
THE
CRIMSON
NIGHT
WAR ETERNAL
T.M. MERCER

THE CRIMSON NIGHT

WAR ETERNAL SERIES

BOOK ONE

T.M. MERCER

MERCER PUBLISHING

OceanofPDF.com

The Crimson Night

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To those who waited patiently these past few winters.

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KORINETH
N
S
Sea of Aethira
Luvarian Expanse
Braverran Divide
The Serulean Deep
Mountains of Tombória
Grimrave
Gandar
Arnolo Woods
Eau Woods
Cyrodell
Rendspire
Seranorch Mountains
Fountain of Empre'ya
Narrow River
Lesia River
Elthrick Mountains
Cyrodell's Keep
Northwind Mountains
Orden
Mountains of Fire
Mount Omen
Valora Mountains
Stormpeak Mountains
Hot Springs
The Stone Fortress of Samson
Great Forest
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Northwest Fork
Ithaka
Stoawyk River
Necromanc Mountains
Aôa
Belfour
Evermore
Lima
Wychpine
The Serpentine River
Burnkarn River
Valley of the Giants
Gonqada Mountains
Knox Mountains
The Eldergrove Peaks
Borô
Black River
Gor Tash Mountains
Drakhar
Fernhill Woods
Vacila Fortress
Watch of Magnus the 2nd
Fields of Derek
Licking River
Loreign
Highmoor
Valenheim
Slêgo Mountains
Hook Mountains
Kiojin Mountains
Mormir
Harendell
Cryptolith
Sharlenten
Vera River
Akron
Trombone Mountains
The Church of Lu
Binox Isle
The Weeping Run
Skyplain Fields
Abbottstown
The Great Colosseum
Worrin
Mischief Mountains
The Bastion of Goliath
Chês
Lansing
The Great Lake
Sadeas Mountains
Kossuth River
Serpent River
Orenberg
Niels River
Polk River
Tenchra River
Inon Bay
The Noradic Mountains
Khazadryn
Newport
Bornok Bay
Serakos
Findley
Drearth (Forgotten Woods)
Listoff Mountains
Twin Bay
Bridge of Truth
Mali Isle
Rormir Mountains
Yactun
Gornhelm
Eldoria
Island of Mirk
Liora
Miffleton
Stetharose
Orâwak
Tuscora
Tenkara
Flan (Death Island)
Scattered Islands
Arendale
Amarid
Kayes Mountains
Guinea Mountains
Niara
Lake Togo
Marzallo
Lêglos River
Kashna Lake
Leh'uanda River
Mordor Mountains
Monvia River
Zarik
The Drowning Triad
Etheria
Thal'mire
Shanoba
Terós
The Sahara Mountains
The Sahara Mountains
Darlington
Vênia
The Grounds of Judgement
Bênak'ra

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Elandor's Stonewatch
The Noradic Mountains
The Emlyn Peaks
Khazadryn
Salfer Mountains
Hazelwood
The Varathel
Mountains of Musetafer
Stonewyk River
Bornok Bay
Carl River
Scone
Sikson Lake
Gjoa Forest
Twin Bay
Ste Lake
Vaelwyn River
Chelmsford Mountains
Berks
Listoff Mountains
Ardester
Morgar Forest
Saraveen River
Gladlen Forest
Sanctarion
Vaelwyn River
Heyden Woods
Rohland
Antelope Mountains
Mire
Yalk Lake
Karomir Mountains
Kolmarith
Saraveen River
Keensin
Pillars to Oryneth
Chern Mountains
Traem River
Church of Oryneth
Elmwood
Path of Branhor
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Luvarian Expanse

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PROLOGUE

THE SUNDERING OF HIGHMOOR

Veridane the 9th, Year 10,689
(The sixth month)

“I HAVE BECOME A SOVEREIGN.” THE MAN MUTTERED TO HIMSELF AS HE stood atop the corpse of an Aeralynian, his armored boots planted against the pale flesh. The fallen Aeralynian’s skin, once white like snow, was now stained with ash and blood. The golden diamond set in the center of his forehead, the mark of the people, was cracked straight down the middle.

Fire consumed the streets of Highmoor. The great white city, once a jewel of Valdorin, was dying. Behind the Human man rose the white castle of Highmoor, the spires piercing the clouds, now cloaked in smoke and flame. The man was tall and broad-shouldered, his presence commanding even amid ruin. His skin was dark, his head shaved clean beneath a white hood that fluttered in the heat. Silver armor hugged his frame, etched with unfamiliar runes from long ago. His sword rested casually at his side. This was Prince Kordas of Highmoor.

“I am the ink that writes what will come,” voice calm and assured as he whispered to himself. “And soon, I will write what has already happened.”

Behind him, the square was a graveyard.

A dozen figures stood in silent formation. They wore white robes stained with soot and blood. Their faces were hidden behind skeletal gold metal masks, hollow-eyed voids that seemed to watch without life. They did not speak. They merely waited.

Aeralynian people lay scattered across the blood-slicked stone. Men, women, elders with wrinkled hands clasped in death, even children.



In the wreckage of it all, a small Aeralynian boy knelt.

The boy shook. “Father! Wake up…please…” shaking the limp shoulder of the man beside him. The body lay face-down in the muck, surrounded by the lifeless forms of others. It didn’t move.

Beside the boy crouched his sister, “Father…father, please…wake up,” both of them shaking him, in the thick, bloody fog that clung to everything.

Then, through the rising smoke, a voice ripped through the haze.

“Sylith! Torm!”

It was their mother. Her voice broke with terror and urgency. She ran through the smoke and she fell to her knees beside them. “By the sovereigns,” she whispered, crushing them both in her arms. “We have to leave. We have to go now!” But the children only sobbed harder, clinging to her like frightened animals.

All around them, more Aeralyns, pale and terrified, were already fleeing. Mothers clutching infants, scouts dragging wounded men, elders staggering forward in confusion and disbelief.

Prince Kordas watched them in the chaos.

His presence was a stillness, a calm rooted in dread. He watched the mother and her two children with an impassive gaze. But then he gave a simple nod to the soldier beside him. The soldier with the skull mask moved forward. He drew his sword with no hesitation.

The children wouldn’t let go. Torm gripped the folds of her bloodied dress, his voice cracked from screaming. Sylith’s tiny arms wrapped tight around her mother’s waist, her white face buried against her ribs. But their mother’s eyes were already looking beyond them.

Smoke rolled through the shattered square. The soldier stepped through it, his mask glinting with the gold of the setting sun. His blade hung loosely in his hand.

“Torm. Sylith,” her voice shook. She crouched and gripped both their faces with blood-stained fingers. “You run, do you understand me? You stay with the others, don’t stop, no matter what you hear.” She turned them both by the shoulders, and pushed, hard—sending them stumbling toward the crowd of fleeing Aeralynians already vanishing into the mist. “Go!”

“But mama!” Sylith sobbed, twisting mid-run to reach back.

“RUN!” Her sword scraped free in one swift pull, small, old, but steady in her grip. The soldier came on and she didn’t wait. With a cry, she charged to meet him, one mother against the wave of war.

Torm looked back once. He saw the soldier raise his sword. Saw his mother’s parry knocked wide immediately. Then saw the blade slash through her side.

She never stood a chance.

Their mother hit the ground with a scream, and didn’t rise again. Her eyes wide with shock, blood pooling beneath her.

“Sylith, run!” Torm cried, grabbing his sister’s hand and dragging her through the fog, through the bodies, through the wailing and the ruins of everything they had once known.

Behind them, the soldier turned.



Prince Kordas watched the children flee for a moment. Then he nodded again to the skull-helmed soldier. The soldier sprinted after the two children, disappearing into the smoke and the wailing of the fleeing crowd. Kordas did not flinch. He turned his gaze back to the dozen in formation, white robes stained red.

“KORDAS!”

The shout cracked through the smoke.

Kordas did not turn.

Footsteps pounded across the broken stone. “Kordas!” the voice cried again, closer now, raw with grief and disbelief. Only then did Kordas glance over his shoulder. A man in white armor staggered into the square, blood streaking his face, his helm dented, his breath ragged. He held a golden sword in trembling hands, its once-pristine surface dulled by gore and ash. This was Artus, older brother to Kordas. Prince of Highmoor. The eldest and the true heir to the throne.

“Brother…” Artus gasped, horror flooding his eyes as he took in the scene before him. “What have you done?”

Kordas turned fully now, his expression unreadable.

“The Aeralynians were our people!” Artus shouted, his voice breaking. He gestured weakly to the corpses surrounding them. “They lived under our banners. Why?”

Kordas stepped down from the corpse beneath his feet, the crunch of bone echoing in the silence. “They were parasites wearing the skin of allies.”

Artus shook his head, rage and despair warring in his eyes. “No. Father taught us better than this. We serve the Heliorens. This is genocide—”

“Don’t worry Artus, I won’t be killing all of them. I have need for them actually,” he smiled.

“For what?”

“You’re so blind,” Kordas snapped annoyingly, his voice finally sharpening. “You and father were always blind to see what was happening right in front of you.” He gestured broadly to the city. “They were taking everything! While you and father smiled, bowed, and prayed. You’re telling me, you weren’t upset at this?”

Artus took a step back, his sword wavering. “Kordas. We can stop all of this. This isn’t who you are little brother. You were so kind back—”

“No brother,” Kordas interrupted. “This is who I’ve always been.” He turned to his masked followers. “Gather the remaining Aeralynians,” he commanded. “Those who fled. Keep them alive. Chain them if you must.”

One of the robed figures stepped forward and knelt. “Sir,” the figure rasped, voice distorted behind his mask. “Messengers report Eldoria is mobilizing. The other kingdoms march as well. What shall we tell King Elandor of Eldoria?”

Kordas didn’t hesitate. “Tell Elandor to round up any survivors that escape. We need them, as many as possible,” he said. “Afterward, we will speak, as rulers and with the others.”

Artus stared at him in disbelief. “What is this? Eldoria is also a part of this?“

Kordas laughed softly. “You always were theatrical.” He stepped closer, and the air around him seemed to bend. “I have seen the future Artus,” Kordas continued, eyes gleaming. “A future where the Kings of Darkness walk openly in the world. Where mortals kneel not to distant sovereigns, but to those who act.” He raised his hand slowly. “I have been chosen brother. I have been made into an Oathracki. Join me, and we can rule together.”

Artus lifted his sword despite the terror clawing at his chest. “An Oathracki? What nonsense are you even speaking of, brother?” he said, voice trembling. “But no matter, I will cut you down where you stand. Your reign ends today.”

Artus gripped his sword tightly, and charged.

But Kordas’s body twisted violently, as dark blue flesh and bone erupted outward. His spine elongated, ribs bursting through his chest like jagged blades. His neck stretched forward unnaturally, as his head reshaped into something monstrous. A towering beast stood where Kordas had been. Dark blue as void. Hunched. Skeletal. Its face a dark blue skull with black Human eyes. Long arms ended in claws.

Artus froze in terror.

The creature seized him effortlessly, lifting him screaming into the air. “I offered you a place at my side brother,” the beast growled, voice layered and inhuman. “But you chose them over me!”

Artus writhed in Kordas’s monstrous grip, his hands clawing at the twisted fingers crushing his ribs. “Let me go!” he screamed. “Brother—please—put me down!”

Kordas did not answer. His mouth curled in a hideous, gleeful grin. He lifted Artus higher, ignoring the blood spilling from his brother’s wounds, ignoring the way Artus’s legs kicked helplessly above the heap of corpses below.

“Kordas!” Artus choked, still fighting to pry himself free. “This isn’t you!”

Kordas grabbed his brother with his other monstrous hand—and with a brutal snap of motion, Kordas pulled. Tearing Artus in half. His bones cracked. The flesh split. The pieces of Artus's body hit the mound of Aeralynian dead with a sickening thud.

Then Kordas turned, deliberately. He stomped up the rise of bodies, stepping over crushed skulls and severed limbs, his silhouette growing larger against the light of the burning city behind him. Screams echoed still from distant alleys. Kordas stood atop it all, victorious. Then, from deep within his chest, he let loose a roar. Not of rage, but triumph.

A beast's cry.

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PART

ONE

The First Crossing

Matthew

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1

THE ELF OF LIORA

530 Years Later
Dusrelon the 17th, Year 11,219
(The tenth month)

THE FIRST SOUND WAS HIS OWN VOICE, BREAKING APART.

"No. No!"

Matthew's words echoed across an endless ocean. Matthew stood on a surface that shimmered like water but held firm beneath his feet. The wind whipped through his blond hair and against his pale skin. He turned slowly, blue eyes scanning the endless horizon, searching for a way out. But there was no escape. Only the unbroken expanse stretching in every direction.

The water beneath him was motionless and the air held no scent of salt. He stared into that calm and found no reflection of himself there, only the dark sky above, jeweled with stars. His thoughts pressed against the silence, and then suddenly, the world fractured.

Out of the void, a pulse of white light opened into a single, immense eye.

It floated before him, green as deep emerald. The eye held an ancient calm, a strange gentleness behind the terror it inspired. Around it, shadows moved like black flame, twisting and recoiling. The shapes flickered too fast to follow.

But then the eye was gone.

When Matthew blinked again, he was standing in snow. A forest of frost stretched before him, the trees bending under the weight of winter. And through that pale expanse walked a creature. A big black dog stood beneath the dim light. The beast's head was massive, its shoulders narrow, and its golden eyes gleamed with the cunning of something that knew far too much.

It stopped and looked at him. A grin spread across its muzzle, impossibly wide. Behind the dog, the forest began to bleed. Red mist crept through the trees, swallowing the snow, staining the air like smoke from a distant fire.

The dog laughed, deep and resonant, as the trees began to die. Their branches withered and curled, twisting into jagged shapes. Matthew could hear screaming beyond the mist. But he saw no one there. The red light pulsed, spreading through the forest.

Then he felt it. The cold seep of water in his boots.

He looked down. What had been snow was now liquid and red, rising around his legs. He tried to step back, but his feet would not move. The ground clung to him, pulling him deeper, the surface rippling as though alive. "No…no…help! Somebody help!" He clawed at the air, at the nearest roots, but there was nothing solid to grasp.

The blood reached his knees. Then his waist.

The dog began to walk toward him, slow, deliberate, still smiling.

"Help me!" Matthew screamed, but his voice was swallowed by the red water. He felt the metallic taste fill his mouth. The air vanished. His lungs convulsed as he gasped for breath that would not come. The water dragged him down, deeper and deeper, until even the light from above dimmed to a faint shimmer. He reached upward, fingers breaking through the surface one last time.

And then, nothing.

Darkness swallowed everything.

Matthew woke with a violent gasp. His hands flew to his neck, clutching at the air. His chest heaved. Sweat dampened his hair, clinging to his temples. "The same dream," he whispered. "Why is it always the same?"

The grass beneath him was cool, the scent of salt heavy in the air. He lay at the edge of a cliff, overlooking the vast Sea of Aethira. The ocean glistened under the light, endless and indifferent. For a long moment he just

sat there, breathing, staring down at his hands. The dream's images still clung to him. The dog, the eye, and he could not shake the taste of iron from his tongue.

He tilted his head back.

Half-buried in the tall grass behind him, swallowed by moss and creeping vines, lay the remains of a shal'kor sentinel. The ancient machine had collapsed into itself long ago. Its torso was torn clean in half, the upper body resting against the slope of the hill. Rust had claimed the once-golden plating, staining it a dull green. Wildflowers pushed through the joints of its fingers. Birds nested inside the hollow of its chest where a core had once burned.

His grandfather Meriden had once told him the shal'kor had stood here long before the Elves ever set foot on Liora. Machines from another age. Remnants of a kingdom that had waged extermination against an entire people.

"The Sundering," Meriden had called it.

A word passed down from Matthew's great-grandfather Sekero, the warrior of Loreign. Sekero, who had led the Elves away from Valdorin more than five hundred years ago, fleeing the wars of men and the rule of King Kordas. Sekero had sailed with his people into uncertain waters until their ships broke upon Liora's shores. And there, amid wreckage and salt and grief, he declared it their new home.

Far from the moral rot of Valdorin. Far from the wars of Korineth. But before his death, Sekero left one command that hardened into law:

Never travel far from Liora. The world beyond was fractured. Corrupt. Unclean.

And the people did what Sekero commanded.

Matthew stood up and stepped closer to the broken sentinel. The dreams had started months ago. Black skies, a dog, red mist, and sometimes a red moon. He stared at the hollow chest of the shal'kor and felt something unsettled twist inside him.

Matthew thought about telling his father or maybe one of the elders. But they would dismiss it as imagination. Or worse, whisper of bewitchment.

It was better to say nothing.

The wind moved gently through his hair as he turned back toward the sea. The day was pale and still, the horizon cut by a faint shimmer where light struck the water. He searched that line as though it might answer him.

He wanted to leave Liora.

But the thought felt dangerous even inside his own head.

He was eighteen now, old enough to have purpose. Old enough to know what kind of Elf he was meant to become.

Except he didn’t.

Everyone else seemed certain. Taren, his closest friend, already spoke of future duties, like taking watch at the Tower of Sekero on the northwest of the island. The elders nodded approvingly when Taren spoke. Including Elder Rowan.

But Matthew felt untethered. And the worst part was, he had everything. Life in Liora was good.

Peaceful.

Heir to leadership after his father Arthur, whose name carried weight not through fear, but through respect. Arthur was not like the fathers described in old cautionary tales within the Solvaran, not cruel, not distant, not hardened by bitterness. His father was kind, thoughtful, and patient. Matthew had been given what many would have begged for, to lead the entire village, to inherit legacy instead of earning it.

And yet, Matthew did not want it.

He did not feel built for it. He knew nothing of the world beyond Liora’s shores, granted, nobody really did. But how could he lead his people when he had never even seen the lands they once fled?

No.

His heart did not stir for council meetings or harvest disputes.

He wanted wind in his face and salt in his lungs. He wanted to sail into waters where karnaliths surfaced like small living islands. To see the dragons the elders spoke of, the ancient creatures said to govern the weather and shape the biomes of Korineth. The Ginish in their hidden canyons of Zephirra. To stand in places no Elf of Liora had seen in five centuries.

And then return. Return with stories, with scars, with proof. To stand in the village square and speak of all he had survived.

Like Greg.

Where was he? When would he be back?

Greg should have returned by now. The only one who would understand his longing, who would know what he desired, even though he was Human. The thought of him steadied Matthew’s breathing for a moment, but the silence that followed only deepened his unease.

The date came to him then, Dusrelon the seventeenth, the tenth month of the year, with only two left before the turn of 11,220.

A year was ending, and yet nothing ever changed.

Below the cliffs sprawled the village of Liora. The settlement lay nestled among colossal trees, their trunks so wide that entire homes had been carved within them. Doors shaped from amber-colored wood blended seamlessly into the bark, round and modest. A few trees had long since fallen, their hollow stumps repurposed into cottages and workshops.

Matthew watched the movement of his people below. Elves of fair skin and pale hair, moving with the gentle rhythm of a quiet life. All were busy, carrying supplies, preparing for the festival that would come tonight. For the young Elves who would come of age to sixteen.

