A sanguine, ad sanguinem,*” Malakar said. “From blood, to blood. It all comes back to me in the end. Your grandparents knew this. It is time you learned the same lesson.”

Cedric and Elyria both dove to opposite sides as Malakar soared toward them, raw power pulsing off his celestial body. Tendrils of magic poured from his palms, lashing at them both simultaneously. Elyria tore into the air with a pump of her majestic wings. Wasting no time, she called the shattered pieces of the obsidian platform to her, then sent the shards careening toward the dark sorcerer. Blue-green light streamed from the gashes the sharp stones cut into Malakar, and he hissed his displeasure.

His attention diverted to her, both he and his power shot into the air in pursuit.

Elyria flew.

Staff still gripped in hand, she used her wild magic to tear chunks of rock from the walls, the floor. She captured the ones calmly floating in the ether above the Line and threw them all at Malakar as he chased her down.

Cedric watched helplessly from the ground as Malakar deflected half of them with a flick of his wrist and avoided the rest with a *step* through the air. And when he emerged from the shadows a third, fourth, fifth time, laughing—a dark, grating sound—Cedric realized the dark sorcerer was simply *toying* with Elyria.

Eventually, though, he got tired of playing.

Malakar’s power swelled, surging ahead of him, cutting Elyria off. It wasn’t like ribbons that wrapped around her, capturing and restricting. It was a hollowness, a light-spun void. It sucked Elyria in, dragging her down, pulling her toward him.

And no matter how hard she beat her wings against it, she drew ever nearer.

Elyria cursed, wielding her staff like a bat, trying to beat back his power. It did nothing. She was only feet from him now. And when Malakar reached a hand out, his starry fingers twitching as though aching to grab her, Cedric’s furnace burst open.

Sunfyre erupted from him as he braced himself, leaned back, and launched a flaming Ashrender at the mad celestial sorcerer.

It soared through the air, the blade red-hot, and Malakar roared when it lanced his gut.

White-gold fire danced from the place where sword met flesh, catching his celestial robe on fire.

And the makeshift star god fell to the ground in a blazing heap.

Silence descended upon the cavern. Even the roiling mana of the Line seemed to settle and calm. Elyria fluttered back down, eyes pinned to Malakar, splayed on his side, Ashrender’s hilt sticking out from his front, the sharp blade jutting out of his back.

It was too easy.

It *was* too easy.

Because just as quickly as Cedric’s sunfyre had washed over Malakar’s body, it snuffed out.

Cedric and Elyria gaped—tense, disbelieving—as Malakar stood up, then looked down. Despairing incredulity bounced down the bond between them as the dark sorcerer curled a midnight hand around Ashrender’s hilt . . .

. . . and withdrew it from his body with a squelch.

Blue-green light poured from the hole in his gut.

“You,” he said with a sneer, “should have aimed higher.”

He chucked Ashrender aside with all the ceremony of tossing a broken quill in the bin. Then he took a single *step* into the shadows and emerged directly in front of Cedric.

Elyria’s scream was a brutal, furious sound.

She surged forward, her wild magic pulling more rocky fragments—marble and granite and obsidian, all—around her in a swirl.

But Malakar flicked his wrist, and his hollow power ensnared her once more. It pinned her and the shards in place, suspending them together in a twisted tableau, forcing her to watch in absolute horror as the dark sorcerer wrapped his fingers around Cedric's throat.

"Enough of this," Malakar said, his voice low but even. The croon of a lover. "Enough from you."

He squeezed.

"No!" Elyria's voice echoed in Cedric's mind as his vision began blackening at the corners.

Not just from the loss of air, though.

Darkness was swirling around Elyria, shadows misting off her, frantic, frenzied. And whether she didn't remember she was surrounded by shards of obsidian, or she simply didn't care, it did not matter. Her shadows touched the power-hungry stone all the same, and her dark magic ignited.

The three of them—Elyria, Malakar, and Cedric all—were blasted back.

Cedric slammed into the wall behind him with a *crunch*. Warmth trickled down the back of his neck, and he blinked through blurring vision.

Elyria had gone tumbling backward too, but she managed to right herself before she slammed into the cavern on the opposite side. With a great flap of her wings and her staff pointed forward, she sped back toward Malakar.

Malakar, who—

Well, he'd stumbled.

Staggered.

Just a step. Maybe two.

There were gashes in his skin, more of that mana-filled light streaming from his wounds in place of blood.

But the blast of supreme, obsidian-amplified power had barely impacted him at all outside of that, and *that* was far more terrifying than anything Cedric had seen him do so far.

No, that wasn't true.

The most terrifying possibility was still happening.

Because as Elyria rushed him, a whole new kind of darkness flashed over Malakar's face. Any lingering composure, any remaining patience, the

thought of continuing to toy with them, to draw out this final fight—it all evaporated.

The pained whimper Elyria released when Malakar's power ensnared her once more drew fire from behind Cedric's ribs. He tried to move, tried to rise, tried to draw his magic into his hands, then to lift those hands to his head and heal himself.

But his limbs were weak. His magic was sputtering. Like a clogged drain, only the smallest wisps were leaking through.

He looked down to see rivulets of red dripping from his palms, his wrists. And at the source of each bloody stream, a dark, shiny stone was embedded in his skin. Cedric had thrown his arms up in instinctual defense when Elyria's power exploded through the cavern, and now shards of obsidian studded his flesh.

And so all he could do was watch with black-spotted vision as Malakar used his power to yank a paralyzed Elyria toward him. Her feet touched the ground, and the dark sorcerer ripped her staff from her grip, discarding it before snagging the back of her neck the way one might grab an animal's scruff.

"This has gone on too long," Malakar said, dragging her beside him as he took measured steps toward the Line. He hooked his night-sky fingers around her crown and plucked it from her head, looking at it with disdain before discarding it like it was little more than costume jewelry. "We offered you the world, *regina.* Power greater than that which the celestials wield. And over and over you spat in our face. You flaunted your bond; you wielded that sharp tongue to wound us." He arched a dark eyebrow. "You stole our power, and then you kept it."

"You've already pierced the Line," Elyria gritted out. "You said you don't need your power back."

"Correct," Malakar hissed. "We do not need it. But neither do we think you deserve to keep it any longer." He shoved her to the ground, the slow mana tide rippling just inches from her periwinkle hair. "Not brilliant, you called us. No mastermind. Perhaps that is true. But still, we know things. True power does not lie in piercing the Line. It lies in using the Line *to pierce*."

Elyria's eyes widened, fear racing down the bond into Cedric's chest, overriding his agony. He bellowed her name, clawing at his own hands,

tearing his flesh further as he attempted to rip the obsidian shards from his skin.

“We would have loved for you to see the new world we will create.” Malakar sighed, wistful. “You will have to settle for knowing you died in service of making it great. Now come, let us show you how one steals power from the celestials.”

Shadows consolidated in the dark sorcerer’s hand as Elyria lay on the ground. She grunted as she fought against his hold, her muscles vibrating, limbs quivering against the invisible force keeping her still. Malakar’s shadows elongated—a sharp point, a curved edge, a black tanged blade—and he plunged it into the Line.

When he withdrew it, the turquoise mana coating the shadow-made sword was marbled with black—like ink spooling through water.

He positioned the mana-dipped blade of shadow over Elyria’s heart.

She closed her eyes.

Cedric could not close his.

He would watch. He would see the exact, precise moment her beautiful, perfect soul left this world.

And then he would follow her to the Hereafter.

He drew in a final breath.

Malakar raised his hands.

Black streaked across Cedric’s vision, too fast to make sense of it.

Cedric whipped his gaze to the side, but the motion had his head pounding and momentarily erased what remained of his eyesight.

There was screaming, crashing, a deafening roar.

Muttered words that he could not hear over the rush of blood in his ears.

The bond went taut in his chest.

Another scream sounded.

And only terrible, terrible silence remained.

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SOMEBODY'S FATHER

TENNY



SID WAS A BRILLIANT BLUR OF SHADOW-MISTED BLACK SOARING ACROSS THE cavern. She collided with Malakar in a frenzy of claws and teeth and screams—Elyria's, Sid's, the dark sorcerer's.

Not just a sorcerer. Not anymore.

Tenny could hardly believe what she was seeing. It was like her father's body had been born anew, stars birthing and dying over the violet expanse of his skin. Power pulsed from him even as he staggered back from Elyria, who was frozen on the ground.

Well, not frozen any longer. She had been, when Tenny and Sid had first emerged in the cavern, having flown down through the crater to help their friends.

Tenny didn't know how she was supposed to help, really. Not in a battle between star gods. But the instant the shadowcat had recovered from the blow she'd sustained above, it was clear Sid was intent on going to help Elyria and Cedric below.

And Tenny could not let her go alone.

Thankfully, Sid's attack seemed to have distracted Malakar enough to release whatever magic he was using to keep Elyria restrained and immobile, because she leapt to her feet as soon as they collided. She cast a look at Cedric, who, Tenny realized with a pang, was collapsed against a blood-streaked wall.

Elyria lifted her chin. Took a breath. Clenched her fists. And attacked.