Among the Elves below walked creatures called garatens, four-legged beasts of moss and bark, with small mushrooms growing along their legs and two pale flowers sprouting from their snouts. Their green hides shimmered faintly with dew as they pulled wooden wagons up the winding paths.

But suddenly from behind him, came a rustle in the underbrush. He turned just in time to see a small figure tumble out from the trees. A little girl with bright braided hair and a grin that carried all the mischief of childhood.

“Matthew!” Elara called, brushing leaves from her dress. “What are you doing out here again?”

“Go home, Elara, and help mother. You will get us both in trouble again.” Matthew said.

She tilted her head, skeptical. “You’re waiting for Greg again, aren’t you?”

Matthew sighed. “No, I’m not,” he said.

Elara adjusted the basket in her arm, filled with golden apples that gleamed in the light. She held one up toward him. “Well, you should eat something. You look horribly pale.”

He caught the apple as she tossed it to him. “Thanks, you saved me,” he said sarcastically, biting into its sweet flesh.

Footsteps thundered from behind, and another child burst from the trees. Finn, Matthew and Elara’s younger brother, wild-haired and breathless, shouted, “You didn’t tell me you were coming out here!” His small face twisted in mock outrage.

Matthew laughed quietly, “Oh for crying out loud. Finn…no…both of you, need to go back.” He brushed a hand through Finn’s tangled hair.

“Mother told me to fetch you,” Finn said.

“Did she?” Matthew sighed. “Well come on then. Let’s go back before she starts lecturing us.”

Together they turned from the cliff, walking through the thicket until their home appeared through the trees—the structure sprawled outward with wide balconies and glimmering windows that caught the afternoon light. The clearing around it was open to the sky, perfect for the fireworks that would soon mark the festival.

Near the stables, their mother was feeding the garatens handfuls of the golden apples. The beasts chewed with slow satisfaction, their flowers trembling. “Matthew!” she called. “Your father’s inside. Go to him please, he’s waiting. Elara, Finn, come help me with the preparations.”

Matthew sighed and crossed the clearing. Their home stood open to the light, warmth spilling through the great glass window that spanned the rear wall and looked out toward the Vahêla Woods.

He followed the hallway toward his father’s study.

Arthur sat hunched at his desk, quill scratching briskly across parchment. His brow was furrowed in concentration, blond hair falling loosely across a face lined not by age alone, but by responsibility. Matthew knocked lightly against the frame. “Should I come back later?”

Arthur looked up, exhaling through his nose. “No…no, this is fine. I’m just finishing the fishermen’s reports.” He flexed his fingers and leaned back, smiling tiredly. “My hand’s about to fall off from all this writing. They want to rebuild Airiâna Docks. Make them wider so the larger boats can push out farther for fishing.”

Matthew stepped inside as Arthur sealed the parchment.

Arthur gestured toward the window where Elves moved through the front yard, setting tables, stringing lanterns between trees, laughter drifting faintly upward. “A good evening for celebration, don’t you think? The young Elves will remember this one.”

“Yes,” Matthew replied politely. “It should be…fun, it always is.”

Arthur’s smile softened, though it carried weariness. “You know, being in my position isn’t easy. Sometimes I think the village forgets how to think without me.” He chuckled. “Every small thing becomes my decision.”

He pushed back from the desk and stood. “But enough of that. I have something important to tell you.”

“And what’s that?” Matthew asked.

Before Arthur could answer, the door burst open. Elder Rowan strode in, flustered and red-cheeked. “Arthur! When should the band begin setting up? We still don’t know how many guests are—”

“Handle it yourself, Rowan,” Arthur said evenly. “I’m clearly occupied.”

Rowan stopped, noticed Matthew, and forced a smile. “Ah. Matthew. Looking bright as always.”

“You know me,” Matthew replied faintly.

“And Arthur,” Rowan continued, lowering his voice slightly, “your father Meriden is causing quite a stir at the Church. He’s… struggling with stepping down. Age has not made him more agreeable.”

Arthur’s jaw tightened. “Yes I know, I will speak with him later. Thank you, Rowan. Now, please.”

Rowan bowed stiffly and left.

Arthur exhaled once the door shut. “Do you see? They cannot breathe without asking how.”

He turned fully to Matthew now, seriousness settling in. “Now back to important matters. Your mother and I have spoken. We believe it’s time you begin taking on some of my duties. As my hand.”

Matthew’s shoulders stiffened. “You mean…to lead?”

Arthur blinked in surprise at the bluntness, then smiled. “Well. No. Someday. You will make a fine chief, son. I believe that. But not quite yet.”

“I need time to think,” Matthew said carefully. “That’s a large responsibility and—”

“It is,” Arthur interrupted gently. “And you have much to learn. But you will learn it. In time.” He hesitated, then added with a grin, “And of course…leadership brings other matters. A wife, perhaps.”

“Father.” Matthew stepped back, embarrassed.

Arthur rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Iwa is…quite bold she is. Fêtina has spirit. Sôna is kind—”

“Father.”

Arthur laughed.

But then—

There was movement at the edge of the trees, Matthew's breath halted. There, half-shadowed among the trunks of Vahêla Woods, sat the black dog from his dreams. How was it here? Was he imagining?

The dog was watching. Staring. Panting with hunger.

The world dulled around Matthew. The laughter outside faded. The scent of cedar vanished. There was only that gaze and Matthew's heart pounded faster. Time felt stretched thin.

"Matthew?" Arthur's voice cut through.

Matthew blinked, heart pounding still. He pointed toward the trees. "There. There's a dog out there."

Arthur stepped to the window. The forest was empty. "I don't see anything," Arthur said gently. "You sure?"

Matthew stilled, certain he had seen the dog between the trees. But when he looked again, there was nothing there. Only wind stirring the leaves. He let out a slow breath, disappointed with himself for letting his dreams get the better of him.

Arthur chuckled. "Shadows can play tricks on the eyes. Especially near the woods."

"Yeah," Matthew murmured. "Shadows."

Arthur nodded slowly. "Now," he said, returning to the desk. "As I was saying. You are eighteen. It is time to study properly. To learn governance, and dispute mediation. We'll be beginning next week."

"Next week?" Matthew stiffened. "That's earlier than I expected."

"Nonsense. What did you expect? To run along the beaches with Taren forever?" Arthur's tone was not harsh, just practical. "Taren is already preparing for lookout duty at the tower. His father is proud of him for stepping up." Arthur looked back out the window as lanterns were lifted into place. "That is why I want you to enjoy this weekend. Celebrate. Have fun. And maybe meet someone special, perhaps."

"Father!"

"I am only joking," Arthur chuckled. Then softer: "But if opportunity comes, or you need advice…I'm here."

Matthew pressed his palms to his face in embarrassment.

Arthur clapped him on the shoulder. "You can do this. Now go. Help your mother and have fun tonight."

Matthew forced a smile and nodded. But his thoughts were not in the house. They were at the edge of the forest, on the dog. Why did he see it?

Why was it there? Was it the shadows playing tricks?

Matthew's mind then drifted. He wanted to tell his father the truth. That he did not want this path. That he wanted wind and danger and distance.

But unfortunately, he already knew the answer he would receive. There was no point in saying anything.



Matthew's hands worked automatically, laying down silverware and plates. His father's words hung over him.

Hand. Then chief.

He could barely imagine himself in that role. The idea of spending his life solving small disputes with the fishermen or elders, of never leaving this place—it suffocated him.

Why him? Why this life?

Matthew looked up and watched the others preparing. And then he saw the newly sixteen-year-olds walk in, their faces bright with anticipation. They would soon come of age tonight.

Matthew smiled faintly.

But then a hand clapped onto his shoulder from behind, firm, familiar, careless in the way only lifelong friends could afford to be. "What has you sunk so deep in gloom?" came the voice, higher than Matthew's, edged with easy mischief.

Matthew turned and forced a smile. "You did, the moment you arrived."

Taren lifted both hands in mock surrender and circled the table, catching a slipping corner of the blanket before it dragged through the grass. "You're fortunate then. I am a healer of moods."

"Yeah yeah," Matthew muttered.

"Tonight's going to be good," Taren said, scanning the clearing. "You don't even look excited. Come on, this should be fun. Best night we've had

in months.” His voice drifted off as his eyes moved past Matthew’s shoulder. “Very good,” he added under his breath.

Matthew followed the look despite himself.

Across the clearing, a cluster of older Elven girls crossed between lantern poles, baskets of fresh bread in their arms. Iwa. Sôna. Fêtina. Their laughter rose lightly above the bustle, hair catching the sunlight. The air smelled of yeast and smoke and anticipation.

They were beautiful, all of them.

Matthew watched perhaps a second too long before turning back to his work.

Taren did not. “Think I could win her?” Taren asked quietly.

“You can’t win any girl,” Matthew said, chuckling.

“I can so!” Taren shoved him lightly, grinning.

“Who are we talking about anyway?”

“Iwa of course,” Taren replied without hesitation.

They both looked again. She stood apart from the others, loaf tucked against her hip, steam curling in the cool air. Her hair fell long and bright down her back. She carried herself without apology, shoulders straight, chin high, smile unapologetically bold. Beauty wasn’t the right word. She didn’t try to be seen. She simply was. And yes, she dressed with more confidence than the elders preferred. The cut of her tunic drew eyes whether she meant it to or not. If certain older women had their way, she would have been scolded daily.

But Iwa did not bend easily.

“Well excuse me miss. Where do you think you’re going?” Kiliâh’s voice rang out sharply, an older woman.

Iwa turned, unimpressed. “Oh? Did I commit some great crime?” she replied, lips curved.

Taren started laughing from a distance. “You see? Exactly why.”

“You’re kidding?” Matthew said. “Out of all the girls, you want Iwa? She’s only going to get you into trouble. Seems like a headache to deal with if you ask me.”

“Acting all noble and honorable,” Taren shot back. “Don’t tell me you don’t like a woman like that.”

“I’m good,” Matthew said quickly. “She’s all yours.”

“Oh, how generous of you,” Taren muttered.

Kiliâh had already begun ushering Iwa toward Matthew's house, lecturing her about proper dress and threatening to fetch one of the other elder women for reinforcement.

"Well," Taren said, folding his arms. "You should know Matt, I'm asking her to dance. Tonight."

"That's lovely, Taren."

"I think she's the one I'll marry."

Matthew blinked. "What?"

Taren shrugged. "I like my woman bold."

Matthew smiled, or something close enough to one that passed. "Well, then I hope she says yes." But something inside him shifted anyway. Not sharply, not painfully, just…deeper. His own thoughts felt like a compass needle that spun whenever he tried to steady it.

"But what about you?" Taren asked, nudging him. "If I'm dancing with Iwa, maybe you take one of her friends?"

"I don't know. You know me. I'm too busy."

"Busy?" Taren snorted. "It's a party tonight. You're just scared."

"No."

"Yes, you are." Taren glanced back toward the girls again. "You and Sôna would make sense. She loves garatens. You own three. That's practically destiny. The sovereigns would be pleased." He nodded once, satisfied with his logic.

Matthew huffed a quiet laugh, but his eyes drifted again, not to Sôna. To the edge of the trees. Where nothing stood. And yet he could not shake the feeling that something was watching him.

Suddenly the clearing shook with small, frantic footsteps. Finn burst from the trees, grass in his hair and triumph on his face, words tangling together in his mouth until they became a single blur.

Matthew caught him by the shoulders. "Finn breathe. What is it?"

Finn bounced on his toes, then blurted it between gasps. "Greg. Pirates. They are here."

"Where?"

"The trail." Finn said, pointing with the whole of his arm. "They are coming up now."

"Show me," Matthew said, then turning to Taren. "I have to go."

They ran. Branches brushed Matthew's shoulders. Stones rolled beneath his boots. Excitement moved through him so quickly it made him

light-headed. He cleared the last hedge and there they were. Greg, the Human pirate with his easy stride that said every place was his if he chose it. Tan skin, black goatee, black trench coat creaking at the stitch, tricorn hat angled with carelessness that had taken time to learn. The sword at his hip lay quiet in its sheath, but the way Greg’s hand settled near it told the truth of his life.

At his side walked a mountain of a man, black as rich earth, beard thick and uncombed, smile impossible to suppress. Don’s laugh arrived before he did, thunderous and generous. He carried an axe on his back and in his fist, almost by instinct, he cradled a half-gnawed turkey leg he had somehow acquired on the road.

Behind them came a figure who turned heads even among Elves. Taller than most men by a head, lean as a blade, with dark skin and hair the color of gold that fell all the way down his back. Bare feet touched the dust. Rail-thin anklets of gold chimed softly at his steps. He had the ears of an Elf, but his presence felt older and stranger. Azeel was his name, part of the Incarni race, navigator and right hand to Greg, eyes cool.

Matthew and Finn stepped from the trees and planted themselves by the path with arms crossed, faces stern in a way that never lasted long on either of them. “Crask. It’s about time,” Matthew said. “It’s been three years.”

“And you have grown two of those years in your shoulders.” Greg tilted his head toward Finn. “And one in his ears.”

Finn flushed with pride, made taller by it. Matthew could not stop the laugh that shook loose from his chest. The first time Greg had come, Matthew had been twelve and thin as a reed, still kept out of most adult rooms. Greg’s crew had crawled out of the Sea of Aethira with hunger sitting on their bones, dead-eyed and desperate after crossing the Luvarian Expanse. Liora had opened its doors, because that was what Liora did. The crew had never quite left, not in spirit. They returned when the sea let them, helped with nets, lifted beams, gave advice of other coasts. A year became a pattern. Then Matthew turned fifteen, and Greg said he had debts to pay. He vanished into the world and took three years to find his way back.

They crested the last rise, and Matthew’s house opened ahead. Whale carvings along the lantern rims cast shadows of fins and tails. To the left, a small stage carried the first voices of the evening. The women sang with patient strength, the men answered on lute and drum. The melodies were old and familiar.

Matthew’s mother and father stood near other families, hands clasped, offering the stock phrases of congratulations that still felt warm when spoken sincerely. The sixteen-year-olds walked in procession. “Tell me, what happened while you were away?” Matthew said to Greg, unable to keep the eagerness from his voice. “Tell me what you saw.”

“Food first,” Greg said, slinging an arm around Matthew’s shoulders. “Then tales of Korineth. Never let a good story be told on an empty stomach. At least, that’s what my father used to say.” Don saved them from hunger by charging through. He scattered children like leaves, stormed a table, and laid claim to a pile of meat that disappeared at a rate that startled even him. Greg brushed dust from his coat, flicked a crumb from Matthew’s shoulder, and lifted his hands to the sky. “Let us give these good people a party they won’t forget.”

The pirates were absorbed by the village. Elven women pulled Greg toward their table, their smiles unashamed in their boldness. Greg took a chair as if it had been saved for him and obliged the first request before it was voiced. “We are told you outran a pirate lord at the Scattered Islands years ago, Captain Greg,” one of the women said, eyes a little too bright.

“Outran is one word for it,” Greg said. “Another is that he tripped on his own pride and we took the path he forgot to guard.” They laughed and leaned in closer.



The music thickened. Mead sloshed in cups. Laughter spilled between trees and up into the leaves. Matthew found himself laughing and swept into a contest he had never agreed to.

Don stood over him with a pile of wings that grew. “One more,” Don said, eyes shining. “One more for honor.”

“Honor is already on the ground,” Matthew said, groaning, and took another bite. He made it through a leg and a half before conceding. Don

clasped his shoulders and declared him a brave Elf. Matthew wiped grease from his fingers and let himself be pulled into a circle where pirates and villagers moved to the same tune, bagpipes crying beneath the lutes, drums soft at first and then certain.

Then night gathered and the celebration found its stride. The sixteen-year-olds climbed the stage. Flowers rose from the crowd in a joyous storm. Greg’s crew cheered like sailors greeting land. Taren danced with Iwa like he had chosen. Their hands met, and Matthew felt no envy, only a quiet, surprising relief that some things were simple for someone.

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2

SHADOWS IN THE NIGHT

MATTHEW HESITATED, THEN SAT. HE CONSIDERED TELLING GREG ABOUT THE dreams. He imagined how it would sound, the eye, the black dog, the blood that rose like a tide. He could not shape the words. The night felt too light for such heaviness.

Azeel sat cross-legged on the ground, back straight, a pipe at his lips. The smoke moved from him in a thin blue ribbon. His stillness was not stiffness. It was intention. Azeel drew on the pipe and looked at Matthew without moving anything else. His voice, when it came, was low and measured. “Matthew Peregryn. They say you will be the next chief.”

Matthew straightened too quickly and smiled. “Right. Possibly. We’ll see.”

Azeel watched the smoke leave his mouth. “It is not something you seek.”

“No. That’s not true.” Matthew felt heat touch his neck, and he leaned forward. “It is what I want.”

Azeel’s eyes did not change. He took another patient pull and let the quiet do the work. It said more than any argument could. Greg stumbled into the clearing with a bottle in one hand and flattery clinging to him like perfume. He tipped against a tree, set his hat beside him, and grinned at them both. “What mischief are you two plotting here instead of bringing shame to the dance floor?”

“The Elf does not want to be chief,” Azeel said, as if noting the time.

Matthew flushed. “That is not true. I do, but…”

Greg cut him off with a laugh. “Do not say you want to be a pirate, Matthew. It is very bad for your reputation.”

Matthew swallowed and forced his voice steady. “I want to see some things, that’s all. If I am to lead, I should know the world beyond Liora’s trees.”

Greg and Azeel shared a look. Agreement lived there, and something like amusement. “Well that is interesting,” Greg said. “Because I was going to invite you on our next trip.”

Matthew blinked. “You’re joking.”

“Captain Greg.” A small chorus broke on the edge of their clearing, four Elven women moving toward him. They sat near his feet with the confidence of those who knew they were welcome. “Another story. Something more exciting, Captain Greg.”

Greg made a show of sighing. “Perhaps.”

Azeel smiled without showing teeth.

Greg leaned back and let the bottle dangle from one hand. “Very well. Another narrative.” They drew in. He rubbed his goatee, eyes narrowing with pleasure. “Must be something from long ago, across the desert lands of Zephirra maybe, where the sun is unforgiving—where water lives in jars and hope dies under the banners of Tenkara. The poor are many. The proud are loud,” he said. The music seemed to ease around his words.

Matthew rolled his eyes and got up to walk away.

“Don’t want to hear about my story in Tenkara? It’s quite a good one.” Greg called after him chuckling, already turning back to the ladies to tell his story. He was smiling in a way that made the girls lean even closer.

“Have your fun,” Matthew smiled shaking his head.



The party did not fade behind him as Matthew walked north toward the cliff with the shal’kor. It followed in echoes, in the call of the bagpipe that

rose into a brief solo and drew claps from hundreds of hands in unison. The scent of roasted meat chased him a little way up the hill, then fell away. He reached the cliff and sat where he always sat, knees drawn up, arms resting over them.

Duty, freedom, responsibility.

If he asked Greg to take him, Greg would apparently say yes. Or was he just pulling his strings? The thought felt clean. But the next thought did not.

His father, mother, Elara, and Finn. The whole village expected him to grow into the leader he was supposed to be. Matthew took his head in his hands.