The ground cracked open, thick roots crawling up from the center of the world, swarming Malakar's boots. Shards of swirling rock whistled through the air, slicing at his arms and legs. Ribbons of gold-edged shadow ripped from Elyria's hands as she thrust both arms in front of her with a primal yell.

Malakar cursed, defending against the onslaught of rock and root and shadow, against gnashing teeth and beating wings as Sid continued her assault.

Tenny ran for Cedric.

She was almost to him when she saw it. Turquoise light glinting off silver steel. A round amber stone.

Ashrender was lying on the floor, the blade half-immersed in the liquid mana flowing against the rocky ground.

Tenny pivoted midstep, racing for the sword.

He saw her.

With a shout, Malakar waved one hand, and a blast of power sent Elyria staggering back and Sid hurtling across the cavern, spinning in the air. With his other, he sent a long, swooping swath of cursed shadows straight at Tenny.

The rush of oncoming power blew the hair off Tenny's face before the shadowy tendrils reached her, and she instinctively shut her eyes before they ended her life.

Her life did not end.

Why didn't it end?

She cracked open her eyes and gasped at the undulating ribbons of dark power just inches from her nose.

They were shuddering, quivering, still reaching for her—but it was as though someone had grabbed them, ensnared them. As though someone was holding them back.

"Portentia?"

She stepped back with a gasp.

Because when she lifted her eyes to look at Malakar—his arm outstretched, his fingers twitching—amber eyes stared back at her from his night-kissed face.

"Father?" she whispered, her throat hoarse.

He didn't say anything else. His eyes were black as tar once more, an endless void of night, and Tenny was diving out of the way of the magic

that resumed lashing at her.

But that hesitation, that moment of breakthrough, was enough.

Malakar's hand fell.

And *she* rose.

Elyria Lightbreaker was a dark phoenix as she rose into the air, her shadow-laced wings flaring wide behind her. No golden circlet sat upon her head. White-gold flames danced there instead—a crown of sunfyre.

She was a queen of shadow *and* sun, twilight and sunrise, the beginning and the end.

His end.

With a terrifying, glorious cry, Elyria lunged for her staff, scooping it up and immediately wrapping it in gold-ringed shadow. The darkness consolidated in a sharp, spiked tip at the end—a daynight spear. She hurled it like a javelin at Malakar, the strength and speed behind the blow sending him careening back into the cavern wall behind him.

He looked down at the staff embedded in his gut and laughed. "It would appear you are shockingly resistant to learning from your mistakes, *regina*." He gripped the shaft with two hands, and Tenny's face screwed up in disgust as he moved to pull it out.

Only, he couldn't.

Tenny saw the instant the realization hit him. He was stuck to the wall, the shadow-swarmed staff thoroughly embedded in the rock behind him. Vines crept from the cracks in the stone at his back, wrapping around his legs, his arms, moving them apart and leaving him spread-eagled against the side of the cavern.

He was pinned by the brilliant, magnified mix of the Revenant's magic —wild and sun and shadows.

Shadows he used to think were his.

Elyria's smile was a slow, devious thing as it spread across her face.

And Tenny moved.

She let out a shriek when a small wave of mana crashed around her feet, splashing over them as she snatched up Ashrender from where it lay. Her skin burned where the mana soaked in through her boots, but the feeling was lost as soon as she heard Cedric's pained groan. Tenny whipped her head to the left, where Sid was whining at the injured knight's side. Her large, shadowy head butted his shoulder, as though trying to urge his arm over her neck.

“No, no.” His words were slurred, his head swinging weakly from side to side. He held his bleeding hands aloft, keeping them away from Sid’s fretting form.

Ashrender in hand, Tenny ran to join them, her eyes bulging at the sight of the jagged pieces of stone sticking out of his skin. “I have him, Sid,” she said unevenly. “Stay back for a moment.”

The shadowcat growled her displeasure as Tenny swallowed hard, her mind racing. Cedric needed help. Needed more healing than she could provide. Sid could fly him out. But Sid was made of shadow, and the obsidian in his hands . . .

Tenny touched her mana token, draining its final dregs of power as she targeted the rocky piercings on Cedric’s right hand and wrist. It was fast, and it was bloody, and Cedric’s hissed string of curses made it clear that it hurt. But Tenny was able to clear the shards from one hand, messily sealing the wounds before it was her turn to curse. Her magic had sputtered out entirely.

Maybe it was enough, though. Tenny grabbed Ashrender and cut a length of fabric from her skirt, then wrapped Cedric’s remaining hand—a makeshift mitt for the rest of his obsidian-laced skin.

“Sid!” Tenny urged, and the shadowcat was back in an instant, tucking herself under Cedric’s body, bracing him, helping him to his feet.

A scream sounded from where Malakar was still pinned to the wall of the cavern, struggling against the roots holding him in place, against the staff still plunged deep in his gut, against what looked like several shadow-forged daggers lodged in various parts of his body.

Elyria floated back and forth several feet in front of him, her wings fluttering slowly—the ultimate predator toying with her prey.

“Do not fear, *mi sanguinexos*,” she said darkly, flipping a shadowdagger in her hand before flinging it into the dark sorcerer’s shoulder and eliciting another rage-filled roar. “Soon you will forget all about this. I will snuff out whatever tiny, insignificant delusions you might still have of winning.”

Malakar laughed, luminous light-blood leaking from the corner of his mouth. “Clever, *regina*. Always so clever. But you cannot kill me. I have already foreseen it. The world will be remade. Our victory is prophesied.”

“The sword,” Cedric grunted, and Tenny ripped her gaze from Malakar and Elyria to look down at Ashrender, still in her grip.

“Don’t be daft; you’re in no shape to help her,” she said, panting as she attempted to haul Cedric onto Sid’s back. “The best thing we can do is get you out of here.”

“It’s not . . . for me.” He snapped the fingers of his free hand, summoning a single spark of sunfyre, which he touched to Ashrender’s mana-dipped surface.

The sword ignited, not with white-gold sunfyre but with a dazzling, kaleidoscopic array of rainbow flame—raw mana, true magic, the power of the Line.

Tenny’s wide eyes met Cedric’s.

He nodded.

“Elle!” Tenny reared back and threw the sword, sending it spinning through the air.

A single ribbon of gold-laced shadow whipped forth to catch it. Elyria wrapped her fingers around the amber-stoned hilt. Shadowy mist wound down the sword in her hand, mixing with the prismatic fire blazing across its length.

“You wanted to remake the world,” Elyria said darkly. “Remake this.”

She thrust a flaming Ashrender into Malakar’s heart.

Everything went still. For a moment nothing happened. Malakar just blinked those onyx-black eyes at Elyria, the galaxies swirling over his skin moving, writhing, like they were trying to escape.

He gaped at her, then gasped a wet-sounding breath. “Im-impossible.”

“A sanguine, ad sanguinem,” she replied, rainbow flames extinguishing as she pulled Ashrender from his chest.

Turquoise light wept from the wound in his gut, the hole in his heart.

“Who says I can’t learn from my mistakes?” she said.

And with a furious, lightning-fast swing of her arm, Elyria Lightbreaker, the Revenant, cleaved the dark sorcerer’s head from his body.

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THE PRICE WE PAY

LEVIATHAN CHURCH



First, there is only darkness.

The pulsing, pounding, descending night.

It pushes down on me.

Pushes in on me.

Pushes me out.

He *pushes me out.*

I am here and I am not.

I am dust and I am . . . nothing.

And so it goes. He has me locked in a room, seldom visited, cold and small and empty. Every now and again, a window appears. I see flashes of the world, the barest hints of the life we now live.

He wields the power I *gathered. Puts into motion the plans that* I *made. They follow him—blindly, loyally.*

Their blood king.

He twists the oaths they once made to me, infuses them with greater evil. He will not stop until the world is bowing at his feet.

He has taken my empire.

He has taken my body.

He has taken everything.



Regret. It is agony, woven into the very fabric of my being.

I've done so much wrong.

I've hurt so many.

I've hurt my children.

I've hurt him, and I've hurt . . . her.

Her.

My daughter. Flesh of my flesh, my blood and bone. In the lowest moments of drifting in this desolate nothingness, when I wish I could just disappear, vacate his mind and my body and this cruel, wretched life, she appears.

Rosy cheeks. Strawberry curls. And my own eyes, staring back at me.

Why couldn't I let us be happy?

Why couldn't it have been enough?



There is so much blood.

He wields it like food, like fuel. Its power presses into our bones, tears through our skin. And then there is more than blood. There is pure power—unfiltered, unrestrained.

It is changing him. Changing us.

They have come. They've come to stop him. Stop us.

Please, stop us.



They can't.

And now he—he is hurting them.

He wants to pierce their hearts, to suck out their power.

He wants to take it all.

It has to end somewhere, somehow.

Is this really what I thought I wanted? Did I really think it would be worth the cost?

I should have known it never is.



"PORTENTIA?"

For the first time in a thousand sunless nights, my voice is the one to erupt from our mouth.

She is here. I reach for her.

No, he *reaches for her. He wants to hurt her. Wants to bend her to his will. And if he cannot bend her, he will break her.*

Never.

Never.

Never.

I *am the one who bends.*

And together, him and I, we break.



FIRST, there is only light.

The brilliant, burning, inevitable sun.

It lifts us up.

Throws us down.