It felt childish.

But he did it anyway.

If he left, could he promise to return and keep the promise? Would he be the same person who left?

Greg would say no.

The sea threw moonlight back at him. The sky was crowded with stars that seemed nearer than the day before, cold and watching. But suddenly small feet skittered through the grass behind him. He turned quickly, Elara and Finn appeared, breathless and bright-eyed, Finn clutching a cat that rejected him with every muscle it had. The animal's two hind legs dangled as if it had already given up on dignity.

"Whoa! Careful," Matthew shouted. "It's night and this is a cliff!"

"Can you come play?" Elara said, stepping up beside him, eyes on the ocean. "We are playing hide and seek in the Vahêla Woods again."

"Not tonight, Elara," Matthew grumbled. "Another time maybe."

"But it will be fun," Finn insisted, the cat twisting in his arms with a look that promised consequences.

Elara leaned into the view. "Oh, the sea is so beautiful isn't it? When I grow up, I will see every landmark in the world. And one day, I will be a fairy."

Matthew chuckled and rolled his eyes. He recognized the shape of himself inside her, only she spoke it more boldly. She might have more courage than he did, although she was ten.

"A fairy? No, you can't," Finn said. "And I'm the one who will explore everything, Elara. I will be the king of all Korineth!"

Elara poked him in the side. "You cannot be a king. You are not royal. What would you rule, the cats and the garatens?"

They all laughed, even Finn after a sulk that lasted three heartbeats.

“You could do it, Finn,” Matthew said, leaning back on his hands, letting his smile reach his brother. “You only have to try.”

Finn poked Elara with a triumphant grin. Elara rolled her eyes, though she smiled.

“You two go and play,” Matthew said. “I’ll be over there soon. I’ll play later.”

They made faces of brief disappointment and then forgot to be disappointed. They ran back the way they had come, bumping shoulders and racing to claim the path. The cat took its chance and escaped.

Matthew turned back to the sea again. The bagpipe solo ended to another roar of approval behind him. He placed a hand on the shal’kor beside him and tried to feel how solid the world was. But he knew Greg had arrived before he even looked. The grass sounded different under the captain’s boots, and spiceleaf had a way of announcing itself.

“Brooding suits you,” Greg said. “You should take it up as a trade.”

Matthew did not answer. Greg sat beside him and leaned back on his hands, eyes on the water. He took a slow draw from the hand-rolled smoke between his fingers. The scent curled in blue-green threads. “I offered you one earlier,” he said. “Fine plant. Deadly for the wrong gull, harmless for men with stout hearts.”

“No.”

Greg laughed quietly. “Right, too pure. You would not want to stain your lungs or soul or reputation.”

“I just don’t like the smell,” Matthew chuckled.

Greg sighed watching Matthew. “You’re still thinking about leaving?” Greg asked, the tease gone from his voice.

Matthew nodded once. “I meant what I said three years ago before you left. I wasn’t trying to impress you. I have thought of little else.”

Greg raised an eyebrow, the wind tugged at his coat and hat. He took one last pull, ground the ember out on stone, then flicked it aside. “If you are serious when the sun comes up, two days from now, there is room. Not comfort. Not certainty. Room.”

Matthew turned. The offer felt like a door opening in a wall he had accepted as solid.

“You thought I would refuse? I said earlier that you could,” Greg said, amused.

“I thought you were joking.”

“I want hands that do not tremble and eyes that pay attention. I do not care whose son they belong to,” he grinned. “You can gut a fish, right?”

“Yes, I can gut a fish.”

“Well, we will have to see.”

Greg was quiet, the both of them watching the sea. He offered a small flask, but Matthew shook his head. “Right. No spiceleaf and no firebrew,” Greg said, smiling. “None of the small sins.”

“You talk as if saying no is a flaw,” Matthew grinned.

“It is not a flaw,” Greg said. “But it’s not always useful.”

Matthew looked at him, not angry. Only uncertain. “If I join, what am I?”

“Whatever you can survive. Rigger, scout, or a deckhand. We are not picky. You’ll earn your place. I’m sure of it.”

“Well, even if I wanted to go, my father wouldn’t approve.”

“Don’t ask him then.”

“What? But I can’t just—“

“Tell him when your foot is already on the plank. That way he will know you went because you chose it.” Greg stood and stretched until his bones clicked. More cheers were heard behind. Greg took three steps toward the music, then half turned. “You have fire, Elf. Most mortals only have smoke. But don’t smother it because someone thinks the house is prettier without the flame.” Then Greg was gone, swallowed by the music and darkness.

Matthew remained. The sea did not look gentle any longer. It looked like a road that refused to show where it ended.

He sat until the pulse in his neck slowed. Greg’s words did not. They beat at him from within. Perhaps he should leave. He could leave in two dawns’ time.

He lifted his gaze.

The stars felt closer, and the night seemed to be listening. He dropped his eyes toward the slope and the black band of the beach.

But for a moment, he did not understand what he saw. A wooden ship rode the small waves, its sails red and jagged, cut like blades. It was moored nearer than he liked, close to where Greg’s ship rested easy as a sleeping animal.

Matthew frowned. He had not seen that hull arrive. He scanned the shoreline. To the right, two more vessels sat in the dark water. The same red sails, triangles torn from the same cloth. Lanterns and cages showed on their decks, but there wasn’t a crew. When did they come? How long have they been waiting? He felt the old chill from his dream move through him. As if the night had just remembered a secret and was preparing to share it.



Matthew made his way back through the crowd, something beneath it all felt wrong—off in a way he couldn’t name. The laughter was too sharp, the fires too bright, the wind too still. He could feel it in the ground, in the way the soil no longer felt warm beneath his boots.

He looked once more toward the sea beyond the trees. It was nothing but a black sheet, unbroken by moonlight. The three red-sailed ships he’d seen earlier still sat at the edge of his thoughts like thorns. Why were they there? No ships were expected.

Greg and his crew were loud with drink, sprawling around the fire pit, voices heavy with songs that didn’t belong to this island. Don laughed somewhere behind a barrel, mead spilling from his beard, while Azeel sat apart, calm and unreadable, his pipe glowing faintly in the dark.

Matthew threaded through the crowd until he found his father near the elders.

“There you are,” Arthur said, voice warm with pride. “We were just talking about you.” He gestured to the ring of elders around him. “They’re all eager to have you at my side now. The next chief of Liora, imagine that!”

Matthew tried to smile. The words brushed against him like cold mist.

The elders turned one by one, each offering a clasp of his hand, their palms dry and firm. “A leader of good heart,” one said.

“The Heliorens smile on your family,” said another.

Matthew’s father beamed, but Matthew could barely hear them. The night pressed close, every sound felt too near. He opened his mouth to speak, to say that something was wrong, that they should check the docks, but another firework cracked overhead, scattering blue sparks across the clearing. The elders laughed, lifting their cups to the display.

He caught it then, a sound, faint and uneven, beneath the laughter. Not the snap of firewood. Not the sigh of the sea. Something smaller, sharper.

A muffled cry.

His head turned toward the woods.

No one else seemed to notice. The musicians struck another chord, the drums rolled, the children danced near the tables, their shadows twisting with the light. But the feeling in Matthew’s chest deepened, a tightness that climbed his throat.

Another sound followed, this one clearer. A high voice, a child’s, then silence again.

Matthew reached for a nearby spear, his fingers tightening around the haft. “Father,” he began, but the words never left him.

A scream split the night.

Music faltered mid-note. Laughter died in throats. Every head turned toward the tree line.

From the edge of the forest, a little girl stumbled into the clearing. Her white dress was torn at the hem, streaked with dirt and something darker. Her hair clung to her face in damp strands. She looked smaller somehow, like the night itself had hollowed her out.

Behind her, an adult Elf dragged another Elven man from the shadows. The injured Elf’s body hung limp, boots carving lines in the grass. Blood soaked his tunic, dripping steadily onto the lantern-lit earth.

The girl collapsed into her mother’s arms, shaking violently.

“What happened?” her mother cried, dropping to her knees. “What’s wrong?”

The child tried to speak, but only ragged sobs came. Her fingers lifted slowly, trembling as she pointed toward the trees. “The shadows,” she whispered. “The shadows took them.”

A ripple of confusion passed through the crowd.

“Took who? Shadows?” someone demanded.

The man dragging the wounded Elf staggered forward, breath tearing in and out of him. “The others,” he managed. “They came out of the trees. Not

for us. Only for the children." His voice cracked. "We tried to stop them, but—"

He looked down at the blood on his hands. "But they moved too fast."

The clearing began to churn, parents rushed to count faces. Names were called into the dark. The band stopped entirely; the last trembling echo of a drumbeat faded.

Matthew's heart slammed in his chest.

The trees beyond the lantern glow seemed to deepen.

Arthur moved at once, stepping forward into the center of the clearing. His voice did not shout, but it carried. "Quiet." It cut through the rising panic. "Everyone. Quiet." The murmurs softened, though fear remained thick in the air. "Stop the fireworks. Douse the torches at the perimeter. Bring the children inside. Now." The command spread quickly. Lantern flames flickered out one by one along the edges of the clearing, and with each light extinguished, the darkness pressed closer.

The forest loomed darker now, every shadow deeper. Then came the sound that made the blood drain from every face—children screaming in the woods, dozens of them. The kind of sound that did not stop when you covered your ears. Mothers dropped their cups and ran toward the trees. The Elven men reached for spears. Greg's men sobered in an instant, grabbing blades and bows. Matthew's heart pounded so hard it made his vision pulse.

Elara. Finn.

He didn't think, he ran. Branches tore at his arms as he plunged into the woods. The path disappeared beneath the dark canopy, but he knew these woods like breath. The smell of moss and damp bark filled his lungs. The night pulsed with movement, footsteps, cries, and something else, faster, heavier.

He shouted their names. "Elara! Finn!" But only the forest answered. The trees opened suddenly into a clearing silvered by the moon, and there Matthew stopped. Dozens of eyes stared back at him from the dark. They glowed gold and narrow, set in faces twisted by hunger and malice. The figures crouched along the branches and rocks, small, broad-shouldered, their skin a slick green that caught the moonlight. They grinned, their teeth jagged and wet.

Goblins.

Matthew's stomach turned. They were everywhere, ten before him, more in the branches, more behind. They hissed and cackled in a language

he didn’t know. The smell of rot and iron filled the air. And then he saw what they carried, children. Small bodies slung over shoulders, limp or writhing. Some kicked and screamed; others hung silent, their eyes wide with shock. Among them—

“Elara!”

His sister’s face turned toward him, streaked with dirt and tears. “Matthew!” she screamed. Her little hands reached for him, twisting in the air as a goblin dragged her backward. “Matthew, Matthew, save me!” she cried.

His breath broke. He ran forward, spear raised. But a goblin dropped from the branch in front of him, blade flashing. Matthew stumbled, barely dodging the swing. He thrust his spear wildly, scraping the creature’s shoulder, and it hissed and lunged again. Then a blur crossed Matthew’s vision, his father, spear driving straight through the goblin’s chest. The creature shrieked and collapsed.

“Stay behind me Matthew!” Arthur shouted. But there was no time to stay behind anyone. The forest erupted, Elven warriors poured into the clearing, their cries clashing with the goblins’ howls. Arrows hissed, steel rang. The smell of blood and sweat filled the night. Matthew stepped forward, but another goblin leapt from the side and drove him into the dirt. Its dagger flashed above him, then another spear struck from the side, killing it instantly. Taren stood over him, panting. “Matthew! Are you all right?”

Matthew gasped. “They’re taking the children, down the mountain!”

He pushed himself up, still gripping his weapon, and ran. Taren followed, and other Elves tore through the trees behind them. Below, through gaps in the branches, the flicker of torches moved toward the docks. The screams of children echoed faintly over the wind. Matthew broke from the forest and skidded down the hill. The three ships from before waited below. The goblins were loading the last of their captives aboard, Elara among them, her small arms thrashing. Finn’s voice cried in another cage, high and desperate. Lanterns swung from their masts, the light glinting off iron cages. Inside those cages, many small hands beat against the bars, and voices cried for their parents.

“Elara!” he shouted. “Finn!”

He saw them then, both of them, and he ran faster than he ever had.

Two ships were already pulling away, their sails catching the full wind. The third still waited, the goblins shoving the last of their captives aboard. At least two dozen of them stood between Matthew and the boats, their eyes narrow with amusement.

There were so many, how was this possible? Why? Why were they doing this?

Taren came up beside him, trembling. “Drekk,” Taren cursed. “There’s too many—”

Matthew didn’t hear him, he took one step forward. But before he could take another, arrows hissed past his face. Goblins fell. More arrows followed, and then Greg’s voice thundered across the docks. “Take them down!!”

Greg and his men stormed down the slope, weapons drawn. The Elves followed behind, forming a line as the goblins shrieked and scattered. But it was already too late. The last ship was pulling away from the dock, the oars cutting through the black water. The sails caught the wind, and in moments, the ships were gone, swallowed by fog.

A hollow stillness followed, only the waves answered.

Matthew stood motionless, staring into the mist where the ships had vanished. His hands trembled. The sounds of crying rose behind him, the other parents clutching at one another, shouting in fury and grief.

He felt nothing.

Not yet.

Only the echo of his own voice in his mind. He told them no, not tonight.

He remembered their faces, bright with excitement. The way they had begged him to play. The way he had smiled and sent them away. A sound escaped him, half a gasp, half a groan. The tears came like an ambush. He didn’t notice the others gathering around him until he heard his father’s voice through the din.

“Where are they?” someone shouted. “Where are our children?”

“They’re gone,” Greg said quietly.

Matthew lifted his head, Greg stood by one of the fallen goblins, turning the creature’s head with his boot. His eyes narrowed.

“What in the Sovereigns’ name are those things?” Elder Rowan demanded, his voice cracking with panic. He rounded on Greg, eyes wide

with accusation. “Pirate. What did you bring to our village? Was this your doing?”

Around them, the other Elves stared in horror at the dead creatures. Most had never seen goblins with their own eyes. They knew them only from Greg’s stories—half-believed village tales of twisted little monsters that hid in caves from mortals. Creatures many in Liora had long dismissed as exaggeration or sailor’s myth.

But there was no mistaking them now.

Then Greg’s voice dropped, edged with warning. “Goblins don’t raid like this. They can’t sail and they especially don’t take children.” He crouched, pulling the creature’s collar aside. Ink marked its throat, a black tattoo of a skeletal hand.

Greg’s expression darkened. “Drearthen marks,” he said. “From the island Drearth. The Forgotten Woods.”

The Elves murmured, confusion and fear rippling through them. “Drearth?” one whispered.

“Northwest of here,” Greg said. “If we leave now, we can reach the shores before they make landfall.”

A storm of voices erupted, some Elves shouted that they should go, others that they must stay. Elder Rowan raised his staff and shouted over them all. “You would lead us to another island we know nothing of? Into darkness? Madness!?”

The argument swelled, chaotic and fevered. Matthew stood in the center of it all, barely hearing the words. His eyes found his father. The chief was limping, supported by two men. Blood ran from a wound in his foot.

Greg turned to the crowd. “Decide now. In an hour, the trail will be cold. It will take us five to seven days to reach Drearth.”

Silence fell, heavy and final.

Then Matthew spoke, his voice shook, but it carried. “I’m going.”

His mother Lila pushed through the crowd. “No Matthew,” she said, eyes watering. “You…will not—”

“I have to,” he looked at his father, who only stared back, jaw clenched. More Elves argued, Greg called for volunteers. Fourteen stepped forward, weapons still bloodstained from the forest. Then Matthew’s father’s voice came, hard and tired. “Not you, Matthew.”

Matthew swallowed, but didn’t back down. “They took Elara and Finn. I will bring them home!”

His mother gripped his tunic, her hands trembling. “No you will not, you’re being foolish, Matthew. There are others who can fight and you are no warrior.”

Matthew looked at her, his throat closing. “I will come back,” he turned to his father, searching for something in his eyes—permission.

Arthur held his gaze for a long, quiet moment. “Go,” he said at last. His voice cracked, but he did not take the words back. “Be brave and stay close to the others. Bring them home.”

But his mother spun to father, “Arthur! No he won’t!”

But Arthur stayed silent.

Matthew felt his heart split. His mother wept openly, clinging to him. He held her tightly, breathing her scent. Then he stepped back, nodding once to his father.

Greg’s voice broke the silence. “Let’s move, we leave now. Say your goodbyes.”

The group moved quickly, the pirates loaded their gear; the Elves gathered provisions. Torches lit the dock with trembling light.

The ocean waited, black and vast. Matthew turned once more to see his parents standing side by side. His mother’s face was pale and wet with tears. His father’s hand rested on her shoulder, the other gripping his spear for balance. They waved as the ship pulled from the dock.

Matthew didn’t wave back. He couldn’t. Everything happened so quickly. He still couldn’t believe it was real.

He watched as the island grew smaller behind them, its lights fading one by one until it was nothing but a faint glimmer on the horizon.

He had dreamed of leaving Liora.

But not like this, not for this reason.

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3

THE DEATH OF MERCY

6 Days Later
Dusrelon the 23rd, Year 11,219
(The tenth month)

THE SEA HAD A WAY OF SWALLOWING DAYS WHOLE.

Six of them had passed since Liora disappeared behind the horizon, and Matthew had begun to lose his sense of where one ended and another began. Dusrelon the twenty-third, Greg had said this morning, one day left until Drearth. But the words meant little. Out here, time didn't move; it drifted. The wind had not been kind. Waves struck the hull in a slow rhythm that never stopped, the sound echoing through the boards beneath Matthew's boots like the beat of an old heart. The air was cold and sharp, tasting of salt. Clouds rolled low, thick and heavy, turning the daylight dim.

Matthew stood by the deck rail, staring into the empty sea. Nothing moved there, no birds, no land, no hint of color but the grays and greens of the water's restless skin. The horizon was a line that promised nothing.

It had been a hard six days.

Greg's crew had done their best to keep the Elves busy, teaching them how to tie sails, coil ropes, mend nets, scrub the deck. Matthew had learned quickly—he always did, but none of it settled the unease that gnawed at him. The routine was meant to steady the heart, but his heart wasn't listening. Greg had shown him the map of Korineth more than once, unfolding it like a Lumanian priest revealing scripture. The parchment was

stained and soft at the folds, the edges frayed from years of travel. Greg's fingers traced coastlines and names Matthew could barely pronounce—Zephirra, Valdorin, Tarnvyr.

Three continents. Three realms of endless conflict and mystery.

Greg spoke of them like an old lover—half fondness, half regret. Zephirra, the desert continent where the sand itself could bury armies; Valdorin, green and civilized and full of bloodshed; Tarnvyr, the Wild Lands, where the beasts were said to walk on two legs and whisper like men. Greg laughed when Matthew asked how much of the world he'd seen.

"Enough to know that I still don't understand everything," he said. "But that's the curse of it. The more you find, the more there is to find."

Matthew hadn't known what to say to that.

He had stared at the map a long time, realizing how small Liora really was. A single island in a sea that stretched endlessly beyond the eye. The thought had once thrilled him. Now it only made him feel hollow.

He thought of Elara and Finn.

Six days.

Had they eaten? Had they slept? Were they still alive? He pressed his palms against his eyes until light bloomed behind them. "Please," he whispered to the Sovereigns of Light. "Please let them be alive."

Greg had told him again the night before, that goblins didn't behave like this, that they didn't sail, didn't take children. "They hate the open," Greg had said. "They live in holes and drink mud. Something else is driving them."

That had only made Matthew's thoughts worse. If the goblins weren't acting on their own, then who—or what—was?

And the dreams…

They had not stopped. Every night, the same visions came and went like tides: the black dog of unusual size, its golden eyes shining through the dark; the green eye burning against the shadows; and now a vision of darkness with the hum of locust wings in a forest that felt too real. But out on the ocean, they seemed quieter, distant, as though the sea itself dulled them. Still, when he woke, his hands would shake, and he would taste iron on his tongue.

That evening, as the sun sank beneath the clouds, Matthew sat slumped by the deck's rail. The air was thick with brine and the musk of wet rope. The sea looked like hammered glass. He could hear everything. The creak

of masts, the flap of sails, the low murmur of the crew, but all of it seemed distant, muted, as though he were underwater. He thought of his parents, his mother's voice, soft but stern. His father's hand on her shoulder. He imagined them standing at the docks still, waiting for a ship that would not return.

A hollow ache spread in his chest. But he didn't notice Greg's approach until he heard boots beside him.

"Six days," Greg said quietly. "You lot are handling it better than I thought."

Matthew didn't look up. Greg leaned on the rail beside him, shirt loose at the collar, his tricorn hat missing for once. The wind tugged at his dark hair, making him look younger. He pulled a flask from his belt and held it out.

"Drink?"

Matthew shook his head.

"It helps," Greg said, unscrewing it and taking a long swallow. "For worry."

Matthew said nothing.

Greg sighed, glancing toward the horizon. "We'll get them, Elf. Your brother and sister. We'll get them back."

Matthew's jaw tightened, his eyes stayed on the sea. Greg studied him for a moment, then drew his rapier. The blade caught what little light the dying sun offered, glinting faintly in the wind.

He held it out. "Take it."

Matthew blinked. "What? Why?"

Greg's voice was quiet, almost calm. "It is good to have a little extra training, because you're not going to save anyone with your hands in your lap."

Matthew didn't move.

Greg rolled his wrist, flipping the sword once, the metal singing as it turned. "You'll learn nothing by watching waves. Take it."

Reluctantly, Matthew rose and accepted the blade. It felt lighter than he expected, too light to be something that could decide life and death. "I don't want to train right now," he said.

Greg's gaze hardened. "Then you don't want to live."

Matthew frowned, confused. "What are you—"

Greg stepped closer, pressing the tip of his own knife against Matthew's chest, just enough to make him flinch. "If you stop training, you don't learn to fight, you'll die. Worse, you'll watch others die because of you."

The words hit like a slap.

"Now," Greg said softly, "kill me."

Matthew froze. "What?"

"You heard me. Kill me."

"That's—" He stammered. "That's insane!"

Greg tossed the knife in the air, caught it by the hilt, and smiled. "Welcome to the lesson."

"I can't," Matthew said, backing away. "I won't."

"Then you'll die," Greg said, stepping forward.

"Greg, stop—"

But Greg didn't stop.

He lunged.

Matthew barely brought the rapier up in time, deflecting the strike that would have driven straight into his heart. The force knocked him backward onto the deck. He rolled, scrambling behind the mast. "Stop!" he shouted.

The pirates had gathered now, forming a loose circle, their eyes bright with interest. The Elves tried to step forward, but were held back by Greg's crew.

"Watch his eyes!" someone called. "He's not joking!"

Greg threw his knife. It whistled past Matthew's face, burying itself in the mast beside his ear. Matthew's breath came fast, ragged. He turned, gripping the rapier in both hands. Greg pulled another blade from a nearby sheath, his expression unreadable.

The two faced each other across the deck. The wind howled between them, snapping the sails overhead.

Matthew could feel his pulse hammering. His hands shook.

Greg moved first.

The rapier flashed silver in the air, a line of light that came too fast to follow. Matthew blocked on instinct, the clash of steel ringing through his bones. He stumbled back, the deck slick beneath his boots. Greg pressed the attack. Their blades met again and again, sparks leaping between them. Matthew's shoulder burned where the knife had grazed him.

He struck clumsily, wild, and Greg easily turned the blow aside. "You're thinking too much," Greg said. "Thinking gets you killed!"

“This isn’t right!”

“Then die,” Greg lunged. The tip of his blade carved across Matthew’s shoulder, sharp and deep. He gasped, dropping to one knee. The pain came delayed, a hot bloom spreading down his arm.

Greg stood over him, eyes cold as the sea. “Again.”

Matthew pushed himself up. His breathing was shallow, his vision trembling. The world narrowed to the space between them—the faint glint of Greg’s blade, the creak of the ship beneath his feet, the pounding of his own heart. He swung, Greg parried, steel screamed. The air smelled of sweat and salt and iron. Matthew drove forward this time, desperate, reckless. For a moment, he thought he might actually win, until Greg stepped aside, twisted his wrist, and brought his blade to Matthew’s throat.

The cold steel rested against his skin.

Greg’s voice dropped low. “You’re dead.”

Matthew stood still, chest heaving. The fear was so sharp it felt clean.

Greg pulled the sword away from Matthew’s hand. “If you don’t have the hunger to kill,” he said, “then you can’t save anyone or yourself. The world doesn’t spare the gentle.” He turned and walked past, sheathing his blade.

The crew dispersed. The Elves hurried to Matthew’s side, but he said nothing. He just stared at the wooden boards beneath his feet, blood dripping softly from his shoulder. The wind carried Greg’s last words across the deck. “Remember that, Elf. Mercy is a story people tell before they die.”

Azeel appeared beside him then, silent as always. The tall Incarni rested one heavy hand on Matthew’s shoulder. His eyes, gold and calm, met Matthew’s briefly. “You’ll climb,” he said simply. “The mast. Watch for land.” Matthew didn’t argue. He only nodded, still half-stunned, and turned toward the ropes.

The climb was slow, his arm throbbing, his breath uneven. The sky opened wider the higher he went. When he reached the lookout post, the wind hit him full force, cold and relentless. Below, the ship moved like a dark wound against the sea. He looked out across the endless waters.

Nothing.

Only gray and horizon. He rested his forehead against the wooden rim of the lookout, closing his eyes.

Greg’s words echoed in the hollow of his mind. He didn’t know what Greg meant by that.

He didn’t want to understand it.

The world felt too large, the sea too endless, his heart too tired. He stayed there until the stars began to form, their pale light trembling through the clouds. Tomorrow, they would reach Drearth.

Matthew whispered to the wind, “One more day.”



Hours had passed since Azeel left him at the top of the mast, yet Matthew remained there, wrapped in wind and silence. The world below was a black expanse stitched with silver. The sea rising and falling in slow breaths that caught the reflection of the low moon. Every motion of the water carried sound, the groan of wood, the whisper of ropes, the deep, distant churn of waves colliding with themselves.

He had thought the ocean might grow familiar after six days.

But it hadn’t.

The longer he stared into that emptiness, the more he felt it staring back. His thoughts circled like gulls around a sinking ship.

Why did he come?

He told himself it was to save his siblings, but the truth pressed against that lie like a bruise, he had wanted to run, to see what lay beyond the cliffs of Liora. He had wanted something to make him feel real.

Now, all he felt was small. His hands gripped the wood rail as the mast swayed. He whispered to himself, voice low, barely carried by the wind. “I’m a coward.” It sounded truer spoken aloud. He breathed out again, more bitterly this time. “Weak, useless, foolish!” His throat caught. “I can’t fight, couldn’t even kill a goblin and save them.”

The wind shifted behind him.

“You’re not a coward,” said a voice, quiet, amused. Matthew turned sharply. Greg stood behind him, balanced on the narrow ledge as though the

height meant nothing. A thin stream of smoke curled from the pipe between his fingers, glowing faintly in the dark.

“How—” Matthew stopped. “When did you even get up here?”

Greg smiled. “If I told you, I’d have to kill you.”

Matthew blinked, uncertain, until Greg’s grin widened.

He was joking.

The tension in Matthew’s chest eased, just slightly. Greg leaned against the railing beside him, eyes half-lidded from the spiceleaf. The smoke blew sideways with the wind, mingling with the salt. “You’re not a coward,” he said again, softer this time. “Cowards don’t leave home.”

Matthew didn’t answer.

Greg exhaled another long curl of smoke, letting it twist into the night. “Weak though? Yeah.” He glanced at Matthew, his face dimly lit by the pipe’s ember. “You grew up in safety, kid. You had family, food, people who cared whether you woke up in the morning. You were lucky. You’re still lucky. But don’t mistake your comfort for weakness.” Greg’s smile didn’t reach his eyes. “I had none of that.” He looked out at the sea, the smoke dimming in his pipe. “Born a slave in Tenkara. Didn’t know my parents. Didn’t know a single soul who gave a rauking varn if I breathed or not.” He cursed. “Everything I am, I had to carve out of the skin of other men.”

The sea sighed beneath them and Matthew swallowed hard. “I’m sorry,” he said, though the words felt small.

Greg shrugged. “It made me strong.”

Matthew lowered his head. His chest ached. “I shouldn’t have complained.”

“Stop complaining,” Greg said. “Focus on what’s happening now.” He turned, leaning both arms against the railing with a sigh. “Tomorrow we reach Drearth. When we do, you need to stay close to us. Don’t run, don’t wander. That island is the ugliest corner of this drekking world, and I’ve seen a few.”

Matthew looked at him. “You’ve been there?”

Greg nodded. “Once. Years ago. I told myself I’d never go back.” He took one last drag of his pipe, the ember flaring bright red in the dark. “And yet, here we are.”

He flicked the pipe into the wind and straightened. “Get some sleep, Elf. You’ll need it.” He climbed down the ropes with the ease of someone born

at sea, vanishing below deck. Matthew stayed. The waves lapped softly against the hull.

Drearth.

Even the name carried weight. He tried not to think of Elara and Finn, of their voices calling through the dark, but it was useless. Every thought led back to them.

“Please let them be alive,” he whispered to the Heliorens.



Matthew stood in a forest made of shadow. The air was still, heavy, the stars above sharp as glass.

“Elara?” His voice trembled. “Finn?”

He heard them calling. Soft at first, then clearer. Their voices echoed through the trees. He ran toward them, branches scraping at his arms. The trees broke open to a lake. In the center stood a mountain, sharp and black, rising straight from the water. His siblings were at its peak, their small figures pale against the sky.

“Matthew!” Elara’s voice. “Help us!”

He waded into the lake without thinking. The water was freezing, thick, pulling at his legs. He swam, arms burning, breath short, until he reached the mountain’s base. He climbed, fingers slipping on the wet stone. But above, a storm gathered—red mist rolling through the sky like blood turned to vapor. The air crackled with silent lightning.

“Elara! Finn! I’m coming!”

But something was moving on the other mountain cliff beside him. A shape. The black dog with a head too large for its body, golden eyes gleaming in the dark. It watched him, still as death. Matthew froze. His hand slipped, scraping raw against stone. The dog tilted its head, lips curling in something like a smile. And then he saw him. At the summit, beside his siblings, stood a figure cloaked in white. Not a man, but

something else. Wings grew from where a face should be, seven of them, layered like petals, each feather marked by a single green eye.

When he spoke, the air rippled. “It is not time.”

Matthew’s hands clung to the rock. “W—what? Who are you!?”

“It is not time,” the voice repeated. “You can’t go.”

“Can’t go?” Matthew shouted.

The figure’s voice seemed to come from everywhere at once. “The Son of Light is coming. He will help you. After he saves you, remain within the city for two days more. Do not flee.”

Matthew’s heart pounded. “City? What are you—” Matthew then looked over to the dog. It hadn’t moved, only watched. Matthew looked back up at the cliff. “Who are you talking about?” he demanded. But the winged figure raised an arm, no hand, only a sleeve fluttering like smoke. A gust of wind struck Matthew’s chest. He lost his grip. The mountain fell away beneath him.

“Wake,” said the voice. “Wake up.”

He hit the ground—

—and gasped awake. The sound of rain pounded against the wood above him. The air was damp, choking. He was on the floor of the crew’s quarters, alone. He pressed a hand to his head, breathing hard. The dream clung to him. The figure, the dog, the voice: the Son is coming. What did that mean? He had never had that dream before.

The ship lurched suddenly, throwing him sideways. Shouts erupted above deck.

Matthew staggered to his feet and climbed the stairs.

The storm hit him like a wall. Rain sliced across his face, blinding and chilling. The deck heaved beneath his boots. Lightning flashed, white and cruel, revealing men running, ropes snapping, the sails thrashing in the wind.

Greg was at the helm, barking orders, his voice nearly lost in the roar. Azeel stood near the main mast, calm even as the storm tore at the ship.

“Strap it down!” someone yelled. “Get the cannon secure!” A pirate grabbed Matthew by the shoulder, shouting something he barely heard. They moved together, hauling rope around a loose cannon. The wind screamed through the rigging, and every movement was a battle.

Then the world flashed white again, and in that light, Matthew saw it. A shape far out on the waves. At first, he thought it was another wave. But

then the wave moved against the wind.

Matthew stopped.

The next flash of lightning revealed it fully. A serpent's body, long as the ship itself ten times over, its hide dark and ridged, water spilling from scales the size of shields. Two eyes burned faintly in the stormlight.

The sight hollowed him out. "Greg!" he screamed. "There's something out there!" But his voice vanished into the wind. The serpent moved closer. The sea broke open around it, the surface splitting with the force of its rising. Then came the sound. A deep, mournful cry that wasn't a roar or a screech. Something older, heavier, ancient. It vibrated through his bones, through the ship, through the air itself. It was the kind of sound that made men fall silent without knowing why.

Greg turned toward the serpent. "Leviathan!" The word tore through the storm. Bells rang. The crew scrambled, Azeel climbed the mast, then firelight blooming at his fingertips. Matthew could only watch as the Incarni shouted "Infêrnio" with both hands—and pulled from the air a spear of golden flame. The heat was so intense it cut through the rain. He hurled it toward the horizon, the light trailing like a comet.

It struck the serpent's back and exploded, the flash lighting the sea for miles. The creature vanished beneath the waves. For a heartbeat, there was silence. Then the odd sound returned, low, deep, resonant.

It wasn't from the serpent. It came from below them.

The ocean itself seemed to quiver. Greg shouted something, but Matthew couldn't hear. The waves rose higher. And then a cannon broke loose, rolling across the deck. Matthew lunged toward it, grabbing for the rope. The ship tilted, throwing him to his knees.

Another flash.

Another roar.

And the mast cracked above him.

Someone screamed his name.

The next moment, something struck his head. An impact so hard it shattered the world into light.

Then there was only water.

Cold.

Endless.

He sank, his limbs weightless, the surface already far above. The light faded, replaced by dark green and the muffled sound of waves. Somewhere

below, something clicked, a deep, rhythmic sound, like bone striking bone. Matthew tried to open his eyes, but they were too heavy. The last thing he saw was movement—something like a giant fish gliding through the dark.

Then nothing.

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4

THE FLAME THAT MARKS

Dusrelon the 24th, Year 11,219 - Early Morning
(The tenth month)

THE FIRST THING THAT REACHED MATTHEW WAS THE CHILL OF THE TIDE.

Not the bright shock of river-water, but a slow, bone-seeping chill that felt like the ocean still held him. Sand pressed against his cheek, wet and hard-packed, and the tide crept up with thin touches that slid around his calves and retreated with a hiss. His eyelids fluttered against a white glare. Above him, gulls quarreled in shrill voices that made his skull ring.

He rolled onto an elbow. The movement wrung a groan from him. His belly knotted in emptiness and let out a noise that would have embarrassed him. Salt had dried on his lips in a thin crust. He tasted the sea and something faintly metallic.

When he found his feet, he swayed. The horizon wavered. The morning sun climbed the eastern sky through thin clouds and laid a harsh silver sheen across the water. Nothing broke the sea. No familiar hull. No lantern-struck mast. Nothing.

Matthew turned and looked downshore. The beach ran in a pale strip that curved away behind a shoulder of stone. Cliffs rose beyond, rough and dark, their faces torn by old storms. Above the rim of rock, trees clung and leaned. Some threw out long, thorn-bristled arms. Others wore autumn’s last defiance, gold and rust flickering in the wind.

Greg? The crew? The Elves who had come?

He scanned the line of surf for the wreckage; casks turned to drums by waves, a torn length of sail, the broken ribs of a skiff. He saw nothing but weed, driftwood, and the shell-white bones of fish. He followed the beach. The sand shifting underfoot, each step stealing a little strength. Matthew pressed a fist to the hollow ache in his belly and kept moving. The tide had laid out a fringe of wrack along the water. But he saw no sign of men, no prints but his own. Around the bend the shore opened wider. Far above the cliff line, half-hidden behind the saw-tooth of trees, a shape needled the sky.

He squinted.

Towers.

Roofs like spearheads, dark green with age. This was not Drearth. Drearth was woods and fog, according to Greg. Matthew stared until the sun stung his eyes and told himself what the sight already proved. The storm had driven him elsewhere. He sank to his knees and struck the sand once with the side of his fist. It made a dull sound and left a wet crater. Anger rose and slid away. He closed his eyes against it and breathed until the breath steadied enough to stand again.

When he lifted his head, something flickered at the cliff-rim. For the space of a blink, he saw a wheel of white wings, not two or four, but seven, petaled around a center he could not name, green eyes set in feathers that watched without blinking. The vision hung there, bright and wrong, then broke. Only branches. Only gulls. He rubbed salt from his lashes with the heel of his hand.

Perhaps light.

Perhaps his mind trying to turn his dream into morning. He did not believe either answer.

Matthew followed the base of the cliffs until the rock split into a path. It climbed steeply, packed earth clawed by roots and slick with last night’s rain. He ascended carefully, one hand in the dirt whenever his boots slipped, lungs rasping against the incline until wind caught him in the ribs at the tree line.

The air changed. It smelled of leaf-mold and spearmint-like resin, fresh from the gouged sap of thick-barked trees. The cries of gulls faded behind him, replaced by something odd. A chorus of layered voices, Human, hurried, pulsing in overlapping rhythms.

He stepped through a fringe of fern and onto a road.

And the city took him, abruptly.

The road widened into a narrow street, then spilled into a fan of others. Carts rattled across damp stone. People moved in choreographed lines, each path intersecting the next without chaos or collision. There was a rhythm to it, something rehearsed.

But then he noticed.

Every face he passed bore the same features; pale skin, black hair combed neatly or braided back, and eyes—sharp, narrow, watching. All of them, man or woman, elder or youth. But the architecture of their faces remained unbroken, as if stamped from a single cast. The scent of baking bread mingled with livestock and the wet itch of wool soaked in river mist. A carriage lunged past, its wheel close enough to graze Matthew. The driver balanced on the board, whip flicking at the horses, voice cursing. A woman dragged a boy by the wrist, hissing at him not to stare at strangers, not to drop the bread. And then—

A short man darted through the crowd, orange hair wild beneath a crooked cap, his beard like fire-straw tangled beneath his chin. His voice boomed with irritation. Behind him, a taller man tried to keep up, nearly tripping over his own coat. Matthew blinked. The Dwarf's face was the first break in the pattern. Loud, rough, utterly distinct. His eyes round, not slitted. He did not match. In a city where every face echoed another, he stood apart.