Pushes in on us, searing through us, tearing us apart.

We are here, and then we are not.

We are dust, fragments of life scattering in the wind.

It is glorious, wondrous, consuming.

Because he is gone.

And I am . . .

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AGAINST THE SUNLIT SKY

KIT



THE WORLD STOPPED.

Like the pause between ticks of a clock, the inhalation before a gasp of life, it was as though time itself had frozen.

And then it restarted, and Kit's eyes grew wide as many, many things began happening at once.

Turquoise light shot up from the crater Malakar had left behind—a blinding geyser of magic that burst into the sky.

Heat and power washed so intensely over the battlefield, Kit could feel it all the way from the healer's tent at the top of the hill. She scrambled to her feet, heart hammering in her chest, while Tenebris Nox's words of concern fell unheard on her ears.

Kit could not hear anything, could not *see* anything, other than what was happening on the battlefield below.

The remaining abominations, still engaged in battle, looked up for a suspended moment, staring at the power still exploding from the crater. Then, screeching, they *ran*.

Quick-thinking soldiers and the Arcanians still on the field did their best not to let them escape. They could not stop them all. One carried a red-robed figure in its misshapen arms as it flew away. But they stopped enough.

The pillar of swirling light started to calm, gushing power replaced with a shimmering mist—like the spray of a waterfall, sprinkled in the air. The

rays from the sun and the aurora created brilliant, dazzling rainbows where they met the vapor.

It was too beautiful a sight to describe. And the contrast with the bloodstained, body-littered battlefield below was too horrifying to behold.

A dark shape emerged from the crater, soaring through the mist. Kit held her breath—

Then released it when she saw the long, sleek curve of a feline body, the huge feathery wings extended on both sides.

She breathed deeper when she saw the two silhouettes on the shadowcat's back.

"Take me down!" she urged Nox, who was standing beside her now, their eyes locked on the sight before them as well.

The nocterrian's gaze flicked to the bandage wrapped around Kit's midsection and narrowed their gaze.

"*Now*," Kit bellowed at them, and with a shake of their head, they swept them both into the dark, reemerging a few yards from the crater.

Bodies surrounded them. The snow was so thoroughly steeped in red and black blood that there was hardly any white left.

Kit couldn't look long. Her vision tunneled to the shadowcat who had just landed in front of her. And then shock rippled through her core, because it wasn't Elyria struggling to hold a barely conscious Cedric Thorne upright on Sid's back.

It was *Tenny*.

Relief, panic, and alarm warred in Kit's chest. Tenny was safe, Cedric and Sid were here, but—

"Where is she!?" Kit cried.

"She was right behind us," Tenny said, releasing a small grunt as Nox rushed forward to help slide Cedric off Sid's back.

The shadowcat vanished her wings in a burst of black smoke, then immediately lay on the ground, offering her body as a brace for a groaning Cedric as Nox leaned him back.

"Get Shep," Tenny told Nox, and without a word the nocterrian stepped back into the shadows. Her eyes darted nervously to the crater before she unwrapped his hand and began plucking shards of—*quartered hell*—obsidian from his skin. "She said she would be right behind us." Her voice was quiet, hollow, and Kit's heart clenched.

Nox returned a moment later with Shep in tow, green light already swirling in his sylvan hands.

“His head,” Tenny said urgently. “I ran out of mana.”

“I have him,” Shep replied, and Tenny sniffled and gave a stiff nod before backing away to let the healer work.

“Where is she?” Kit repeated, a whisper that lingered too long in the air. Now that Cedric was being taken care of, she could not rip her gaze from the misting crater. “What happened?”

“Elle, she—she killed him. She stopped him.” Tenny wrung her hands together, then wiped them on her dress, like she was just realizing how much of Cedric’s blood coated them. “And then the Line—I don’t know how to explain it. Swelled? Burst? She yelled at me to go, to get Ric out, and I swear to the Five, Kit, she really *was* right behind us.”

“She’s all right,” Kit said, shaking her head. “She has to be all right. She’s just . . .”

She was just, what though? Kit could not come up with a reason for why Elyria would not have soared out of that crater along with Tenny, Cedric, and Sid. Why she was not already here, watching over her injured *solimaeus*.

Tenny gasped and let out an agonized cry. Kit was almost too afraid to turn her head.

And when she did anyway, she desperately wished she hadn’t.

“No, no, no, no.” Tenny’s gaze was not on the crater. It was on the frozen ground in front of it.

The ground, where a blood-covered Thraigg was sobbing over Kingsley’s broken form.

The ground, where bodies lay in heaps surrounding the crater—abomination, cultist, and soldier, all.

The ground, where teal hair was matted with blood. Where ice-blue wings were flat and unmoving. And where Ollie’s brown eyes held nothing of his warmth, his humor, his appetite for life as he lay atop a pile of slain *sanguinagi*.

Kit’s keening cry was so loud, she thought maybe it could be heard all the way in the Hereafter.

She hoped it could.

She hoped he heard it.

She hoped he already knew, wherever he was, that the world was colder and dimmer and worse without him in it.

She felt Nox's presence before their figure came into view at her side. The nocterrian braced one strong hand on Kit's shoulder, saying nothing, because there was nothing to say.

Kit gripped their hand, tears bursting free from her eyes, her chest shuddering with broken sobs as her heart cracked.

When she lifted her eyes, when she finally let them roam over the rest of the bloodied scene surrounding her, it cracked further.

Shattered crystal and dented steel were strewn throughout the field. Groans and cries filled the air as the other healers rushed across the battlefield to help. Gryphons flew overhead, half of them descending to carry away the injured, the other half unceremoniously hauling enemy bodies to a pile far on the other side of the field, back near the village.

Raefe stood beside it, fire streaming from his hands, and thick black smoke wafted into the air as he burned the remains of the enemy to ash.

Kit's eyes returned to the crater. To the fact that there was still no sign of Elyria.

A fresh stream of tears carved down Kit's cheeks when she spotted Jocelyn lying in the snow. It was too much. Too much death. Too much loss.

"She stopped him," Tenny had said. But at what cost? Surely this was all too high a price to have paid. How could the celestials have allowed such destruction? How could Aurelia have abandoned the war she was responsible for starting?

There was a groan—muted, muffled. Ollie's body moved, just the barest bit. Kit's heart leapt as she raced over. She could feel her wound tearing open when she fell to her knees, but she didn't care. She rolled his body onto his back, pressing her ear to his chest.

Nothing.

There was nothing.

No tremulous beat of his heart, no warmth in his blood.

But if it wasn't him . . .

Fingers twitched next to Ollie's head, and Kit realized with a gasp who had been buried beneath him—had been *protected* by him.

Blood leaked from the edges of Tristan's mouth as he coughed, splattering Kit's blouse with specks of red. He was laying on his side, the

broken shafts of four crystal arrows embedded in his chest, pierced right through his armor.

"You're a . . . sight for . . . sore eyes, Ten," Tristan said as Tenny fell to her knees beside Kit, who was already summoning healing magic to her palms.

But Kit had never been much of a healer. And this . . .

"Shh," Tenny's voice was scolding, even as tears fell freely from her eyes, each one dropping to Tristan's chest plate with a *tink*. "Don't speak. An incredibly difficult task for you, I know, but you'll need to try."

Tristan attempted to laugh while they rolled him gently onto his back. It came out in a wet and bloody rush, red leaking from either side of his mouth. A mouth that was not laughing anymore. Because his new position allowed him to catch sight of Ollie's lifeless body beside him. And Tristan's whispered "No" as he reached a weak hand toward Ollie broke Kit's heart all over again.

"I'm sorry, Tris. I'm so sorry." Tenny's cry shifted into chest-heaving, heart-wrenching sobs. "It's going to be all right," she spluttered, grappling with her empty token. "You're going to be all right. Just hold on. Please, *please*, just—"

"Stars *fucking* damn it, no!" The rawness in Cedric's voice was like a punch to the chest, crumbling yet another piece of Kit's heart into dust as she turned to look at him.

Cedric's face was pale, but he was standing and he was whole as he, too, joined the others around Tristan. Shep was right behind him, green light still flickering in his palms. But even as Kit backed up to make room for the two of them, even as they pulled crystal shafts from Tristan's armor and worked together in tandem with Tenny to stem the flow of blood from each wound, a dark understanding came over Kit.

She knew that the sylvan's magic was close to being spent, that he had already healed so many, that Cedric's own grave injuries had used much of what was left.

She knew that Tristan was human. And the human body was not meant to take four arrows to the chest and gut and make it out alive.

Tristan coughed again, and more blood trickled from the corner of his mouth, painting the strands of blond hair stuck to his cheeks red.

"Don't you *fucking* dare, Tris," Cedric said, one hand gripping the knight's shoulder, the other placed atop his heart. "Do you hear me? I

command you not to die. You're going to fucking *live*."

With what seemed like great effort, Tristan tore his gaze from Ollie. There were tears in his sky-blue eyes as he huffed a weak laugh, laying a shaking hand over Cedric's. "Well, if my king commands . . . then I shall have to obey." His eyelids fluttered shut. "After all, there are still so many people left in this world I've yet to f . . ."

Tristan's arm went limp. His hand fell away. The rise and fall of his chest grew even shallower.