"Keep up, keep up, I said keep up! Khazadryn iron will not hum in the forge while you count your toes! Eldoria wants blades that sing and bite, not spoons. General Ludwig will be waiting for proofs by noon! Do you want to explain to his temper why you were admiring clouds?!"

"Bork," the tall man panted, shifting the long sack of wrapped metal on his shoulder. "I am following!"

"Not fast enough," the ginger Dwarf snapped, shoving through a knot of people.

They vanished into the crowd, the tall man bobbing in Bork's wake. Matthew kept to the shadows that buildings gave him. His clothing marked him shabby and out of place. But his ears marked him worse. Faces turned and turned away again. Several men's hands strayed to the hilts of knives or to the strings of their purses. A woman steered her child around him with a firm, impersonal tug.

"Elf," someone said behind a palm.

"Look at the hair. Liar's color."

“Keep your eyes down, tree-thing!”

“By the sovereigns, they let vermin into the city now!? What’s an Elf doing here!?”

He had heard scorn before, but nothing like this. This was different. Here it wore the crown’s colors without fear of correction. Hunger pawed at him with malice. He found a line of stalls under patched awnings where bread lay warm on boards and fruit sweated in piles. A baker with a beard watched him approach with the narrow eyes of a man who counts small coins for a living.

“Bread,” Matthew said. “A loaf. Please.”

“Three crowns,” the baker replied.

“I have no crown,” Matthew said.

“No crown, no service.” The baker’s voice thinned. “Away with you Elf. I do not want curses sweeping under my stall today.”

A woman crossed herself, not the sign Matthew knew, but a small, practiced flick of fingers across brow and throat. The boy behind her stared with the cruelty of the very young. Matthew backed away, confused over the hatred. The pain in his stomach tightened only more until it felt like he had swallowed a fist. But Matthew swallowed nothing and moved on.

At the center of the market a black-stone pillar rose from a ring of three shallow steps. Ancient script cut its sides in tall, patient letters he could not read.

Five feet below the triangular cap, a square hole opened clean through the stone. A small bird had made a nest there. It watched the crowd with a bright, suspicious eye and darted out whenever someone came too near, only to return and settle again. People paused in ones and twos to look up at the pillar. No one touched it. He heard a woman’s voice nearby, quiet but certain. “The Vel’thar. It’s been here longer than Eldoria’s first stone. Folk say one of the brothers from the Old Time placed it to mark his claim.”

A girl, perhaps her daughter, glanced up from the step below. “I thought this land was the Sovereigns of Light? Isn’t that what the old songs say?”

The woman made a soft sound in her throat, half indulgent. “Stories, child. That’s all they are. Everyone says something different as they pass by. Come along now.” She took the girl’s hand and turned away. “We still need milk before the midday bell.”

He drifted farther into the city and the street broadened into a court. A man wearing an eagle helm, gray armor, and a green cape stood with a

squad of soldiers. He read names from a scroll and took coins and wrote other names down when coins did not come. “Taxes,” a nearby man muttered. “Always more.”

A woman at his side said nothing, only pressed her purse tight in her hand. An older man reached the front. He was thin where life had worn him down unevenly, his shoulders narrow, his collarbone ridged under a frayed tunic. He looked at the officer as if he were addressing a door.

“Fifty crowns,” the man said without looking up from the list.

“I cannot,” the elder replied. His voice was a handful of dry leaves. “I have six.”

“Then you can march,” the officer said. “Eldoria is generous to debtors. Your work will repay us. Your service will satisfy the eagle for King Ronan.”

He gestured. Two soldiers took the elder by the arms. The old man bleated a small sound and tried to set his feet. One of the soldiers shoved him. He went down, palms scraping on the stone, mouth working without sound. The crowd murmured. One or two called out offers of coin. The officer did not raise his eyes. “Each man pays for himself. That is the law. If King Ronan wished it otherwise, the decree would read differently.”

Matthew felt the old heat move. It was not noble. So he stepped through the line until he stood between the elder and the soldiers. “Let him go. He clearly cannot fight.”

The nearest soldiers fixed on his ears at once. The faces around him changed. “An Elf?” The officer’s mouth curved. Not a smile. A small acknowledgment that something interesting had come to interrupt his boredom. “Well, this is surprising. You care for, him? An Elf cares for a Human? How surprising indeed,” he said. “Well, if you can beat me in a fair fight, his debt is forgiven, Elf.” The elder shook his head once on the ground and tried to crawl backward, not to safety, but away from Matthew who stood over him. His eyes did not plead. They trembled.

Matthew glanced around, unsettled, wondering why every passing face called him Elf with a hint of caution. Why the word carried more fear than recognition. Then Matthew looked at the officer and thought of Greg’s blade stopped at his throat and the clean sentence Greg had given him. He did not like the sentence. He did not know if he even believed it. But it moved in him now.

They squared with no ceremony. The court started to hold its breath with a noisy hunger. A woman laughed once and clapped her hand over her mouth. The officer settled his weight with the assurance of someone who had broken jaws before breakfast.

Matthew moved first.

He launched forward and let fear be his speed. He snapped punches at the soldier's head and ribs. Two landed and made decent sound. The soldier let the hits teach him the rhythm and then stepped through the next flurry and put a single punch on Matthew's cheek with precision.

Stone slammed his shoulder when he fell. The sky above the court went pale and a little far. He tasted iron and salt and the sour of hunger. He stood again and the soldier circled and struck again. Matthew went down harder. Laughter rolled through the soldiers and people behind the officer, not cruel so much as astonished at how easy it is to watch an Elf fail. He pushed to his hands and knees. Something in him swayed, the way the deck sways when the sea climbs the sides. Sound dulled at the edges. The hunger in his belly reached up into his head until light felt thick and breath came hollow.

Light-headed.

Dizzy.

He gripped the stone with one hand to keep from sliding. He took one step toward the officer with the other. Heat gathered in his chest, then it moved to his shoulder and down his left arm.

And suddenly, black fire roared into being around his left hand. It wrapped from wrist to palm to fingers in a hungry bloom, not bright, not smokeless, but a burning that drank light.

But Matthew felt no heat.

He felt the world answer, as if something older than speech had said his name back to him. Matthew stared at it, shock breaking his jaw half-open. "What?" he said, to no one. "What is this?"

The court stopped breathing.

Someone behind him shouted a single word. "Aetherian! Aetherian!" A different voice spat on the stone and whispered a prayer to the sovereigns that Matthew did not know. The elder on the ground did not thank him, did not plead. He scrabbled sideways on knees and palms, as if a fire had crossed the floor between them and he must keep it from touching his legs.

The officer shifted his stance and put his hand on the hilt of his sword. His face had gone completely pale under the weathered brow. He spoke

without raising his voice. “Pete. Collar. Now.” Boots thudded behind Matthew. He turned too late. Metal bit his throat. The collar snapped shut and clicked around the neck. The black flame on his hand guttered once, twice, and died. The dizziness did not leave, but the pressure in his chest eased. He stared at his own skin as if seeing it return from a place he had not quite understood. Nothing remained except a faint ache in the tendons and a lingering sense that the air around his fingers had kept an imprint.

The soldier behind him brought his wrists together and yoked them with iron. Another soldier pushed his shoulder with a palm and forced him to his knees to bind cleanly. The collar tightened when he breathed too deep, not enough to choke, but enough to remind.

The officer glanced sidelong at his companion. “We should be grateful, Pete.”

The younger man grinned, “You all always laugh at me for lugging it around,” Pete said. “But now I finally get to laugh back when it saves our skins.” The murmur in the court turned from curiosity to a colder sound. Matthew caught phrases as if a chaff were blowing through the air.

“Elf with black fire.”

“Filth from the trees.”

“Keep the children away.”

He stood when they hauled him up and kept his feet. He found the elder with his eyes. The old man had crawled to the court’s edge and was pulling himself upright with two hands on a post. He refused to meet Matthew’s gaze.

“Come,” the officer said, and the ring of men opened to take him through.

They marched him out of the court and along a road that crossed a broader thoroughfare and climbed toward the ridge where the castle’s green-roofs cut the day. Matthew kept his head high enough to see without asking for pity.

They passed through a high arch where the city gave way to the crown’s ground. The change was immediate. Noise sharpened and ordered itself. Drums practiced a cadence in the distance. A voice counted in a way that made numbers into a blade. The smell of the market fell behind. Sweat, leather, hay, and oiled steel took its place.

The first wall kept the city out of the camp. Inside it, streets ran between stone buildings capped by dark green roofs. A second, lower wall fenced an

inner yard where men trained with pikes. Beyond that stretched a long green, where formations practiced moving.

To the right, a stable opened. Horses blew steam and stamped. And then two hippogriffs flared their wings and snapped at a handler's pole. The handler laughed and tossed them meat. The beasts tore it, eyes bright with hunger.

Banners lined the avenue. Dark green, yellow border, a golden eagle clutching two swords by their edges. Eldoria's sign watched as the soldiers brought Matthew to a table of old wood set before a stone hall. The man at the table under the shade did not look up at once. Scrolls stacked to his left and dwindled to his right. He was the Master of War.

To his left, stood the Master of Ravens, who spoke names softly and offered documents with meek efficiency.

"What is it?" the Master of War at the table asked at last, not a true question, more the sound a craftsman makes when a customer enters but the work must be done first.

"An Elf," said the officer. "Aetherian by sign."

The man lifted his face. His eyes were not cruel, not warm, simply present. Matthew felt the sensation of being weighed.

"Home," the Master of War said. "Business."

"Liora," Matthew replied. "A village on an island in the Sea of Aethira." He breathed carefully against the collar. "I fell from a ship in a storm. I washed ashore."

"Not Sharlenten?" the general said. "Not Cyrodell? Not Loreign?"

"I told you where I am from," Matthew said. He tried to keep impatience from the words. The general rubbed his eyes with thumb and forefinger. He looked at Matthew again and spoke as if to test an edge.

"And why are you in Eldoria?"

"Because the sea would not keep me," Matthew joked. "I have no other answer for you."

"He struck my men in the square, General Kael," the officer inserted.

"What? No—"

But Matthew was cut off by the Master of Ravens, as his lips curled beside the general. "Execute the Elf," he said. "Sell him." He gestured lazily, as if shooing away a fly. "We should not soil the eagle's green with Elf blood. It will stain."

Matthew felt the panic rise and pressed it down with the heel of his will. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m lost! Please, if there is any mercy under your banners, I ask for it!”

Kael regarded him as if trying to decide whether to waste a lesson. “Insulting an officer can mean the rope,” he said. “It can mean the chains. It can mean other uses when the army is feeling inventive.” He turned to the officer without looking away. “You said he showed aetheris? Are you sure? Tell me exactly what your eyes saw.”

The officer’s jaw tightened. “Black flame around his left hand, general. It came when he stood again after the fight. It left when one of my men locked the collar around the Elf’s neck.”

Kael’s mouth drew a thin line that might have been surprise. He put his quill to a fresh scroll. “For the insult,” he said while he wrote, “you will not die today.” His hand moved. The wax seal took the shape of the eagle and two swords. He passed the scroll to the Master of Ravens. “But for the time being, you will serve mandatory service, then we will decide what to do with you. Induct him now.”

The Master of Ravens twisted. “What? General Kael,” he said softly, as if making a friend of the name would help pry it apart. “He’s a rauking Elf.” Barnobus, the Master of Ravens, cursed. The vulgar word scraping from his mouth like snot. “Are you mad? He will burn your barracks while the soldiers sleep. He is an Elf and an Aetherian also. That is a braided rope. Hang him with it.”

Kael did not honor the plea with a second look. “Take him to tent three,” he repeated. “Ludwig will want to deal with him.”

They dragged Matthew from the dais. The camp moved around him in precise lines. The drum stopped somewhere and a horn called an answer and the call bounced from stone and tower. He saw a recruit mis-hold a spear and a sergeant correct him. He saw the hippogriffs again, the handler stroking the line of their beaks. The soldiers led him to a row of canvas tents pitched near the entry arch. The collar on his neck clicked loose. His wrists were freed. His skin prickled where the metal had rested. The officer leaned close enough for Matthew to see the small crescent scar under his eye.

“If you run,” the man said without malice, “we will catch you. If we must catch you twice, you will wish we had killed you the first time.”

“I have nowhere to run,” Matthew said.

The flap swung aside and they shoved him through. Matthew fell and raised his left arm—turning his hand in the light—as if the black flame might have left marks in the lines of his palm.

But there was nothing.

Aetherian. What exactly was this?

He sat and leaned his elbows to his knees, letting his head hang between his hands. The tide at the edge of his mind brought him a single question again and again.

Where was he?

Where's Greg?

Where is the crew he knew by the sound of their boots?

He had scanned the beach for anything they had owned, and the sea had given him nothing. He breathed and counted the breaths and let the count fall away.

"What do I do?" he whispered.

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PART

TWO

The Hours of Many Faces

Aurora · Matthew · Torm · The Black Knight

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5

THE PRINCESS OF ELDORIA

MORNING CARRIED THE CHILL IN FIRST. DUSRELON THE TWENTY-FOURTH, six days before month's end, two months before the new year. Aurora held the numbers in her mind. One step, then the next.

"Come now, Aurora." Her mother's voice came clipped and certain from the skywell garden. "We must pray to the Sovereigns of Light."

Aurora quickened her pace, the autumn morning light catching on her pale skin. Her long black hair spilled down her back in soft waves, swaying with each step. She bowed, though the bow felt like something borrowed and returned too often. The garden lay cupped inside eight stone walls, all angles softened by years of wind and sun. Water circled a low island of stone where the two of them stood, a ring around cut beds of ordered flowers. A single old tree leaned over a memorial stone at the center. The whale carved on top watched without eyes.

They unrolled the red prayer-rugs like a rite they had rehearsed since childhood and knelt. Aurora placed her hands together and closed her eyes. Her mother began the prayer, voice clear and strong. "Guide us, bless us, lead us. Keep us pure. Help us against the evil that comes."

Aurora's lips moved with the lines. But her thoughts did not. Nineteen now, she thought. The number meant nothing and too much at once. It had come with no new freedom. Only more doors to sit behind and more people to smile at. She tried to pull herself back to the prayer and found only a blank hallway in her head. They finished and they stood. Her mother's face

was crisp with satisfaction. Aurora let out a breath. She felt the old tug toward honesty and pulled the mask back over it.

Prayers at dawn.

Lessons.

Her mother adjusted the set of her shoulders with two fast touches to her own collarbone. “Chin up. Posture, Aurora. The council meets today. Look ready for your people.”

Aurora lifted her chin. She could feel the old tug again, but she swallowed it down. She stared at the letters on the memorial. The Solvaran said you could pray anywhere, that the Heliorens heard from hillside or kitchen or a road with mud up to your calves. Yet every morning they came here. Her mother insisted on here, insisted that discipline mattered more than mood.

Then she wondered if repeating words you did not mean did the opposite of what prayer was supposed to do. She wondered this most days, but she never said it.

She thought instead of the library. Of the feel of a spine in her palm, of thin pages whispering under her thumb. She pictured sunlight breaking across the high windows and lifting dust like a soft snow. If she could not leave the castle without permission, she could at least travel from a chair.

“Aurora,” her mother’s voice again, closer this time.

“Yes, mother, I am listening,” Aurora said, even though she had not been.

“Posture.” Orkora’s fingers were gentle and relentless at once, drawing Aurora’s shoulders back, pointing her chin toward the morning like a compass. “You will be the face of steadiness today.”

It was easier to nod than to explain the truth. The truth was she did not hate the people. She hated the room that turned people into lists.

Footsteps echoed along the stone walk. The Master of Guidance Tamber came as he always did, half-stumble, half-glide, cane tapping to keep time with his body. He bowed without fuss, breathed a bit heavier than last season, and somehow smiled with his whole face.

“My ladies. The air is honest today.” He looked up at the sky as if greeting an old friend. “Feel it? Sechera’s winter slowly creeping in. A good day to remember what sustains us.”

Tamber held his faith the way you hold a child’s hand. Gentle and firm. Without shame. “You look lovely today, princess,” he added.

Aurora gave him the sort of smile that did not cost her much. “Thank you.”

Tamber moved to the memorial and rested a hand on the stone as if checking its temperature. “Hope,” he said, almost to himself. “What a weapon the Sovereigns of Light left us. I should like to see the Great Sea-Watcher someday.” He tapped the whale with his finger as if it might answer.

Lu. The Son of Oryneth who kept watch on waters and the world. Aurora knew the names and the stories because Tamber had placed them in her one quiet lesson at a time. Lu, one of the children of Oryneth. Part of the stories in the Solvaran.

Aurora could recite all of it. Some days she felt the weight of it. Other days she did not.

Tamber spun back to them and nearly lost his balance to his own enthusiasm. “And your prayers this morning? Anything for which I should bring council?”

“Guidance and wisdom,” Orkora said at once. “To lead rightly under Oryneth.”

Aurora kept her face calm. The truth was, her head had been empty while her mouth worked. The truth was not for this hour.

“We will meet in scripture later,” Tamber said to Orkora. “Bring your questions. The Solvaran bears more weight read aloud,” he giggled.

He turned to Aurora with the kindness of a teacher, “And you princess,” he said. “Keeping up with your readings?”

She blinked.

“Cite from Shield for Those Who Stand Alone.”

Of all the tests he could have picked. She had skimmed that book the way people skim warnings meant for someone else. Soldiers. Scouts. Those who carry spears or bear banners. Aurora’s work was faces and rooms, the careful reading of men who wanted something without saying it aloud.

Her mother’s gaze began to burn at the side of her head. Aurora set her jaw and reached for something she kind of knew. “Chapter one, reading two.” She swallowed. “It says that the shield is not given but handed from above.”

Tamber’s laugh was soft and not unkind. “Close,” he said. “For the shield is not given to the brave, but to the weary who rise again,” he said triumphantly.

She wanted to say she had been reading other things. That maybe people like her, people who never leave the castle except in processions, might need a book with different verbs. She only nodded.

Tamber tapped the cane against his boot and pointed it gently at her. “Library this afternoon,” he said. “You will hate me for it and thank me later.”

Steps hurried along the greenhouse passage. Puruna appeared, small and round and a little out of breath, white robes tugged straight with the automatic care that came from years of service. Puruna had watched Aurora grow teeth. She never minded when Aurora needed to be a person before a princess. “A busy morning,” Puruna sang. “The villagers come early, your majesties. The requests…well. There will be many.” She smiled.

Orkora stiffened. Not fear. Readiness. “We had best go.”

Aurora would have asked for an hour in the library rather than three sitting on thrones. Instead she walked with them, out of the skywell, through the damp green of the greenhouse, past windows latticed like careful handwriting, and into the main hall. They passed the curved stairs and entered the throne room. Banners stood like tall plants along the walls, all dark green and gold. The high window laid a rectangle of light across the floor. Aurora’s stomach tightened when she saw the chairs. The gold one with the eagle climbed up its back. The dark stone seats flanking the sides. The throne room always emptied her out.