"No, no, Tristan," Tenny said, hands still pressed to his wound—*one* of his wounds—with desperate fingers.

"I said, no, dammit!" Cedric roared, golden light pouring from his fingers as he slammed his palm against his friend's chest. And then Kit and Tenny and Shep were all gasping as more impossible things happened at once.

Cedric's eyes shifted from a glassy brown to a radiant, gleaming gold. The veins under his skin lit up, luminous and incandescent, waves of holy power rolling off him. The crown atop his head flared with white-gold flame.

The ground rumbled.

The earth shifted.

And Kit's gaze snapped toward the gaping crater behind him just in time to see the remaining mist of power churn into a vortex that sucked itself back into the earth.

It took the crater with it.

The edges began collapsing inward, the ground folding in on itself, yet also, somehow, growing anew in the open space between. Black stone settled where the crater stitched itself together—a door being shut, a wound being healed.

Kit ignored the pain in her side as she scrambled back to her feet, lunging at the closing crater. Her lungs burned as she sprinted for the edge, boots slipping on the blood-slicked ground. And then strong arms were wrapping around her middle, holding her back, and Kit screamed.

"Fuck, no, no—Ellie!" she cried, thrashing against Nox's hold. "Let me—she's still down there! Let me go!"

"You cannot," Nox said softly in her ear, and a sob ripped from Kit's throat.

The field shuddered violently as the final part of the opening sealed—

—but not before a shadowy blur burst upward into the sky.

Elyria shot out of the collapsing crater, wings opening wide as soon as she cleared the edge. She floated there, a shadow against the sunlit sky, the aurora pulsing above her, crowning her in a halo of uncanny rainbow light.

There was her actual crown, too, the gilded spires gleaming under the bright sun, Ashrender gripped in one hand, her staff in the other.

New tears sprang to Kit's eyes as she gazed up at the very picture of the divine.

A low whistle sounded from behind Kit. "Stars a-fucking-bove, Elle. That's some entrance."

Still folded in Nox's arms, Kit turned.

And then she was crying for a whole slew of new reasons.

Because Elyria was here.

Because Malakar really had been stopped.

And because Sir Tristan Hale was sitting up, gaping at the shadowy goddess before them all with a dumbfounded expression on his stupidly handsome face.



THE CLEANUP HAPPENED QUIETLY. Without pomp, without circumstance. Bodies were gathered. Wounds were tended. Fires were lit, and, eventually, fires were doused.

Kit and Zephyr were still helping pack up the last of the supplies in the healing tent when Tenebris Nox came.

"You are well, Zephyr?" they asked.

Zephyr glanced down at her bandaged arm. "Shattered bones take a while to heal, but I will be soon enough. Thank you."

The nocterrian nodded, and the sylvan nodded back.

"You just missed Tenny," Kit said. "She went to guide Fjaethe back to the village with the final few injured folks in tow. You have to admire Shep's work ethic. He's turned the village chapel into a healing center already. Church pews make for excellent sickbeds, it would seem."

"A better use for them than praying, at any rate." Nox's voice was low and steady. Dark, even. And Kit wasn't sure if they were joking or not.

She cleared her throat. "Anyway, she should return soon."

Nox simply stared at her, their crimson-black gaze roving over her face like they were categorically committing every inch to memory.

“I . . . think I’ll go and see if Tenny needs a hand,” Zephyr said quietly, and she slipped out of the tent.

Kit swallowed, shifting nervously on her feet. “Ellie thinks it’ll just be another day or two here, and then we can all make for Luminaria. Sephone and Raefe already took Tartanis there directly to recover under the care of the sylvans. And according to the sparrow that just returned from Elder Jung, Castle Lumin’s wards have dropped. Any remaining cultists should be easy enough to clear out—if they haven’t fled already.”

She exhaled. “I mean, I know it won’t be as simple as all that, but I’ll be the first one to admit that I’m looking forward to getting back to palace life. My time in Aerithia, despite how fruitless it ended up being, was a reminder of how much I like my luxuries. And I think I’ll like it even more if the king whose castle I’m taking up isn’t a witless fool I’m embarrassed to share blood with and—”

She blinked at Nox, whose indigo lips were curved to one side, revealing the barest hint of white fang.

“I’m babbling,” she said.

“You are babbling,” they agreed, and Kit gave a sheepish smile.

“Forgive me, I don’t know why I’m so . . .”

“Nervous?”

She laughed—nervously. “No, it isn’t that. Not . . . exactly? It’s like . . .”

“Anticipation.”

“Yes. Like I’m still waiting for the other shoe to drop. Because it can’t have been this easy, right?”

Nox arched a brow. “This was easy?”

“You know what I mean. It’s hard to imagine us all getting some time to just . . . *be*. For once.” She lifted her eyes to meet the nocterrian’s gaze. “Together.”

Something flashed across Nox’s face. “You deserve that,” they said, taking one of her hands. “And I . . . I wish I could give it to you.”

Kit blinked, dread immediately settling in the pit of her stomach. “What do you mean?”

That was when she noticed the shadows pooling at their feet.

“You’re leaving again.” The words fell raggedly from her lips, a broken whisper. It wasn’t a question.

“Something else I wish,” they said wistfully. “That I didn’t have to.”

“Then don’t,” she said, fingers threading through theirs, an intertwining of indigo and brown. *“Stay.”*

Nox’s smile was sad. “The Lord Noctis calls, and I . . .”

“Must answer,” Kit finished for them. “It isn’t fair.”

“It is the bargain I struck,” they said simply. Or was that hopelessness Kit heard behind the words?

The tent flap rustled, and a head of strawberry curls tied in a haphazard bun appeared. “That should be the last of—” Tenny stopped midstep. “What’s going on?”

“Tenebris came to say goodbye,” Kit said brokenly.

“What? *Why?*” Tenny demanded. “You’ve only just returned!”

“And it is because I did so that I must now face the warden’s justice,” Nox said darkly.

Kit balked. “What does *that* mean?”

“The celestials have decreed that there is to be no further interference in mortal affairs. I knew there would be a price for my disobedience.”

“Disobedience . . . ?” Tenny whispered, horrified.

Nox squared their shoulders, horns tipping to the ceiling. “It was a cost well worth paying, to assist in our victory.” Their gaze flicked to Kit. “To ensure your safety.”

Tears lined the edges of Tenny’s amber eyes. “Will we know where you are? Will we ever see you again?”

Nox raised a hand to softly cup her cheek. “Not in your lifetime, I am afraid.”

They returned their gaze to Kit, a meeting of crimson-black, blue, and green. Just for a moment, the world fell away. Because Nox was dipping their head to press an achingly soft kiss to Kit’s lips.

When they pulled back, they were smiling.

And then their shadows surged.

Tenny gasped.

Kit clutched Nox’s hand in hers, as if she might tether them in place, keep them here.

Keep them with her.

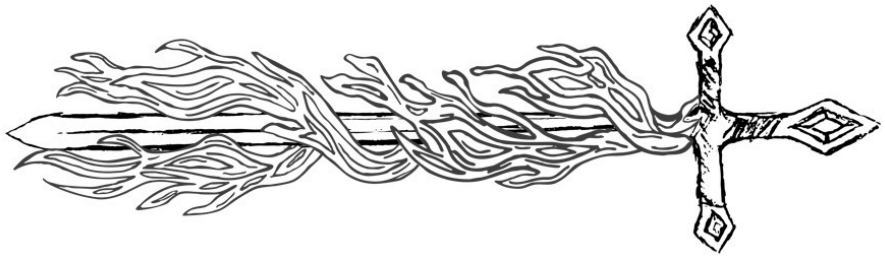
“Farewell,” they said. And Tenebris Nox was torn from her grasp, yanked into the unraveling darkness.

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DAWN

CEDRIC



THE NEXT MORNING CAME AND WENT SLOWLY. AFTER THE ENDLESSNESS OF the day before—stars above, had all that really happened in a single day?—it was a gift, a reprieve. And now Cedric Thorne stood on the hilltop overlooking the village of Kinsgaith on one side and the former battlefield on the other.

The sun touched the horizon, painting the sky with broad swaths of pink and orange and sunset gold. Cedric twirled his crown in his scarred hands, fingers dancing nimbly along its gilded, jeweled surface despite the lingering marks left by the obsidian shards that had cut through his skin. Shep said they would fade with time.

Cedric hoped they never did.

He wanted to wear them forever—an eternal reminder of every life lost, the price of this victory.

He heard her footsteps before Elyria's melodic voice landed in his ears. "Heavy is the head that . . . something something. Isn't that how the saying goes?"

Cedric huffed a laugh. "Close enough. I suppose we'll both be learning that soon, won't we, Trouble?" He inclined his head at the matching crown set upon Elyria's periwinkle hair. Sprigs of merryleaf were woven between the spires, tiny white flowers blooming against the gold, and he couldn't help but smile. She was just so stars-damned perfect.

She grinned at him, the adoration he must have been sending across their bond coloring her cheeks the most delicious rosy shade. “I’d never been much of one for headwear, you know. Always preferred making my own. But this, I suppose, I could get used to.”

“She says as though she has a choice,” Kit said, coming up beside her.

Elyria huffed a laugh—part amusement, part resignation. “Fair enough. Think Agness is up for crafting me a whole new regal wardrobe to match?” She fiddled with the hem of her blouse. “Or, better yet, tell me it’s perfectly acceptable for queens to rule in training leathers and that there will be no need for such nonsense.”

“You keep treating your ball gowns the way you treat your leathers, and there’s no way in all four hells you’ll convince Agness to wield a single stitch for you,” said Kit.

“Bah, fine. Aerithia can keep her. Sylvan seamstresses have her beat anyway. Softest sheets I’ve ever slept in, I’m telling you.”

Kit and Cedric chuckled quietly, but the three of them soon lapsed into a heavy silence. Elyria turned her head toward the field, now a monument to the lives that had been taken—a memorial for their friends. Cedric had watched, amazed, as she spent most of yesterday single-handedly turning over the bloodstained soil, spreading seeds of wildflowers and new grass that would erupt in the spring.

Planting new life where there had only been death.

She’d covered the entire field, taking extra care around the seam where they had sealed the Chasm, as well as burying the now-sealed cavern opening under a mountain of dirt.

“It’s not right, is it?” Elyria’s voice was low. “To be thinking about these things, let alone joking about them, so soon.”

Cedric shifted his crown to one hand, then linked his fingers through hers. He could still feel the way her heart had split right open when she’d seen Ollie’s body, knew she mourned for Jocelyn with every beat of her wings. “Just because we grieve, it does not mean we are not allowed to feel joy, my love.”

Elyria bit her lip and gave a tremulous nod.

“And it’s thanks to you, Ellie, that we who remain are even alive to feel that joy in the first place.” Kit placed her hand on Elyria’s shoulder. “*You* stopped him. Don’t let guilt supplant your victory.”

Elyria shook her head. “It was *our* victory. We all stopped him.”

Cedric chuckled as he pressed a kiss to her knuckles. “Your father was so hellsbent on warning you about how our life-bond might change you. I’d thought he was just being overprotective, but look at you—where has all this newfound humility come from?”

“You broke her, Ric.” Tristan strode up to Cedric’s side, one hand in his pocket, his other arm tied up in a sling.

Elyria pulled her hand from Cedric’s. The ground rumbled, the tiniest rupture tearing through the snow under Tristan’s feet, making him stumble.

“All right, all right,” said the knight, lifting his free hand in supplication. “So she’s still the same.”

Elyria’s mouth curved into that half-tipped smile Cedric loved.

“How’s that power feeling now?” Kit asked, eyes darting to the crown. “Still sleeping?”

“Yes,” said Elyria. “But I’m glad for it at the moment, to be honest. I had the barest taste of what real celestial power felt like when I thrust Ashrender through Malakar’s heart, and it’s not a burden I would ever want to carry.”

“You did give us a bit of a scare while you were down there, Ellie.”

Cedric looked at Tristan, and his throat tightened. “You both did.”

“*Tsk*, me? Just a flesh wound.” Tristan’s scarred cheek curved as the knight grinned broadly. “Not anything close to burying oneself underneath a mountain of stone.” He jutted his thumb at Kit. “I think this one was ready to dive into the center of the earth for you, Elle.”

“As I would for her.” Elyria swiveled her head to look at them both. “But your worry was needless, really. I just had to pick up a few things”—her crown tinkled like a soft bell when she reached up to rap her fingernails against it—“and, more importantly, make it so that no other self-important lunatics can find their way down to the Line in the future.”

“I’m sure others will come who are foolish enough to try,” said Cedric solemnly.

“Let them.” Elyria shrugged. “We will stop them, too.”

“You do bring up a good point there, knightling,” Kit said with a frown.

Tristan chuckled. “King or not, Ric, I’m afraid you’re not escaping the bevy of nicknames you’ve accumulated.”

Elyria nodded approvingly.

“What good point was I making, Kit?” Cedric said pointedly, throwing a glare at both Tristan and Elyria. Quartered hell, between the two of them

he’d never know a moment’s peace again, would he?

“What you said about how others will come.” Kit pursed her lips to one side. “There’s sure to be a power vacuum among the dark and depraved now. Those who survived will still be looking for someone to worship.”

Cedric sighed. “I suppose I have been hoping that more and more will realize the freedom they’ve just been granted. Their blood oaths have been unmade. There is nothing else binding them to a dark sorcerer’s wishes. Perhaps it’s naive, but—”

“It’s definitely naive,” Elyria cut in.

“Undoubtedly,” added Kit.

“Indubitably,” said Tristan.

“Oh, shut up, all three of you,” Cedric groaned, and they laughed.

“Oi, what’s this? Have I missed out on my opportunity to pile onto Ric?” Thraigg limped up to the group with a smile on his face, though the usual sparkle in his eyes was understandably diminished.

“Of course not,” Kit said, wrapping an arm around the dwarf’s shoulders and giving him a quick squeeze. “You’re just in time, my friend.”

“What was naive was thinking that becoming king meant I might actually escape this endless ribbing,” Cedric griped.

“True,” said Elyria, “but it’s nice to have hope anyway.”

The group slipped into a contented silence. The sun continued to set.

“Where do we go from here?” Cedric asked eventually. “What do we do now?”

“Ain’t ye the one who’s supposed to tell us?” Thraigg looked pointedly at the crown Cedric still held in his hands.

Elyria narrowed her eyes at the dwarf before turning back to Cedric. “We grieve. We care for the wounded. We rebuild the city you were always meant to rule. And we welcome anyone who would want to come with us.” She tilted her head, considering. “Eventually, we’ll probably want to seal up the rest of the Chasm. Chase down any lingering members of the Cult. But there’s plenty of time for all that.” She laughed then, a bright, joyous sound that had Cedric’s heart leaping in his chest. “And isn’t that just the most glorious thing you’ve ever heard? Can you even imagine? Having *time* for things? Perhaps if nothing else, the events of this past year will finally have cured me of my impatience.”

Cedric laughed too, though the delight that had sparked in him quickly fell away. “What if I am a terrible king?”

He was immediately met with multiple words of protest, and though the question had been born of a very real fear, Cedric smiled inwardly at the quick defense of his friends. Elyria simply seemed irritated, made evident by the way she both rolled her emerald eyes *and* slapped his shoulder for maximum effect.

“Please stop saying stupid things. You will be the best king Arcanis has ever seen. Lachlandris and Callum should be quaking on their thrones,” she finished with a wink.

“I don’t want to be king of Arcanis though,” he admitted. “I just want . . .”

She smiled softly. “I know. And you know the best part?”

“What’s that?”

She gently pried the crown from his hands and set it atop his head. “You and I can make it the exact kind of kingdom we want it to be. The kingdom your grandparents wanted it to be, what it always should have been. A kingdom for all.”

He searched her face, finding nothing but admiration and conviction there, layered atop the love beaming down the golden bond strung between them—gleaming stronger than ever.

“A kingdom for all,” Cedric agreed. “The future they deserved.”

Elyria’s fingers laced through his, the air filling with certainty. The last dregs of sunset spilled across the land, softly illuminating all that remained.

And there, at the edge of the field, at the top of the sloped mound of dirt that Elyria had piled over the sealed crater, over the entrance to the Line—where Malakar had fallen, where their new future had taken root . . .

Something green pushed through the soil.

A small winding sprig of merryleaf, ready to bloom.

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EPILOGUE I: IN-BETWEEN

TENEBRIS NOX



Four weeks after the Battle of Kinsgaith

Tenebris Nox watched from the shadows as Kit stood on the balcony of her room at Castle Lumin, overlooking the city of Luminaria below.

A pale hand curled around Kit's upper arm, turning her away from the balcony railing. Nox rode a shadowy current to get a better vantage point as Tenny drew Kit into a hug.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Tenny asked as they parted.

"I'll give you one guess," Kit said, taking one of Tenny's long, strawberry-blond curls between her fingers.

"It'll be all right," Tenny said soothingly. "They'll be back."

"Will they? You were there when they left. It was a goodbye."

"I know what they said, but . . . There's still so much we don't know. If I've learned anything from the various adventures you and Elle and Ric have gone through, it's that the celestials are fickle beings. And Nox is . . . Well, I hardly believe they'll be content to follow Noctis's instructions for the next thousand years with no protestation."

Kit released a low laugh. "Maybe you're right," she said, though she didn't sound sure.

"And if nothing else," Tenny offered, sweeping her thumb across Kit's cheek, "we don't know how much of their contract they've already served.

They could have anywhere from nine to nine hundred years left. Maybe we'll get lucky."

"I do not necessarily find that comforting, love."

"Well, knowing you, I find it unlikely to think you'll be able to wait around for too long either way."

"Hey now, I'm an exceedingly patient person, you know." Kit tugged lightly on Tenny's hair, eliciting a soft giggle. "And anyway . . . who says I'm waiting around?"

Nox desperately wished they could step out of the shadows. Not only to see them, to remember what it felt like to touch them—to touch *anything*—but to shake some sense into them both.

Do not look for me, they wanted to say. *And by the Five, do not wait for me.*

But there was nothing they could do, banished as they were to this special hell, this slice of the in-between reserved for Nox and Nox alone. Here, where they were forced to watch the world go on from behind a veil of shadow—like looking through a window, without even being able to do so much as tap on the glass.