Footsteps sounded on the balcony behind the thrones. The king came down with two soldiers shadowing him, both in light armor, green cloth showing at the joints, eagle helmets that guarded the back of the neck. Beside Ronan came General Ludwig, and the room straightened itself around him.

Ludwig was a part of the Zanari race, one of the eagle folk. He had white feathers, gold Human eyes, and a beak that curved like a blade. Five fingers to each clawed hand, each sheathed in dark keratin. Dark trousers, a green tunic, and a gold robe caught at the shoulder by Eldoria’s crest.

“Princess,” Ludwig called, voice warm and edged. “You look eager for the business of the day.”

“Yes.”

Her father smiled softly. He looked well this morning. Strong. Too many meetings or too many miles put a gray at his temples that never quite left. For now he looked the king properly, and the room gave him the

respect he had earned. “Work with Nere,” King Ronan told Ludwig, the words worn from use. “As we agreed. He must be ready.”

Ludwig inclined his head. “He will be a fine Aetherian.”

He meant it. But that did not help the way the words sat in Aurora’s chest. Everything in her wanted what her brother had been given. Not his title. Not his path. His spark. The sign from the sovereigns that something slept under her skin that might wake when she needed it.

Sixteen had come and gone for her without incident. Nineteen had come and sat down and drank her tea and told her nothing new. The window for aetheris was not closed yet. But it felt narrower with each morning.

Ludwig glanced at King Ronan. “If it is still your wish.”

Her father’s face went blank. He looked at the floor and the line from his mouth to his jaw deepened. “Yes,” he said at last. “Once Nere is trained. You may leave.”

“Leave,” Aurora said, and hated that she said it out loud. Puruna moved to her side and placed a steadying presence at her elbow.

“Ludwig is going to Arendale,” Puruna said in the careful tone.

“Arendale,” Aurora repeated. “Why?”

“To meet my people,” Ludwig said. His beak tipped in what passed for a smile. “I have served Eldoria many years. Service has been an honor. But there are roots I have yet to see.”

It was right, and it was wrong. He had been the balance in rooms that tilted toward anger. And he had taught her to read a person’s stance. Aurora stepped forward and embraced him before she could decide whether it was wise. His clawed hand came up, gentled by habit, and patted her back. She stepped away quickly and pretended not to see her mother’s glance. “When?” she asked.

“After the new class of Aetherians complete their instructions,” Ludwig said. “Including your brother.”

The great doors pushed inward on a gust of light. The Master of Ravens Barnobus came through with a fistful of scrolls and the self-importance of a man who believed urgency could be worn like a cloak. Tall, pale, sharp-eyed, voice pitched a fraction too high. “Majesty,” he said to Ronan without bowing quite enough. “The day will not wait. Bork departs within the week back to Khazadryn Kingdom. Villages in the countryside need attention. And there is the matter of an Elf now in our ranks.”

Ludwig’s head turned. The feathers at the back of his skull lifted a hair. “An Elf?” he questioned, as if asking a child to repeat a dangerous word.

Barnobus bobbed with triumph and disgust. “General Kael keeps him. A stubbornness that does the kingdom no favors. The Elf claims no home among our recorded Elven countries in Valdorin, and Kael insisted on keeping him. It will be argued in the city by noon if we do not act.”

Aurora watched her father’s face tighten. Barnobus had that effect.

“Why keep him?” Ludwig asked, tone even.

“Black aetheris flame,” Barnobus said. “That is what Kael said. He showed it in the square before the aetheris lock went on. Kael muttered something tragic about a short life to me afterwards—and that the chamber will tell us what he truly is. The boy should be put down or sold, but General Kael has decided to keep this abomination.”

A black aetheris flame.

Aurora turned the words over in her mind, testing their shape against what she knew, and what she only half understood. Aetheris did not awaken in everyone. It chose.

In those it touched, it left power. Flames that appeared around the left hand. Colored flame, drawn from the soul and shaped by the bearer’s essence. There were six known paths.

Ashen. It was pale and white, the flame of humility, of clarity earned through suffering, of healing rising from loss. Thornlight burned green. It meant quick, eager, and wild. It belonged to the curious, the restless, the ones who craved freedom and followed ambition. Duskborne was blue. It smoldered with discipline, with quiet serenity, and the power of relentless focus. Crimson pulsed red—wrath and love bound together. Vowed gleamed purple. Duty, honor, spiritual alignment, the soul tethered to something ancient and solemn. And last was Dawnfire, which was a golden flame. It meant leadership, inspiration, the unbearable weight of guiding others into light.

She had read about them all, at one time or another. But a black flame…? That wasn’t one of them. Aurora stood still, she had never heard of a black aetheris flame.

Her father looked from Barnobus to Ludwig. “And if I ask you, Ludwig,” Ronan said, “what do you say to an Elf with this black fire?”

Ludwig watched the light in the high window instead of them. “I say it is my concern,” he answered at last, “and not yours. And that it will not

harm the kingdom. Only the Elf."

That was an answer and not an answer.

Aurora made a note she couldn't really act on. She wanted to ask what the black flame meant among the aetheris flames. She wanted to ask what it did to a person to carry it. How did Ludwig know about this flame? Was this new? Were there other aetheris flames out there?

Suddenly, boots sounded from the gallery above. Carter, Master of Law and captain of the city guard, came down with three soldiers in gray light armor, eagle helmets open at the face and protective at the neck. Carter wore a green jacket with the crest stitched clean on the breast. His hair was cut to bristle, his beard kept to a shadow. "Barnobus," Carter said, without warmth.

"Captain," Barnobus returned, with equal grace.

Carter looked to the king. "There is Lumanian trouble in the north quarter of the city today apparently," he said. "Street fights. Noise. The poor are stacking. The Lumanians begin to stink of organization. But I will go and cut it out before they continue."

"Lumanians are our people," Aurora said calmly. "To speak as if the faithful are a disease is to accuse our kingdom of infection."

Carter did not look at her until the sentence ended. "Have you been in those streets, princess?" he asked. "Do you know what it is like to walk at dusk with a purse and a face that says you will not be missed? I do not accuse the crown of anything. I say there are those who use prayer as a reason not to work."

She opened her mouth. But nothing came.

It made it worse when her father said, "Enough," and sided with Carter by saying nothing else.

Carter dipped his head toward Ronan. "I will have results by tomorrow." He turned and the soldiers followed as if pulled by a chain.

Barnobus slid back into the space the captain had left. "Majesty, the scrolls from Khazadryn need your mark," he said. "The Dwarves swell with offense when you mishandle their craft. Also, Bork will whine, and while I can tolerate many things, a whining Dwarf is not among them my lord."

Ronan sighed and turned toward the inner stairs. "Come. We will conquer the paper before it conquers us."

Aurora watched them go with the kind of envy that had no target. She wanted a room that needed her without requiring her to be a statue.

“Mother,” she said softly as they settled near the thrones. “May I step out of the council this morning? Do I really need to be a part of every one of them?”

Orkora silenced her with a flick of two fingers. “You will sit. You will listen. We show our people that we are steady.”

Puruna took up her place beside them. Aurora patted the cushion of the left-hand stone chair and whispered, “Sit.”

Puruna shook her head with a smile that had sorrow in it. “I am not family,” she said.

“You are,” Aurora replied, and would have insisted, but her mother’s hand found her wrist and pressed once.

“Aurora.”

Soldiers formed lines along the stairs. The herald came in with his parchment and his practiced brightness. “Your majesties,” he said, “shall we begin?”

Aurora looked up at the high window again. The light there did not care what happened in this room.

“We are ready,” Orkora said. The herald nodded to the guards at the great doors.

Iron latches lifted.

The brightness poured down the far hall. Beyond it, the people waited. Their lists. Their requests. Aurora straightened her back and set her face. She thought of the Solvaran, the one for all mortals who stood in lines under open sky. For the weary who rise again.

She felt restless and tired. She placed her hands on her knees the way her mother had taught her and chose to rise anyway. The doors opened wider.

The first villagers came forward in single file.

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6

THE CHAMBERS OF MAELOR

THE TENT WAS STILL EXCEPT FOR THE SLOW SWAY OF ITS WALLS AND THE hum of distant soldiers outside. The air smelled of leather, smoke, and wet earth, and the light from the lamps bled weakly through the green canvas, giving everything a golden hue. Matthew sat with his back against the center pole, head bowed, hair hanging damp over his eyes. His stomach still clenched and growled. He pressed his hand against it, wincing. He couldn't remember the last time he had eaten. The ache of hunger was sharp and constant, and it clouded his thoughts.

His body still felt bruised from the rough march into camp—his wrists rubbed raw where the metal cuffs had been, his knees sore from the walk. The soldiers had said nothing to him except to throw him inside this tent. "Wait," they'd said. That was all.

Matthew's thoughts drifted to Greg, the pirates, the sound of the ship cracking apart under the storm. The sea. His siblings. He wondered if the pirates had even survived the storm at all. Every time he tried to picture them fully, the image dissolved into the darkness of the storm. He exhaled heavily and dropped his head back against the pole. His left hand began to prickle. A faint burn, like someone had pressed hot breath against his palm. He hissed and pulled it back, staring down at it.

Nothing.

He rubbed the palm against his trousers, frowning, before a voice broke the silence.

"Didn't think they'd throw anyone else in here."

The sound came from behind him, quiet but distinct. A man's voice, young but steady. Matthew turned sharply.

A figure stood near the back of the tent—a dark-skinned man, young, bald-headed, wearing the same light green tunic as the others. His eyes were calm, assessing, not suspicious, just curious. He stepped closer, glancing toward the dim light near the center pole before leaning his shoulder against it, above where Matthew sat. For a moment, neither said anything. The man looked him over, his gaze lingering on Matthew's ears and his pale features.

"Well," the man said softly, "I'll be varnd. An Elf." He let out a quiet breath, shaking his head. "Didn't think I'd ever see one in my life. Not here, at least."

Matthew tensed, his eyes narrowing. The man's tone wasn't cruel. Just surprised.

"Name's Zeen," he said after a moment. "Zeen Northspire."

Matthew didn't respond.

Zeen shifted slightly, folding his arms. "You don't look like what they say."

Matthew finally lifted his gaze. "And what's that?"

"Long hair. Fair skin. Golden eyes." Zeen tilted his head slightly. "Yours is short. Blue eyes. You look…ordinary."

Matthew let out a breath through his nose, half a laugh, half exhaustion. "Sorry to disappoint."

Zeen gave a faint shrug, glancing toward the tent flap. "Didn't mean it as an insult. Just…not what I imagined."

Matthew ran a hand through his hair, annoyed. The man walked around the pole, lowered himself into a crouch across from Matthew, and rested his elbows on his knees. They fell into silence. Outside, the sound of soldiers drilling filled the air again—shouts, clanking metal, boots stomping mud. Inside, it was quiet enough to hear the wind along the canvas.

Zeen broke it first. "You're far from home. Typically Elves don't come to Eldoria. Everyone knows that."

"I didn't plan to," Matthew muttered.

Zeen nodded slowly. "Guessing you got caught in something."

Matthew's eyes flickered toward him. The calm tone was disarming, no accusation, no arrogance, just a mild curiosity. "I fell off a ship," Matthew said. "A storm hit. I woke up on a beach here."

Zeen raised an eyebrow but didn't interrupt.

"My siblings were taken," Matthew added. "By goblins."

Zeen blinked. "Goblins?"

Matthew nodded, jaw tight.

Zeen exhaled through his nose, cursing, "Neth'rose." He rubbed the back of his neck. "You sure?"

"I saw them."

Zeen's eyes narrowed slightly, not in disbelief but calculation. "Strange. Because goblins don't take people. They don't take anything they can't eat. They usually hide in their caves."

Matthew's voice hardened. "They took my brother and sister."

Zeen studied him for a long moment, then nodded slowly. "Then maybe these weren't goblins. Possibly Halflings from Orenberg painted in green?"

"No! They were goblins!" Matthew sighed, rubbing his temples.

Zeen put his hands up in surrender, "Okay okay…whatever you say." He then stood, stretching his arms with a quiet groan, and walked toward a wooden table near the back of the tent. "Well," he said, voice calm, "if you're planning on sitting here starving, you don't have to." He reached down and tore a piece of bread from a loaf sitting beside a pot of stew. Steam drifted into the air.

Matthew's stomach growled, the sound almost painful. Zeen glanced back, half-smiling. "Help yourself. It's for us."

Matthew blinked. "For us?"

"For Aetherians," Zeen said. "That's what this tent's for."

The word caught Matthew off guard. "Aetherians?"

Zeen nodded. "By the sovereigns, Elf. It's people blessed with aetheris. You're joking, right?"

Matthew hesitated, then stood slowly, his body stiff and sore. He walked to the table, grabbed a bowl, and dipped it into the pot. "No, I've never heard of it." Suddenly the smell hit him—herbs, rich broth, meat. He didn't wait; he drank straight from the bowl. The warmth filled his stomach, easing the ache of hunger.

Zeen sat nearby, watching him with quiet amusement.

Matthew lowered the bowl, wiping his mouth with his sleeve.

For a while, neither spoke. The stew's warmth dulled the sharp edges of Matthew's fear. He could think again, though he wasn't sure he wanted to.

Finally, Zeen asked, "So what's your flame?"

Matthew frowned. “My what?”

“Your aetheris flame?” Zeen clarified. “It’s different for everyone. The color?”

Matthew hesitated, glancing at his left hand. “Um…well...it’s black.”

Zeen looked up, brows furrowing. “Black?”

Matthew nodded.

“That’s not an aetheris color,” Zeen chuckled. “There’s Ashen, Thornlight, Duskborne, Dawnfire, Crimson, and Vowed. No black.”

“Well, it’s black.”

Zeen’s expression tightened. “Then you saw something that doesn’t exist.”

“Story of my life,” Matthew muttered.

Zeen exhaled, rubbing his forehead. “Neth’rose…you must’ve done something to catch Oryneth’s eye.”

Matthew didn’t reply. He went back to eating, though the food no longer tasted like anything.

But after a while, Matthew nodded slightly. “I’ve only seen two people here that look different. You and a Dwarf.” He glanced around the tent. “Everyone else…looks the same. So where are you from exactly?”

Zeen smiled faintly. “Well…you’re not wrong. I was adopted. My family lives just over the Karomir Mountains. The Mire. Cold, quiet place. Not much to see but fog.” Zeen let out a short laugh, not loud, more like a sigh shaped into a smile.

The quiet settled again until Matthew’s eyes drifted toward the tent’s entrance. The flap was open just enough to see the soldiers outside, marching in rows. He thought about slipping through it, about running until he found a road that led to anywhere else.

“I wouldn’t do that,” Zeen said suddenly.

Matthew turned sharply. “Do what?”

Zeen didn’t look up. “Whatever you’re thinking. Running. Escaping.”

“Well, I’m not staying here.”

“Yes you are,” Zeen said simply. “If you run, you’ll be branded a deserter. They’ll hunt you down.”

Matthew clenched his jaw. “Then what am I supposed to do?”

Zeen shrugged. “Wait and learn. You’re an Aetherian now. That means food, a bed, better pay than the regulars. It’s not freedom, but it’s not the Neth’rose either.”

Matthew muttered, “Feels close enough.”

Zeen’s voice stayed even. “You could do worse than being chosen.”

Matthew turned away, sitting down hard on one of the wooden stools, staring at the floor. The tent creaked as the wind shifted again. He didn’t feel chosen. He felt trapped. Outside, voices rose suddenly. Chatter, laughter, not the disciplined sound of soldiers, but a group of people moving carelessly. The tent flap pushed open, and a man strode in, followed by several others. The first man was tall, dark-haired, confident to the point of arrogance. His eyes were sharp, his uniform perfectly fitted.

Behind him came two other men and two women, all pale-skinned, black-haired, sharp-eyed, Eldorian. The tall man was talking over his shoulder to the younger one beside him, his tone mocking. The younger man was the soldier who arrested Matthew. Pete.

“You’d think a soldier’s camp would have some standards. My father would burn this place to the ground if he saw it.”

The others laughed, too loud. Including the soldier Pete. Matthew tensed. Zeen shifted in his chair.

Pete slowed, “Eero wait. I forgot about the Elf here.”

Eero stopped when he saw Matthew. His eyes narrowed. “An Elf? Didn’t think we let monsters wear the crest now.”

Matthew’s throat tightened. The man Eero took a slow step forward, smirking. “Thought Elves stayed in their forests in Valdorin, playing with bones?”

Zeen spoke up quietly. “He’s part of the Eldorian army.”

The man turned to him, “For now,” his grin widening. “And where are you from, nantherwin rat?”

“The Mire,” Zeen said evenly. The man laughed, half choking on the bread he was eating.

“Figures. Should’ve known. Only the poor come from there.” He spat crumbs onto the floor, smirking at his own joke. The one man behind Eero snickered along, while Pete stared in silence.

Matthew stood suddenly, fists clenched. “We’re here because of aetheris,” he said.

Eero turned, amusement fading. “Oh? And what’s your flame? You rauking Elf?”

Matthew hesitated. “Black.”

Eero laughed loud and cruel. “Oh perfect. So a nantherwin rat from the Mire and a lying Elf. Ahhh...drekk,” he cursed, “what a pair.”

The laughter ended abruptly when the sound of marching boots filled the air outside. Heavy steps. Armor clinking.

The tent flap opened again. Two figures entered. The first was tall, his presence commanding even in simplicity. A young man with long black hair tied back neatly, wearing a dark green robe. His eyes were narrow, measured. The second figure beside him was no man at all. White feathers lined his arms and shoulders, his hands ended in sharp, talon-like claws, and his eyes glowed amber, like sunlight caught in honeyed glass. He was unmistakably Zanari—just as Greg had once described them in his stories. The eagle-folk of Arendale; swift, strong, and deadly. Living myths brought to life.

But within moments, every recruit dropped to one knee. “Prince Nere,” they said. Zeen elbowed Matthew quietly, and Matthew followed, heart hammering in his chest.

“Stand,” the dark-haired man said, his voice calm, smooth. “No need for that. I am a soldier, as you are.”

Prince Nere turned slightly toward the Zanari beside him. “This is General Ludwig. He will lead your training. And mine.”

Ludwig inclined his head, his golden eyes sweeping across the tent. “Prince Nere honors me. But his words are true—this is no ordinary year. Eldoria has been blessed by the sovereigns. Eight new Aetherians. The first in thirty-five years that we’ve had this many.”

The recruits murmured in awe. Ludwig’s gaze moved slowly from face to face. “You have been chosen by the Heliorens to wield aetheris. That means power, yes. But it also means debt. You will train. You will serve. You will learn to control what you have been given.”

His voice filled the space like thunder held in restraint.

“We will enter a chamber for Aetherians now,” he continued, “and there, your true abilities will be revealed. You will learn your path. Then your class within that path. And in time, you will defend this kingdom, from Cree, from monsters, from rival empires like Grimrave, Serakos, and Drakhar. The world sharpens its blades and so must we.”