If this was the punishment Lord Noctis had deemed fitting for defying him, though, Tenebris Nox would gladly take it. They'd been granted far worse for far longer, after all. And at least this way, for now, until they were summoned again, until they were *required* again, they could watch. They could make sure she was . . . happy.

Could make sure they both were.

And if Nox themself could not be the one to provide her comfort, they were glad Tenny could.

Something stirred behind their ribs as they watched Kit lean back from Tenny, one hand still toying with the curls at her shoulder, the other moving to wrap around the back of her neck. Two pairs of fascinating eyes met, and two simultaneous inhales passed through parted lips.

Then Nox watched those lips meet.

Tenny melted into Kit, her hands moving to cup the fae's face. Kit's fingers tangled in the curls at the base of Tenny's neck.

The kiss was tender and pure, full of unspoken promises, and Tenebris Nox wondered if any of the things the two of them were feeling matched the odd sensation currently curling around their own ribs. It wove tightly in the space where, perhaps, their heart used to be.

Where maybe it still lived, deep and dark and swathed in shadow as it was.

Where maybe the smallest fragments of ice had begun to pierce through.

Nox filled the space with the way Kit’s lips had felt pressing against their own, imagining they were doing so once more. That it was them standing on that balcony, arms wrapped around their little fae.

It would have to be enough.

For now.

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EPILOGUE II: AFTER

CEDRIC & ELYRIA



One year after the Battle of Kinsgaith
Cedric

Cedric woke to light and warmth and the certainty that, for once, nothing was on fire—figuratively or literally.

Sunlight filtered through the tall windows of his bedroom in Castle Lumin, pale and unhurried, painting the stone with pretty rays of soft golden light. The city below was awake—he could hear it faintly through the open balcony doors: voices, footsteps, the clatter of carts beginning their day. Ordinary sounds.

Precious ones.

Elyria lay beside him, sprawled with one arm draped over his stomach, her periwinkle hair tangled, her face half-buried in the gap between each of their pillows. One wing was folded against her naked back, partially pinned beneath her. The other was unfurled, spread over the empty bedspace next to her, a beautiful purple-and-green blanket, the slightest thread of shadow still laced along the edge.

Stars above, his queen was beautiful—even still in the throes of a deep sleep, her lips parted, soft, breathy snores coming from her as her shoulders rose and fell evenly.

Cedric smiled.

He scooted himself back against the headboard and let himself look—really look—at her in a way he'd rarely had the luxury to do lately. They

were so stars-damned *busy* all the time. Meetings and appointments and meetings and addresses and meetings and meetings and meetings and—

Sid let out an irritated huff from where her midsized form was curled up at the foot of their bed. She cracked one green eye open to glare at Cedric before rolling over with a flick of her shadowy tail.

He sucked in a breath in an attempt to calm himself. There was no point in getting worked up about it now. It wasn't as though he didn't appreciate the opportunity to be at the helm of so many things, after all. The city of Luminaria was starting to become quite the epicenter of trade and blossoming industry. Cedric and Elyria had garnered a solid reputation as royals, in no small part, he knew, thanks to the guidance and leadership of those on their council. And, he supposed, it didn't hurt matters that they were the ones *literally* uniting the continent by continuing to seal what remained of the Chasms.

Cedric's brow creased. There was only a little bit left now—the northernmost and southernmost parts of the western rift. Personally, he was excited. He'd only heard tales of the legendary Skyridge Mountain, from where all gryphons hailed, and was eager to see it. But he also could not help but wonder if the people's tolerance for their rule would start to shift once the great task was complete. Would they still be as beloved, he considered, as the proof of their usefulness faded into the annals of history?

"You're worrying again," Elyria's sleepy voice cut through his thoughts, and the furrow in Cedric's brow instantly relaxed. His lip curved back up as she lifted her head, exposing the golden crescent-shaped scar of her bondmark—their *life-bonded* mark—at the side of her neck. Cedric resisted the urge to bend down and run his tongue over it.

"What has your thoughts so loud this early in the morning, King Worrywart?" Elyria asked with a yawn. She gave Sid an affectionate nudge with her foot, eliciting another sound of irritation from the shadowcat before she rolled over again—right off the edge of the bed and into a slice of shadow, disappearing from sight.

Cedric shook his head. "Nothing worth adding to your own plate of worries, Trouble."

Elyria flung a pillow at him.

"Fine, fine," he said, snatching the pillow from where it had fallen between them and tucking it behind his shoulders. He left one hand there, scratching at the back of his head. "I was just thinking about whether we

are, well, doing a good job here. Or at least a good enough job. For the people."

Elyria groaned. "Not this again. Has there ever been a ruler who spends *this much* of his mental energy considering things like whether his subjects like him enough? Never mind the fact that they *love* you—"

"They love you, too," he said.

"They're scared of me," she responded with a feral grin. "And that's much better than being beloved."

He released an amused, if exasperated, sigh.

"As I was saying, if they don't like it, they can always move back to Havensreach or Nyrundelle. Let them compare how things work in the Midlands to the way Kings Callum and Lachlandris rule their respective realms. See how fast they come running back."

Cedric bristled. "King Callum is—"

"Trying his best. Oh, believe me, I know. But I also know that if it weren't for our help, along with Tenny's many, *many* correspondences with them, they'd be floundering nearly as badly as Kit's uncle."

Cedric could not argue with either fact.

The king of the fae had lost much favor with his own subjects when the peoples of greater Arcanis learned about what had transpired near Kinsgaith that day. When they learned just how close Malakar had come to seizing ultimate power and that their own sovereign had done nothing to try to stop it.

A problem, as Elyria's father continued to put it during his not infrequent visits, for another day.

"Well, we have the whole day free for once, my love," Cedric said softly, reaching over to sweep his thumb lightly along Elyria's jaw. "What would you like to do?"

Her lips curved into a sinful grin. "Is that a real question, Your Majesty?" She shifted closer, her leg sliding over his, her wing curling over them, brushing against his thigh. The contact sent a familiar heat winding up from the base of Cedric's spine, his cock stirring under the blanket.

He cleared his throat. "Yes, well, that was a given. But I meant what do you want to do after?"

"After, before, during . . ." Elyria hummed. "It's been so long since we've had a moment's peace—a moment to ourselves. Forgive me if I intend on taking full advantage."

Her hand slid up his arm, two fingers walking up his forearms, his biceps, then trailing across his collarbone to his own gilded bondmark. When she laid the flat of her palm over it, Cedric's blood ignited.

"Careful there, Trouble," he gritted out, hands fisting in the sheets.

She said nothing back, only smirked as she bent over him and began dotting light kisses across his abdomen. Cedric tensed, his muscles quivering as she traced a path down the length of his torso, peeling back the blanket to reveal the rest of his naked form, fully at the ready for her.

Elyria turned her head, mischievous emerald eyes meeting Cedric's golden-brown ones for a split second before she licked her lips and took him into her mouth.

Cedric couldn't form words, so immediately lost was he to the mind-blowing pleasure brought on by Elyria's swirling tongue and hollowing cheeks. His eyes nearly rolled into the back of his head when she traced a long line down the underside of his cock with the tip of her tongue, then grazed the ridge of his head with her teeth.

"You're just fucking perfect, aren't you?" he said, regaining just enough of his composure to send the words down the bond before grabbing her by the waist.

Elyria squealed as Cedric pulled her onto his lap in one smooth motion, and he groaned in response when her slick heat slid against his length, wet and eager.

"All this for me?" he asked, hunger morphing his voice into a low rasp.

"I was about to ask you the same thing." She gasped and tilted her hips, rubbing herself along his cock. "What, you didn't want me to continue, my king?"

"I simply need you in other ways, my queen." He leaned forward and crashed his lips to hers, and Elyria moaned into his mouth while she shifted so that his tip was free to edge inside her.

Sparks licked up Cedric's spine as she lowered herself onto him—an excruciatingly slow descent. She seated herself completely, her body welcoming him, her inner walls fluttering around him now that he was buried to the hilt.

It was the best and worst thing he would ever experience, he knew this.

Best—because, stars above, there would never in a hundred universes and a thousand lifetimes be anything better than the feeling of sliding through her tightness. Worst—because they were so attuned to one another,

their bodies so in sync, their pleasure so acute, that they both found themselves careening over the edge after only a few magnificent minutes of rolling hips and bruising kisses and quivering touches—a decadent heaven that simply never lasted long enough.

He spilled inside her with a final thrust, Elyria crying Cedric's name. She collapsed breathlessly atop him, her sweat-beaded forehead resting against his chest. And as they spun down from their respective highs, as he was still buried deep inside the woman he loved, Cedric Thorne wondered if there was such a thing as being too happy.



ELYRIA

"ALL RIGHT, first stop needs to be the kitchens. Artie informs me he's been fermenting some fancy new type of cider, and Thraigg says it's the worst thing he's ever tasted, which *probably* means it's perfect and wonderful and delicious, and I want to try it. Plus, the cooks tell me the latest batch of bacon should be done curing by now."

Elyria skipped across the bedroom, pulling a pale purple dress from the back of a chair. She vanished her wings for just a moment, slipping the dress on overhead before letting them reappear.

"What do you think, too much purple?" She dragged her fingers through her tangled hair with a frown, then hastily began braiding it over her shoulder. "Agness just sent me this one, but I'm thinking maybe she made it as a joke."

"What's the punchline?" Cedric said, giving her an approving once-over that made Elyria's cheeks heat. "You look beautiful."

She flashed him a smile, then picked up her crown from where it rested on her vanity and plopped it onto her head. "I could be wearing an oversized potato sack and you would say I look beautiful."

"I would, because it would be true," Cedric said proudly, swinging his legs over the side of the bed and stretching his arms.

Elyria admired the flex of the muscles at his back . . . and his side . . . and his front as he strode over to his dresser. She fought the urge to zoom

over and run her tongue along each ridge of his abdomen, trailing right back down toward his—

No, Elyria, you insatiable slut, she scolded herself. She and Cedric had *just* finished with each other. There'd be time for another round later.

And then maybe another one after that.

"What about you, Your Majesty? What would you like to accomplish on this rare, oh so elusive free day of ours?"

Cedric looked up from where he was fastening the ties on his trousers. "Well, Tristan did ask if I'm free to swing by and see how the new recruits are coming along in their training, so I suppose if we're heading down to the kitchens anyway, we could just stop—"

"No! No *work*. No *duties*. That's the whole stars-damned point, dummy." She looked for something to throw at him, but she came up empty. Everything in her immediate vicinity she was actually rather fond of. Including, she supposed, Cedric himself. So, she did the next best thing and launched herself at him.

He staggered back, his hands immediately going to support her under her ass as the force of her assault sent him careening backward. The backs of his knees hit the mattress, and he sat down on the edge of the bed, Elyria in his lap.

"Well, would you look at that," she teased through their bond, gazing down at him. *"Fancy meeting you here again."*

"Elle."

"No more work talk, yes?" she said warningly.

"Yes, Your Majesty," he said with a low chuckle.

"Good." She planted a kiss on his forehead and hopped off, then strode over to the window to peer down at the city below. "Do you ever think about how quiet it is here?" she asked. "Not *literally*, obviously, but just . . ." A sigh. "Don't you find yourself constantly waiting for, I don't know, something bad to happen?"

"All the time," Cedric replied with a chuckle. "It's terrifying."

She released a breath. "Not just me, then."

"Maybe we simply need to try harder," he said, pulling on his tunic, then following Elyria to the window and wrapping his arms around her waist. "To believe that things might actually be like this for good. For good, and that they *are* good. Maybe things really will be quiet for us from now on."

Comfortable, warm, contented silence stretched between them, and it felt a little like confirmation.

"One day," Elyria said, almost absently, tracing a circle on Cedric's forearm with the pad of her finger, "perhaps it won't be so quiet, actually. For the two of us. Or rather, you know, if there ever ends up being more than two of us."

Cedric stiffened at her back. His hand, which had been resting against her midsection, suddenly went taut, moving an inch off her belly like he wasn't sure whether he should or shouldn't be touching her there.

It felt somewhat akin to catching a dog in the act of pilfering food from the table, and Elyria had to swallow a laugh.

"If, uh"—he cleared his throat—"if that's what you'd want."

She could feel his conflict swelling down the bond. He would never pressure her. He'd never even ask. But she knew he wanted it, and that made her want it too. Eventually.

"*If* that is what you want," Cedric repeated softly, dipping his head to kiss her shoulder, "then of course you know that nothing would make me happier."

"Not yet," Elyria replied with a smile, "but maybe someday."

Outside, the city of Luminaria continued waking up.

Inside, the world had narrowed to this moment, the lack of space between them, their shared warmth and shared power and shared kingdom.

Cedric placed another gentle kiss on her shoulder, and Elyria had a clarifying, crystallizing thought:

This life had been worth fighting for.

And she would fight to keep it.

The rest of Queen Elyria Lightbreaker's life looked bright.

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THE END

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GLOSSARY

TERMINOLOGY

ARCANIAN—collective term for the magical, non-human races of Arcanis
DWARVES—a race of master craftsmen and warriors, characterized by their stout and muscular builds, standing between four and five feet tall
FAE—a winged race born with elemental magic; the ruling race of Nyrundelle
NOCTERRIANS—a horned race that hails from Nocterrum with a nebulous reputation and an affinity for shadow magic; Nocterrian society is genderless
SYLVANS—a green-skinned, druidic race; masters of herbalism, known for their healing and nature-based magic
VERDANCY—magic that comes from the manipulation of the Verdant Veil, which gives sylvans an array of abilities

Magic Wielders: Arcanian

FLAMECALLER—controls fire
MINDWIELDER—has psychic magic; telepathy
NIGHTWIELDER—manipulates shadows
ORACLE—diviner of prophecy
STORMBENDER—controls wind, air, and sometimes lightning
SUNBRINGER—the extremely rare power of controlling light, which can manifest as sunfyre
TIDEWEAVER—controls water/ice
WILDSHAPER—controls nature/the earth

Magic Wielders: Human

SAGE—equivalent of a mindwielder; telepath
SAINT—possesses an affinity for healing
SANGUINAGI—blood mage
SEER—recipient of prophetic visions
SORCERER—wielder of powerful magic
SPELLWEAVER—wielder of small magics

Creatures

DRAGON—enormous, mystical, majestic fire-breathing creatures with wings and scales that inhabit the world of Arcanis; their existence is known, but they are extremely rare to encounter. Dragonfyre is extraordinarily deadly.
FYRE WYRM—a type of dragon without wings or legs; encountered by the champions during the Arcane Crucible, with Gael ultimately sacrificing herself to slay it.
GNARLING—a gruesome, spiderlike creature with a flattened face and six spike-tipped legs; Cedric encountered them during the Arcane Crucible.

GRYPHON—a majestic creature with the head and wings of an eagle and the body of a lion. They live harmoniously with the peoples of Arcanis and are often hired for transportation purposes. They hail from Skyridge.

VOLACARNII *(Voll-uh-CAR-nee)*—a vicious breed of creatures resembling an oversized wildcat with large, feathery wings, razor-sharp claws and teeth. They can grow to be the size of a small horse.

PLACES

The Arcanian Realm of Nyrundelle
(NEER-uhn-dell)

AERITHIA *(Air-ih-THEE-uh)*—the capital city of Nyrundelle

CORALITH *(KORE-uh-lith)*—a bustling seaside city

DAEGLEN *(DAY-glenn)*—a small village located between the Sacred Mountain and the western Chasm

THE SACRED MOUNTAIN—where the shroud between the mortal world and the Hereafter is thinnest; sanctum of the Dark Warden, Noctis

VERDENTIA *(Ver-DEN-shuh)*—a sylvan settlement located in the southernmost part of Nyrundelle

The Human Realm of Havensreach
(HAY-vens-reach)

DAWNSPIRE—a small village located close to the Chasm bridge; the location of Varyth Malchior's ambush in the second book

GOLDENVALE—a village located on the western edge of Havensreach, near the Chasm; a popular stopping point for those journeying throughout the realm

IRONRIDGE—a prison located in the northeastern part of the continent, close to the Ironpeak Mountains

KINSGAITH *(Kins-GUY-ith)*—a small village that abuts the edge of the Chasm

KINGSHELM *(KINGS-helm)*—the capital city of Havensreach

PAIDEUS *(Pie-DAY-us)*—a preeminent magical academy and home to the largest library in Havensreach

SEASTONE—Lord Church's private estate, located near the southern edge of Havensreach, next to the Chasm; destroyed after Cedric, Elyria, Kit, and Nox rescued Tenny and defeated Varyth Malchior

The Midlands

ELDERGLADE—a sylvan settlement located deep within a forest at the southern tip of the continent; known for producing the most talented healers but not often visited by outsiders; revealed to be a secret sanctuary for mixedborn (part-Arcanian, part-human) children

FOREST OF VALANDOR *(Val-an-DOOR)*—a dense forest that cuts across the Midlands

LUMINARIA *(Loo-min-AH-ree-uh)*—the ancient capital of Arcanis, where Queen Daephinia and King Juno ruled the realm entire before the War of Two Realms; also referred to as the Lost City; restored when the Arcane Crucible was won, now reinhabited by human settlers

Other

IRONPEAK MOUNTAINS—the mountain range that stretches across the northernmost part of Arcanis, home to the dwarven cities; Stonehold is the capital

NOCTERRUM *(Nock-TERR-uhm)*—the mysterious land from where all nocterrians hail, also known as the Shadowlands; Shadowhaven is the capital

SKYRIDGE—a lone mountain located at the northwestern tip of the continent, home to gryphons

CHARACTERS

Arcanians

AGNESS (*Ag-NESS)*—a fae seamstress who works for the Ravenswing Estate in Aerithia

ARTEMICION "ARTIE" BONEJAW *(Art-ih-MEESH-un)*—the crotchety dwarven owner of the Sweltering Pig in Coralith

LORD CORLYN *(KORE-lynn)*—ruling noble of Coralith

CYREN TENRIDER *(SAI-ren)*—a fae champion; stormbender; fell during the Crucible

QUEEN DAEPHINIA NERO *(Day-FIN-ee-uh)*—a fae queen, King Juno's wife, who ruled over a united Arcanis for many years until the Shattering, when she sacrificed herself to destroy Malakar; Sunbringer. Selenae's mother, Cedric's grandmother