Matthew’s breath caught. He could feel Ludwig’s gaze on him again, steady, knowing. It stayed long enough to make him shift uncomfortably.

Then Ludwig turned. “Follow me. Training begins now.”

The tent fell silent. Zeen stood quietly, brushing the dust from his trousers. “Neth’rose,” he cursed under his breath.

Matthew said nothing. He just followed.



They left the fortress in a thin line, boots finding the ruts carved by a thousand drills. To the right, the dirt track ran straight as a spear toward Eldoria’s castle, green roofs knifing the cliffline, a mile away and watching everything beneath it with the patience of old stone. To the left, the road bent toward an arch set in the high wall that kept the city out of the crown’s ground. Between those two hung the camp banners tugged by wind, smith-hammers striking rhythm, stable boys darting like sparrows.

Ludwig never checked to see if they were following. He simply moved, and the line flowed after him. The Zanari’s feathers took the light in a way that made them look carved rather than grown. His gait was unhurried, each step placed with the economy of someone who had dragged too many men through worse places. Prince Nere walked at his left shoulder, hair bound back, face clean, expression disciplined into something that read as ease from any distance.

Zeen drifted near Matthew without quite walking beside him. The others spoke low, but not so low he could not hear himself discussed. Words slid through the group like little shards of glass.

“An Elf? In our ranks? Why? What are the generals thinking?” Pete said.

“Exactly. Look at his ears. A rauking demon.” Eero cursed. Then he laughed too loudly at something Pete beside him said and let his shoulder clip Matthew’s as they narrowed onto a single path. “Eyes front, forest-thing,” Eero murmured without looking at him. “No trees to hide in down here.”

Matthew took the shove and said nothing. He did not trust his voice to be small enough to survive this place. The road broke at the tree-line and became a path, earth dark with damp, bordered with ferns. The forest closed around them, swallowing the clang and rattle of the camp in three dozen paces. Light sifted through a net of leaves, green and gold. They came out into a clearing so abruptly Matthew felt the air change before he understood why. Stone stood there in a great ring, old and overgrown, the crown open to the sky. Vines clung in thick ropes.

They passed under the arch into a cool throat of corridor, the light thinning. The passage opened into a court drowned in green; trees had rooted in the crevices, reaching for the hole where the roof had been.

“Closer,” Ludwig called. He stood on a low circular dais at the court’s heart, a stone plinth at its center carved with a shallow hand-shaped basin.

They ringed him. Ludwig set his taloned palm in the print. The stone answered with a tone you felt more in your ribs than heard with your ears. Gold bled into the lines cut through the rock and then ran away, thin and bright, threading itself through the floor like veins returning to a heart.

The platform shuddered under their boots.

One of the women gasped.

The floor began to sink. A soft wind rose from nowhere as the walls slid upward around them. Matthew swallowed against the drop in his stomach. The air cooled one degree, then another. Lines of light spiraled down the shaft, chasing one another like fish. Nere’s mouth tightened a fraction, and the boy at Eero’s side, Pete, stopped trying to look taller.

“It’s a lift,” Ludwig said, because he knew the right word could break a fear. “Breathe. Do not crowd the edges unless you want to get a stone burn.”

The descent quickened, then steadied.

The light in the stone kept them from the feeling of falling through night. When the wall opened at last, it opened all the way, into a dome so large it made the group look like lost children strayed onto a deity’s table.

Stone everywhere. Stone shaped by hands that had not needed to explain themselves. The gold lines they had ridden down spread through the dome in a lattice, meeting and parting in angles that tasted like order. Water fell in white curtains from four mouths set high in the curve, feeding a river that ran around a central island like a moat guarding an idea.

The lift set them down with a cough of dust. The smell of wet rock rose around them, clean and cold. Something in the air here pressed lightly on the bones of his left hand. They crossed a narrow bridge to the island. Its circle was vast. Ludwig stopped at a mark exactly in the middle. There a round plate had been carved into the floor, a larger echo of the hand-basin above. The gold lines converged on it like roads.

Ludwig knelt, set his palm to the stone, and the chamber answered more fully. Sparks, if sparks could be calm, walked outward from his hand. Nine squat seats rose around Ludwig in a slow ring, stone giving way to stone as if it had only been sleeping beneath itself. They had no backs, no ornament.

“Sit,” Ludwig said, and sat.

They took the seats without jockeying. Even Eero found himself quieter here. One of the women raised her hand before she could stop herself. “What is this place general?” she asked.

“The Chambers of Maelor,” Ludwig replied. His voice softened—not with sentiment, but with recognition. “Maelor ruled Eldoria in the ninth millennium. This is where he and the other Aetherians learned the art that kept his borders and cost his friends. The Solvaran also teaches a story, says the Children of Light raised these rooms for those the sovereigns mark.”

Eero leaned over to Pete and scoffed, “The Solvaran is just a bunch of fairy tales, that’s what.”

The water’s fall made a patient music.

“Today is for paths.” They faced inward, nine bodies making a geometry with the general. Sweat cooled on Matthew’s neck. Zeen placed his hands flat on his thighs and let his shoulders fall by degrees until the tension let go. Eero looked at Nere often enough to make the looking obvious.

“Listen to me and hold to the instructions,” Ludwig said. “You will close your eyes. You will breathe until your breath remembers what to do without you. The chamber will take you where only you can go. You will not be together in this other realm. You will not be harmed. But you will be asked to choose, first the current, then the cut. Three paths, three classes.”

A hand rose somewhere to Matthew’s right, it was Pete. “Can you advise,” the young man asked. “If we—if I cannot tell which is mine?”

“I cannot,” Ludwig said. “No one can. Your flame has already been teaching you who you are. It will keep doing its work when you stop talking over it.”

Prince Nere's voice came even, not for privilege but for clarity. "Does the color of the flame prefer a path?"

"It suggests," Ludwig said. "It does not rule. Dawnfire favored me for the Strider path, speed, command, the burden of being first and not failing. Titan is for those who are strong, where the world keeps trying to break them and then finds use for their refusal. Vaylin keeps distance and heals what can be healed and unravels what cannot. All three paths make a wall when they stand together. But it is also true that all three become a grave when they fight."

He let the words stand. "But enough. Let's begin. Close your eyes and breathe."

Matthew shut his. He didn't understand why he was here or what he was doing—but he drew air slow and deep because Ludwig had said to and because the dome seemed to want it that way. Darkness came, but not sleep. He could still hear the waterfalls, and when he focused on that sound, other noises started to drop away. But his thoughts did not obey.

Elara's laugh. Finn's hand sticky with stolen apples. Greg's voice behind him on the cliff; don't smother it. He tried to press the images down like damp leaves over a stray spark.

But they kept breathing.

"Stop trying," Ludwig's voice said from very close and very far. "Relax. Focus on the sounds around you."

Matthew breathed again. He counted the inhales until the counting felt like a joke he was telling himself. He set the counting down and held nothing. But something in him let go. He felt it as a literal looseness, joints unpinning, rope eased off a chest. His weight unhooked from the seat. For a heartbeat he felt the oddest sensation: he could see himself from above, a pale shape on dark stone, hair fallen forward, hands loose, no threat to anyone.

Then he fell back into himself, the way you are tossed forward in a skiff when the current catches.

When he opened his eyes he was not in the dome anymore. He was in a room so black that black felt like a substance instead of a color. And yet he could see himself, and the ground under his boots, and the air around him as if a soft light clung to the precise space he occupied and refused to spread to anything else. He took a step. The water moved. The floor was a skin of it,

thin and perfect, and his heel sent rings outward. The sound that came with it was not the slap of a puddle but a tone, clear and small.

The sky above him turned. Purple took the black, and stars woke in it, not points so much as bright pinpricks in a sheet, innumerable and cold. He lifted his face into that quiet and felt something move inside him that had been tired for too long. Heat touched his left palm. He looked down as a black fire licked up around his hand. It did not burn. It gave back a deeper dark shot through with motes that pulsed like a heartbeat. He raised it slowly, then reached with his right hand to test his own flame. Fingers passed through it, and the sensation was like warm water resisting slightly and then yielding.

The fire then jumped to the water at his feet, and the water accepted it without smoke. A single dark stream shot away from him. In a breath it split into three narrow rivers that ran forward and forward into a horizon he could not see.

On the far left the current hammered itself to pieces on small waves. Heavy shoulders of water rolled and rolled again, all power and no grace. To his right the surface lay smoother, slower, curling into small, patient whirlpools that formed and let go as if they had all the time the world would ever have. The center river moved like an order given and obeyed, fast, straight, honest.

He went to the right first because calm always looked like wisdom. The black fire in his palm dimmed as he drew near. As though a hand placed flat against his chest to keep him from walking into the wrong room. Annoyance pricked the back of his neck, at himself, at the river, at the way his life kept turning into choices made under pressure. He turned to the left. The flame sputtered, shrank, then held. The big water’s roar made his teeth hum. Strength there. Fury. Something in him answered to that and then recoiled.

He faced the middle path. He did not need to move before the flame leapt. It climbed his fingers, taller, a sound coming from it now like wind crossing a hollow. He stepped toward the center river and felt the ugly, honest relief of recognizing a road cut for your stride. The other two waters grew quiet without growing far. He put his foot on the center current and did not sink. Rings ran out, fetched back, caught up, moved on.

He ran, because the river wanted him to and because running felt good.

The world suddenly changed without collapsing. Snow under his boots instead of water. Wind with a taste of iron and stone. He now stood on a peak sharp enough to make his calves swear. Mountains crowded the horizon in ranks, each shouldering the next, white to the throat. Three stones waited in front of him. Flat and tall, edges broken by time. Words were cut into them: THE STRIDER PATH, PHANTOMMIRITH on the left, SHADOWVEIL in the middle, STORMBLADE on the right. Each stone wore its weather. Frost gathered on Phantommirith, lace crawling over its face, breath in the air without a body. Shadowveil stood in a collar of still mist that did not move even when the wind hit it. Stormblade's air twisted —the wind there funneled into edges, small whirlwinds pulling at the snow and letting it fall again.

A hand-print shimmered on each stone, the cut shallow and exact. Matthew stepped near enough to feel the edges of each choice.

He did not rush.

He lifted his left hand toward Phantommirith and felt the difference in his own flame at once, his dark fire thinned, the heat changed from warmth to a clean cold that stung rather than soothed. But the pull was not there. Something in him shrugged and looked past it without malice.

He faced Stormblade.

The wind at that stone caught in his fire. The flame drew up tall, the pulse in it sped, the warmth ran up his arm and into his ribs.

He reached out. His hand fit the print. The stone flared black and the air became a moving thing with shape, slicing around him and through him.

He laughed once, out loud. The sound went away into the mountains and did not come back.

Then the world blew out like a candle in a room.

Silence.

But not the good kind.

Suddenly a red mist bled up from the ground around his worn boots. The sky above was the same sky he had seen a hundred times in his dreams he would not speak of. Stars, but wrong. Clouds, but arranged as if a hand were closing around the horizon.

The moon above him was itself, and then it wasn't. A darkness poured over it, thick, slow, obscene—and what had been silver turned to a red so deep it made his tongue taste iron. Thunder walked in circles inside the clouds. Lightning came, not white but the color of old blood. Eyes opened

in the cloud-wall, one at a time, far apart, each a single red pupil without lid or mercy.

A cliff presented itself as if the world were a theater and someone had finally been tired of waiting backstage. Then the dog came forward on that ledge.

Its head too large. Fur too black to be merely dark. Eyes gold and bright. Blood ran from the corner of its mouth in a thin line and dripped. “You are mine now, Matthew,” it said. “You have woken me, because you came here, to the aetheris realm. Stupid Elf.”

Matthew’s body moved backward, he felt his heels find no purchase on the ground below. “Who are you?” he demanded, and the sound came out of him sick with terror. “What do you want from me?”

The dog laughed.

The sound went into the cloud and came out bigger. Its shape loosened, its fur becoming smoke. It rushed him. Mouth open. All the eyes in the clouds turned to watch him go into that mouth. He threw his arms up like a child. He had nothing else to throw. The dark closed on him.

And then a hand found his shoulder, not in the aetheris realm, but in the real world. And a voice, calm and low and shaped by years of not panicking.

“Elf. Wake. Wake up. You are fine.”

His eyes opened to the dome’s light. Stone under his thighs. River sounds around the stone island they were on. Ludwig leaned over him, the gold in his eyes at a Human distance.

“You with me Elf?” Ludwig asked.

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7

MARRIOTT'S SHOP

"WHAT A MARVELOUS DAY. TRULY MARVELOUS," TORM MUTTERED WHILE walking the streets of Eldoria.

Eldoria at midday; pale skins, black hair, sharp eyes, the sameness of a people who learned to mirror each other so completely that difference itself felt dangerous. The unique individual Torm walked through the people in the street as if the street were a spine and he were the knife to open it. The looks followed, not merely curious, not merely doubtful, recoiling, then returning, drawn in spite of themselves. White hair in this city was not normal unless you were old. Conversations stuttered as he passed; hands lowered; a father tugged his son closer by the collarbone.

Torm enjoyed it.

The quiet hush when he drew near. The way their eyes could not decide whether to hate him from afar or fear him up close. "These are the ones who eat and sleep with untroubled minds," he thought. He pictured the curve of a heel pressed against a jawbone.

A small gift to the world.

He moved with a confident, careless grace; black turtleneck fitted close, completely white skin, a long strap crossing his torso to anchor the light dark-gold armor that sleeved his right arm, feathers etched in metal, a bird's wing caught mid-beat. Sword earrings glinted as he turned his head, each set with a small red crystal. In his forehead, a dark golden diamond.

The city could not name him. They could not decide if he was Human, Elf, or something they had no word for.

He watched them watching him as he brushed his long white hair back behind his shoulders. The old man licking his thumb before counting change. The baker's boy eating crumbs from his palm instead of a plate. The two guards by the fountain, laughing with their mouths open too wide. He cataloged such things and found them all wanting.

Torm's lips twitched. He accelerated his pace, and when a man moved too slowly out of his path, Torm's armored shoulder found the man's chest and folded him to the cobbles. The basket clattered, pears bouncing and rolling; the man's apology died when he looked up and saw white. Then a child ran laughing through the crowd, five, maybe six—weaving a crooked line between legs and baskets, a little comet with nowhere to land. He clipped Torm's hip and stumbled to a halt, blinking up at the face above him.

"I'm sorry," the boy blurted.

Torm studied him. Soft hair. Clean cheeks. Hands without scars. He felt the familiar heat bloom in his chest, not anger yet; the step before it.

"Why do you live when others do not?" he said, looking down at the boy.

"Wh—what?" the boy said looking up at Torm.

Torm's hand slid to his sword on reflex, fingers curling around the hilt. The leather was warm from the sun. It would be quick, a silver line across the little boy's throat, a lesson the city could carry home.

Breath in. Breath out. There was work to do.

"Marriott's," he whispered to himself. "Marriott's."

He released the hilt, the smile returning as if it had never left. "Out of my way, darling," he said nudging the boy over with his boot, not hard, just enough to place him on the ground where he belonged. "Watch where you're going Human brat," Torm said, cheerful, almost affectionate. He lowered his voice, "Next time, it's your throat."

The boy's eyes went wide. Then the parents came quick and useless, scooping their son to his feet, looking ready to scold until they identified the white hair and the diamond. They stepped back, holding the child turned away from Torm.

The crowd parted. Torm walked on. He turned at random and almost laughed; how do people live stacked like this, breathing each other's breath, collecting each other's noise? He would have liked to pull the houses apart and watch the people bleed to death. It would've been fun.

A voice drifted from his left, “Marriott’s down here,” one man said to another, not trying to be quiet.

Torm did not believe in luck. He believed in listening.

He followed them into the dark channel between buildings. The alley was a throat, damp and narrow, rooflines pressing inward like palms. The smell here was rot and oil and cold stone long unbothered by sun. People hunched the walls, the poor pressed into their cloaks, the sick folded around their coughs.

But in the alley, a lone figure stood atop an overturned crate, dirty robes flapping in the midday wind. From the folds of his garment spilled a battered tome, the Solvaran, its gilded page edges worn out. The man raised one trembling hand, voice rich and carried by emotion.

“O children! Hear the words of love from the Sovereigns! Lu, who offered himself for all of you, sacrificed his former version to save you from the army of darkness, Zareth and his Nihilkins! He saved you from your sins and the varnation of the armies of darkness—and in doing so, he became the great whale of the sea. Do not turn your faces from salvation!”

His audience, however, was fractured, eyes narrowed, voices rising, every direction pushing and pulling.

The preacher continued, unfazed, eyes lifted to the sky. “Pray to the daughter Elmira! She who was struck down by her own blood, slain by her brother Zareth because of his betrayal, but do not fret, because her spirit lives! Her will burns brighter than any shadow! She listens! She answers! And the Father, Oryneth, who loves every mortal soul bound here, awaits to welcome you!”

“The Sovereigns of Light,” he said, voice rising, “desire naught but to see you enter Empre’ya, the gardens of peace! It is not too late! Your time here on Korineth is but vapor, fleeting as breath upon mist. Turn your hearts to love, and love will carry you home!”

Some listened with wonder, faces softening, eyes glinting with hope. A cluster of women edged closer, weaving through the crowd. “How can we know Elmira’s grace?” one asked, voice tentative.

The preacher leaned down, holding up the Solvaran like a lantern in the shadow. “Elmira is all around, but she and her brother Lu, guide us all with their words in the Solvaran,” he said kindly. “Elmira’s light stands within these pages. Seek it, read, reflect, and let your spirit rise. We also have a church in one of the homes here, if you’d like to come.”

Torm paused watching the preacher, grinning with amusement. He could tell that not all hearts were so inclined.

“Lies!” spat a merchant from two people away, hurling a rotten peach that smashed against the preacher’s robes. Another voice yelled, “Your sovereigns abandoned us!”

A cacophony of curses rose, filling the square.

Torm stood with arms crossed, eyebrows raised in quiet disdain. And right now, every fiber of him bent toward hating the preacher. “Rauk me,” he cursed, gaze locked on the preacher, “Every breath he takes tastes like lies and drainage.”

But the crowd had only grown louder.

“Where are the sovereigns now?”

“They don’t care about us!”

A wave of shouts, angry and raw, washed over the square.

A poor man, overwhelmed by the roar, stumbled and fell to the stone. Without hesitation, the preacher, battered and bleeding, knelt beside him, gathering the man’s arm and helping him to his feet.

The crowd recoiled, and then laughed. More food arced through the air like bitter rain, splattering against the preacher and the helpless man in his arms.

Suddenly, from around a nearby corner, a stone flew with precision, striking the preacher over the head with a crack that echoed like judgment.

He fell, but this time, unconscious.

The square erupted.

Some fled. Some cheered. Some cursed.

But Torm just rolled his eyes and kept moving and as he walked, one person reached a trembling hand toward him, palm up for crowns. Torm’s gaze dropped once to the hand, then to the pleading mouth. He suddenly stepped into the man with a precise kick.

Not cruel. But corrective.

The man curled tighter, muttering something that sounded like a prayer misremembered. At the alley’s bend, a sign hung crooked above a stairwell.