DENTARIUS JAEN *(Den-TARE-ee-us Jane)*—the royal advisor to King Lachlandris; fae; stormbender; fell during Varyth Malchior's attack on Kingshelm

DISSIDUA PYR *(Diss-IH-dew-ah Peer)*—a nocterrian champion; fell during the Crucible

ELYRIA LIGHTBREAKER *(Ell-EE-ree-uh)*—a famed fae warrior, also known as "the Revenant," and one of the two victors of the Crucible; wildshaper and nightwielder

EVANDER RAVENSWING *(Eh-VAN-der)*—Kit's brother and Elyria's former love, lost to the Crucible; discovered to still be alive within the Celestial Sanctum, corrupted by Varyth Malchior. Elyria was forced to kill him to save Cedric, Kit, and the rest of the champions; he was a tideweaver

GAEL WINTERS *(Gayle)*—a fae champion; flamecaller; fell during the Crucible

GEORGIE IRONFIST—a dwarven mercenary

JOCELYN *(JOSS-uh-lin)*—wingless fae guard who accompanied the Arcanian delegation to Havensreach; wildshaper

ELDER JUNG *(Yung)*—one of the sylvan elders who resides in Elderglade

KATERINA "KIT" RAVENSWING—a fae champion; head of the Arcanian delegation; tideweaver; Evander's younger sister and Elyria's closest friend; the daughter of Duchess Laeliana Ravenswing and King Lachlandris's niece

KINGSLEY IRONFIST—a dwarven mercenary

KING LACHLANDRIS *(Lock-LAN-driss)*—the current ruler of Nyrundelle; fae; flamecaller; Kit's uncle and Duchess Laeliana's brother

LAELIANA RAVENSWING *(Lay-lee-AH-nah)*—the duchess of Aerithia, Kit and Evander's mother; fae; stormbender; sister of the king

ELDER LARKESS—a sylvan elder who resides in Elderglade; served as Cedric's housemaid and nanny (Alouette), hiding her true nature and identity, up until the night his parents were killed

LUDOV IRONFIST—a dwarven mercenary

MASTER TARTANIS *(Tar-TAN-iss)*—the leader of a Coralithian crime syndicate; Elyria's father

OLYNDOR "OLLIE" OLEANDER *(OH-lynn-dor Oh-lee-ANN-der)*—a fae guard, part of the Arcanian delegation; Elyria's friend; tideweaver

ONYX IRONFIST—a dwarven mercenary

PAELIN SALTWILLOW *(PAY-lin)*—a fae champion; wildshaper; fell during the Crucible

PIOUS IRONFIST *(PIE-us)*—a dwarven mercenary

RAEPHAEL "RAEFE" GILDING *(Rayph)*—a fae member of the Arcanian delegation who works for Master Tartanis; flamecaller

SCARPER IRONFIST—a dwarven mercenary

PRINCESS SELENAE *(Sell-in-NAY)*—the mixedborn daughter of Queen Daephinia and King Juno, initially believed to have been killed by Malakar along with her father; revealed to be Cedric's mother; killed along with Cedric's father by Varyth Malchior when Cedric was a child

SEPHONE TEMPUS *(SEPH-oh-nee)*—a fae member of the Arcanian delegation who works for Master Tartanis; stormbender

TARYN *(TAIR-inn)*—a fae member of the Coralithian city guard who has a history with Elyria

TENEBRIS NOX *(TEN-ih-bris Nocks)*—a mysterious nocterrian champion; nightwielder and shadowstepper

THRAIGG IRONFIST *(Thrayg)*—a dwarven champion; possesses the gift of Stone Sense

YOUNG SHEP—a sylvan guard who accompanied the Arcanian delegation to Havensreach

ZARIC *(ZAIR-ick)*—fae captain of the Coralithian city guard

ZEPHYR *(ZEFF-ur)*—a sylvan champion; shapeshifter; betrayed Cedric, Elyria, and the rest of the champions by stealing the Crown of Concord at the end of the Crucible in exchange for Varyth Malchior's promise to leave the Elderglade sanctuary in peace

Humans

ADDISON—Cedric's attendant during his time at King's Keep

ALDEN ASHFORD—human champion; Saint; fell during the Crucible

BELIEN LARKIN *(BELL-ee-en)*—human champion; sorcerer and Belis's twin brother; fell during the Crucible

BELIS LARKIN *(BAY-liss)*—human champion; spellweaver and Belien's twin sister; fell during the Crucible

BRANDON CORMAC—human champion; Sage; fell during the Crucible

KING CALLUM—the current ruler of Havensreach

SIR CEDRIC THORNE *(SED-rick Thorn)*—a mostly human knight, orphaned at age six, ward and vassal of Lord Paramount Leviathan Church; he is revealed to be the quarter-fae son of Princess Selenae and the grandson of Queen Daephinia, a sunbringer, and is believed to be the one the prophecy speaks of, capable of bringing the dawn and healing the realm entire

GAIUS—a captain in King Callum's forces

GREGOR—an attendant at King's Keep.

HARGRAVE—a guard/mercenary in Lord Church's employ; killed by Audaxus during the attack on King's Keep

KING JUNO NERO—Queen Daephinia's husband, assassinated by Malakar

KELCIFOR *(KELL-sih-fer)*—Master Llewis's apprentice at the mana forge

KYMBER—Elyria's attendant during her time at King's Keep; killed during Varyth Malchior's attack

LEONA BLACKWOOD—human champion; sorcerer and, secretly, a sage; fell during the Crucible

LORD LEVIATHAN CHURCH/VARYTH MALCHIOR *(VAIR-ith MAL-kee-or)*—the former Lord Paramount of Kingshelm, revealed to be the *sanguinagi* leader of the Cult of Malakar and a descendant of the dark sorcerer himself; Tenny's father; murdered Cedric's parents and took Cedric in as a ward in an attempt to manipulate his power for his own gain; Cedric killed him during the confrontation at Seastone, but his dark machinations were already underway, resurrecting the dark sorcerer Malakar in his body

MASTER LLEWIS—the magicsmith; runs the mana forge in Kingshelm

LYSANDER THORNE—Cedric's father; killed along with Cedric's mother by Varyth Malchior when Cedric was six

MALAKAR *(MAL-uh-kar)*—the dark sorcerer whose assassination plot against King Juno led to the Shattering and the War of Two Realms; worshipped by the Cult of Malakar, who work to uphold

his goal in removing the Arcanians from power and utilizing the mana of Arcanis for their own magic usage; Varyth Malchior's machinations led to his resurrection within his own body

PETRA—one of Malakar's followers, a member of the Cult of Malakar

PORTENTIA "TENNY" CHURCH *(Por-TEN-shuh)*—Lord Church's daughter, friends with Cedric and Tristan since childhood; saint

THIBAULT *(TEE-bo)*/AUDAXUS *(Aw-DAX-us)*—a guard/mercenary in Lord Church's employ; he was revealed to be an upper-level *sanguinagi* from the Cult of Malakar, working in secret for Varyth Malchior under the name Audaxus and was killed by Cedric during the cultist attack on King's Keep

TOBIN BARCROFF—the former imperial steward, now one of King Callum's advisors

SIR TRISTAN HALE—Cedric's closest friend; a fellow knight who was formerly in Lord Church's employ

MAGISTER YVAN *(Ee-VAHN)*—a magister of Paideus

Celestials

AURELIA *(Oh-RELL-ee-uh)*—the banished star god; Guardian of Balance; bound to the Celestial Sanctum until the Crown of Concord is once again made whole; previously revealed to be the Arbiter of the Arcane Crucible

GAIA *(GUY-uh)*—Earth Mother

LUNARA *(Loo-NA-ruh)*—Keeper of Time

NOCTIS *(NOCK-teese)*—Warden of Shadows; rules over the Hereafter

SOLARIS *(So-LAH-riss)*—Goddess of Light

Other

ASHRENDER—Cedric's sword, inherited from his father

FJAETHE *(Fuh-YAY-thuh)*—Elyria's horse

HOPS—Thraigg's horse

LYRICA—a dragon; the guardian of the Sacred Mountain

PAISLEY—Ollie's horse

POLONIUS *(Pol-OH-nee-us)*—Cedric's horse

VESPYR *(VES-purr)*—Nox's horse

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And, of course, because it bears repeating once more: Thank you to YOU, dear reader. I hope you found the ending of this trilogy epic and satisfying. And in the event you aren't quite ready to say goodbye to the world of Arcanis just yet, fear not! Because while Elyria and Cedric's story may have come to an end, there just may be more stories left to tell.

Until then . . . !

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Gretchen Powell Fox grew up with her head in the cloud and her nose buried in books. Now, she crafts fantastical worlds—along with the fiery heroes destined to change them for the better.

Her creative process involves copious amounts of Sour Patch Kids and sleeping fitfully. Her many interests include eating soup dumplings, dyeing her hair, reading voraciously, and playing the ukulele.

She lives in Northern Virginia with her husband and two wild, wonderful children.

Find her on social media @gretchenwritesbooks and visit her website at gretchenpowellfox.com.



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