Marriott’s.

Torm walked up the steps and pushed the door. A bell rang, thin and mechanical.

Inside, the shop was larger than it had any right to be. Candles guttered in iron mouths along the walls, their wax thick and pliant as fat. Masks

stared from racks and pillars, elongated faces with open eyes and mouths, some serene, most not. Bones decorated the room with a collector’s precision. A nightwalker’s skeleton towered in one corner, all ribs and promise. Cages housed things that should not have been householded: sleek black arachnids the length of a forearm, labeled WYCHPINE—EAST OF BELFOUR/DRAKHAR. A smaller cage held a crab the size of a hare—sign reading KARNALITH—with a careful hand’s notes: 15 feet when grown, red undercarriage, tan middle, blue cap. Arendale stock. Wild Land origins from Tarnvyr. He admired the economy of the description.

The counter stood beneath a wall of bound figures, not hung corpses, but a sculpture: blue-gray skeletons meshed and mortared into pattern, climbing to the ceiling like ivy. Behind the counter stood the shopkeeper. White cloak. Hood drawn low over a face that was not a face. Blue-black skin, if you could call it skin, drawn thin over bone. A mask covered the upper half like a lid; the mouth below was spent and withered, teeth showing through. The figure’s hands were long and skeletal, tipped with gray nails.

Other people were browsing. A pair of men he recognized from the alley, two women whispering over a row of knives with etched tangs, a boy trying to look older by touching everything and then pretending he hadn’t. The pair from outside paid and turned. Then they saw Torm.

“Holy drekk. What in Valdorin are you?” the taller man said, laughter already in his throat. “Pretty boy with a snowball for hair.”

“What are you? Human?” the other asked, too loudly. “Did someone drop you in milk?”

The women’s glances slid to Torm in little arcs and away again. It was the kind of attention that felt like being licked. Torm ignored the men and read the crab’s placard again, then crouched to watch the creature move. The karnalith’s legs shifted with patient articulation.

A good design.

“Oye,” the tall man said, stepping closer. “We’re talking to you, white hair.”

Torm only tilted his head, as if the crab might respond on his behalf.

“What are you? Some kind of offbreed? We should tell the soldiers there’s an Elf in town. They found another Elf earlier today.”

Torm sighed and stood. He didn’t turn.

“I said,” the man declared, louder, “you’re beneath—”

“Careful darling, I am clearly no Elf.” Torm said, glancing over his shoulder at last. He let his eyes touch the man’s face and then leave it. “Your next words might be your last useful ones.”

The women shifted, their admiration retreating into caution. Jealousy hardened on the men’s faces. Knives appeared, cheap steel, eager hands. “We’ll cut that gold diamond from your skull,” the short one said. “Sell it. Throw you to a chain-monger after. Make a day of it.” The room’s sound tightened like a wire drawn between stakes.

But the Torm they faced blurred as if heat had risen between them. Shapes wavered. The figure in front of them became a husk. They turned. Torm stood a pace behind their shoulders, blade held lightly, its edge resting against his fingertip as if he were tasting something sweet.

“Being a Phantommirith has its uses,” he said, smiling at the thought rather than at them.

“Aetherian?” one breathed, his mouth twitching.

“Yes darling,” Torm answered. “But I am also an Aeralynian. From Caelithar.” He let the names sit on the air like an answer to a riddle no one had asked. “In time, Valdorin will remember what they did.”

They didn’t understand. They didn’t understand what Torm meant, or who he was, nor the Aeralynian name he mentioned. Of course they didn’t. Men like this knew only what their fathers feared and what their mothers could not afford to tell them. They laughed anyway, the way people laugh when they have already decided to be right. “He dyed it,” one said. “The hair. The jewel’s pasted on. We’ll pry it off, make some crown, feed a family. Useful after all.”

Torm felt the rush shovel through his chest. He touched two fingers to his white hair, pushing it back. The movement made the women behind them draw a small breath. He obliged them with a glance and a grin, almost kind. He lifted the blade and drew his tongue slow along the flat. The taste was oil and iron and the memory of other rooms. “Blood today,” he murmured, almost thoughtfully. “On the table, at last.”

“You’re sick,” the tall man said, though his voice had shifted a note lower. “By Lu’s bones—”

But the curse didn’t finish.

A streak of blue fire cut across the room. The tall man didn’t have time to process it. One heartbeat too slow, and the edge of blue met his neck. The head slid off the body with an eerie smoothness, like ice cleaving from a

frozen pond. It fell to the floor with a dull thud, eyes still open in disbelief. Blood gushed from the severed stump in a thick, dark arc, pooling quickly in the dust and grime at his feet.

His companion stared in shock, frozen for a moment as his friend's body convulsed and collapsed. Crimson fountained across the wooden floor.

Then impulse overtook him. The man screamed.

Torm didn't even have to move fully. Because Torm was no longer there.

The man blinked.

And behind him—too late—another Torm stood, a perfect shadow.

The clone drove a sword straight through the man's back. The steel burst from his chest with a sound like tearing meat. The man gasped, mouth agape, eyes bulging, then went still, blood spilling in a thick stream down the blade.

His knees buckled.

The clone let him slide off the sword like discarded meat, and the body collapsed with a wet slap beside the first.

Only the blood moved now, crawling slowly toward the center of the room.

The women screamed; the boy fled; guests scrambled toward the door, tripping over each other's certainty that they did not want to be here anymore. Torm flicked his wrist, sending a few red drops from the edge in an arc, then wiped the blade against the dead man's coat before sliding it into his sheath. The hilt's small wings caught the light as the metal settled. He looked up as if only now remembering he was in a shop.

But the shopkeeper in white stood beside him without sound or interval, long hand extended. "Fifty crowns," it said, voice shaped like dry wood rubbed together. "For the inconvenience."

Torm turned and found himself studying the figure more closely. There was something familiar in the shape of it. Something wrong that stroked the underside of his instincts. He did not like feeling that way.

He smiled to hide it and placed two silver coins in the figure's palm. "Two silver crowns. For the cleaning," he said lightly. The hooded head inclined by a degree. The figure did not walk back to the counter so much as hovered there, the robe whispering across the floor. Torm did not move until the space between where it had been and where it was now felt safe again. Customers filtered slowly back, pretending they had never left.

Half did not return.

“What do you want?” the shopkeeper asked in the same dry voice, looking not at Torm but at the ledger before him.

“I was told you’d be here,” Torm said. “The one-eyed freak with the eyes. He said Marriott would know where to send me next.”

“The one-eyed freak,” the shopkeeper echoed, as if sampling the phrase. A pause. “Yes.”

Torm stepped closer. “I seek power,” he said simply. “Enough to get my justice. Enough to reclaim what was taken from me.”

The quill kept moving. Torm felt laughter rise and swallowed it. He turned away so he would not have to look at the back of the mask and the lack of movement. Armor. Masks. Bones. A row of skull-faced helms with Highmoor carven lines along the brow. He ran a finger over one and felt the old world there like a scar.

“I was told,” Torm said, patience thinning, “that you could help me reach it.”

The hood never dipped. “I am the ink that writes what will come. But now I write what has already happened,” the figure said. It lifted its head, revealing the dim Human black eyes in his skull sockets. “And you, Aeralynian, are the next chapter to be bound.”

The name slid under Torm’s skin. He did not move. “Speak plainly,” he said after a beat. “What can you offer?” The figure turned, not a step, just a change of orientation—and he faced a glass cabinet. Keys clicked in the lock. Long fingers reached inside and removed a necklace resting on a wooden neck-form. The figure returned and laid it on the counter.

Torm studied it, then the keeper. “Pretty,” he said. “But pointless.”

“This is no common trinket Aeralynian,” Marriott replied. “It opens the Varathel.”

Torm looked back at the chain. The pendant was unassuming, a dark-veined stone clasped in a loop of aged silver. “What is the Varathel?”

The figure extended an arm to a map pinned beneath the ledger, a parchment as old as the helms, corners torn and re-stitched. A finger touched the northwest coast of Eldoria, past Scone, at a place where the cartographer had drawn a storm and left a circle of white beyond it. “The storm is a door,” Marriott said. “This is the key.”

“You expect me to believe a necklace can get me through a winter storm of Sechera?” Torm said, amused. “I’ve seen a trick or two. I know the

difference.”

The figure said nothing. Torm reached for the pendant, more to prove the point than from desire to hold it.

Suddenly the world went thin.

Snow. Not falling—circling, drawn by a force that did not respect the rules of air. Mountains on either side, a corridor built from winter itself, the sky a mouth ringed with teeth. He stood at the throat of a cyclone and felt it notice him. Then a new room: a black tower’s heart, stone floor set in a circle, and on its center a black grail. Two handles. Three skulls worked into the rim.

Torm let go.

The pendant dropped.

His breath returned fast, and he caught himself with a palm on the counter.

“What is this?” he asked. The amusement had left his voice.

“The Noctivity Necklace,” Marriott said. “A gift from the sovereign.”

Torm’s grin returned, thin and mocking. “The Heliorens? Like Lu, Elmira and Oryneth? Them? You can’t be serious.” he laughed.

The figure recoiled, not physically, not moved, but the air around him tightened as if the names had weight. “No,” he said, voice roughened. “The true sovereign. The one who opens mortals’ eyes. Lord Zareth.”

The name dropped into the room like iron dropped into water. The sound of the shop changed. Even the arachnids seemed to still. The shopkeeper continued, each word behaved and careful. “Seven mortal sacrifices to awaken the grail. The liquid will run red. Power will answer. And you will become what you intend to become, and more than this kingdom is ready to survive.”

Torm felt the old thrill turn into focus. “That’s all?” he said lightly.

“No.” The word was flat.

Torm rolled his eyes and planted both hands on the counter. “Of course not. A trinket, a storm, a cup, and now a list. What next? Shall I dance for your amusement?”

“Sacrifice is the only crown power accepts,” Marriott said. “You must do this before the end of Tharndusk. After the twelfth month, ashes.”

Torm’s smile thinned. “So the grail expires? Generous indeed of Lord Zareth.” He tapped the wood. “And if I choose to disbelieve you?”

“Then disbelieve,” the keeper replied. “Those who disbelieve tend to be found by belief in the end.” The pen began moving again. “Use the grail. Harvest enough souls. Then the Oculis Vorum will reveal itself.”

“Oculis,” Torm repeated, tasting the syllables. “And what does that give me?”

“Direction,” Marriott said. “To what you truly seek. An army that will break this kingdom to splinters. The truth that will ruin the lie you were raised inside. The path to save what you most desire.” The words arrived in Torm’s chest like an impact.

“Is your ambition no longer to free your people, Aeralynian?” the keeper added mildly. “The ones trapped in Noctenheim?”

The room tilted. The leather of his sword grip creaked under his fingers. Metal kissed air in a short, precise sound as Torm drew his blade and leveled the point at the withered face beneath the mask. “By the neth’rose,” he said, and the humor had left him entirely, “say that again.”

“Did I touch a vein?” Marriott asked, dry amusement rippling under the monotone. Images burned through Torm’s head whether he invited them or not. Children with white hair and diamonds in their brows, hands tied, eyes wide. A chain ringed through a ceiling beam. Shadows with voices that laughed. The sound of his own breath made when it hit stone and came back weaker.

“Speak,” Torm said, blade steady.

“If you want to save the Aeralynian people and end the countries of Valdorin,” the keeper said, “you will do as you are told. Two to three village sacrifices should do the trick. But it must be in Eldoria, or it won’t happen. When enough souls have gone quiet, the Oculis Vorum will reveal itself within the grail. It will lead you to the army that answers only to the one who carries the mark.”

Torm blinked slowly. Then he sheathed his sword. “You could be lying,” he said.

“If I am, return the product.”

Torm almost laughed. It came out a sound that did not quite resemble laughter. “Why don’t you use it yourself?”

“We are not allowed,” Marriott said. “Only mortals untouched by the Nihilkins may handle what the Harbringers give.”

“What are you?” Torm asked, not expecting an answer and not getting one. A woman at his back pushed an insult through her patience. “Can you

hurry?” she said. “Some of us—”

Torm half-turned and moved his hand the way he might shoo a dog. The woman stepped back on instinct she would not be able to explain later. He reached for the necklace again and then he turned to leave.

“Payment,” Marriott said.

Torm looked over his shoulder, prepared to say no, to smile with all his teeth and leave the room before the word finished. He met the shopkeeper’s eyes, and something in him recoiled without his permission.

“Of course,” he said brightly. “How much?”

“Three hundred crowns.”

Torm’s jaw worked once before he let the smile widen. “Three hundred crowns for a piece of metal and a promise?” He put both hands on the counter and leaned in, as if looking under a lid. “I should gut you and wear your robe.”

“Then I misjudged,” the keeper said, hand raised in an aborted gesture. “I didn’t realize I was bartering with a peasant.” The word landed. The voice did not change. “The Aeralynian people have always believed themselves above others,” the keeper added. “It is almost endearing to see one needing crown in Eldoria.”

Something old and bright flared and cooled inside Torm so fast the skin on his arms prickled. He smiled until the muscles of his face felt like wire. “I am Aeralynian,” he said pleasantly. “From above, not below. Choose your words as if they had consequences.”

Marriott extended his hand, palm out. Torm stared at it for a heartbeat, then produced six gold coins and stacked them with a click. Each coin was worth fifty, and bore a winged serpent on one side and its coiled twin on the other. He watched Marriott gather them without satisfaction.

He turned to go.

“Wait,” the keeper said.

Torm’s head came around before the rest of him. “What?”

A long finger snapped. Pain kissed the side of Torm’s neck—a hot spider-bite, and then cooling. He reached up and felt skin. The small mirror on the counter caught his reflection: a black tattoo emblem now rested at the hinge of his jaw, a spider etched in clean lines, the center faintly luminous for a breath and then dull.

“What is this?” Torm asked evenly.

“If you mean to survive the army you will call,” the keeper said, “you will need that mark. Without it, you are as edible as any other leader.”

Torm touched the tattoo again, then let his hand fall. There was no point arguing with a thing that wrote in a ledger what it claimed had already happened.

The Harbringer’s words returned, unwelcomed and timely, as they always did. Bastion had appeared months ago, cloak covered in red eyes, a single larger one pulsing in the center. It had spoken Torm’s name as if it had invented it. “We have watched you. You are ready. Strong enough now. Eldoria will be the lid. We will show you the hinge.” Bastion said.

Torm had no love for being guided. He had less love for being ignored. He gathered the necklace and slipped it under his collar, the pendant cold against his throat. Then he paused at the threshold and looked back once. The arachnids were still. The nightwalker skeleton watched a point above his head as if awaiting instruction. Marriott’s quill scratched again, the sound tiny and final. He then climbed the steps down into the alley’s light and let the city swallow him again.

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8

THE BLACK KNIGHT

Dusrelon the 24th, Year 11,219 - Evening
(The tenth month)

RAIN HAMMERED ABBOTTSTOWN SO HARD THE MUD SEEMED TO BREATHE. Gutters coughed brown water. Boards swelled. Doors slammed in quick, guilty arcs as people fled for a roof that would protect them.

In the square, four wooden crosses stood like a crude compass, not the usual T-shape, but split at the top like the letter Y. Men were nailed to them at the wrists and feet, white robes plastered to the skin, their bodies stretched straight by iron and gravity. One last victim still lay at the carpenters' mercy. Soldiers in dark mail from Drakhar drove spikes through his hands with a laborer's rhythm while thunder rolled its slow reply.

"Mercy," the man begged, voice breaking. "DREKK! Sovereigns, please!!" The man cried. "I returned it," he howled. "I returned it all. Please."

The Drakhar men didn't look up. They spoke only to each other, quiet and bored, as they raised the fourth cross and wedged it into its socket. When the wood settled the man's scream flattened into a raw, steady noise. A woman in the crowd threw a stone and clipped his knee. He grunted and slumped against the cross with the other three men. Someone snorted approval.

"You ought not stare," a shopkeeper muttered to a boy.

“The man’s a thief,” the boy said, stubborn and thin. “They said he stole.”

“He screamed,” the shopkeeper answered. “That is all I heard.”

The soldiers marched away toward the taverns, boots shearing mud into ribbons. The alleys took the overflow. People clung to porches and eaves, heads angled, eyes lowered. Abbottstown had more wood than stone, more hush than law, and weather that chewed carefully on anyone who contradicted it.

Near the lane, a young blonde singer kept her chin tucked low as she hurried for home. Her braid was soaked through. Her shoes sank and lifted with wet sighs. The men shadowing her were already laughing. “Pretty lady,” one called, spreading his arms as if to embrace the rain. “Sing for us like you did earlier!”

“She’s got a voice like honey,” another said. “Come then. One song!”

She turned her head away and said nothing. Her silence should have been the end of it. But the men drifted across the road, four shapes shouldering through other bodies.

“At least smile you rauking fallow,” the square-headed one cursed. His jaw was wide and his teeth sat at odd angles. “You walk so cold.”

“I just want to go home Daryle,” she answered.

“We can help with that,” Daryle said, pleased by his own generosity. They herded her back against a shop beam. She pushed off it and found herself pressed harder.

“Leave me,” she said, louder now. Rain ran along her face in bright lines. “Please.”

“Easy,” Daryle murmured, smoothing his hand along her sleeve, then tugging it up to bare her arm. “Fine skin.”

“Stop,” she said, and slapped his mouth. Her hand stung. So did his pride.

“A lady never hits a man,” Daryle told her, touching his jaw. “Who taught you that?”

She tried to duck away along the beam. But he barred her with both arms and leaned in, breathing at her cheek.

“Give me a kiss,” he said.

“Do not,” she whispered to herself, but fear had already taken that choice. She pecked his cheek and backed off and he laughed and seized her

face with both hands and climbed her mouth with his. His friends cheered and reached to tug at her belt.

She drove her knee up and found his soft place. He folded with a wounded sound, then straightened with rage red in his eyes and punched her against the beam.

Her head rang. She stumbled into the mud on hands and knees. They kicked her, not hard enough to end it, just hard enough to lengthen it.

“By Lu’s bones,” one cursed, shaking muck from his boot.

“Help,” she cried, voice thin and wet. Passersby kept moving. A few watched with the helpless attention of people staring at lightning.

“Look away,” an old woman told her husband.

“I am,” he said, and stared anyway.

The square-headed man Daryle hauled the singer by her hair. She slid through the mud as he dragged her to the dark seam between buildings. “You’re mine,” he told her, breath sour and eager. “I own you now.”

“No,” she cried. It came out as a gasp. “Please no.”

They pinned her in the alley where the rain went from a sheet to a thread. The leader pressed her throat against the wood and smoothed her cheek again as if he were comforting her. “We’re going to have some fun.”

“Teach you to be friendly,” a friend added.



Boots squelched in the shadows. A shape came through the rain, slow and heavy, chain links speaking in short clinks at each step. The men turned their heads just enough to register a black figure closing the distance. A helmet with a horizontal black visor. White cords spilling from the crown like stiff hair. A torn cape dark as wet charcoal. Broad shoulders bore the weight of a massive greatsword strapped across his back, its blade longer than the knight was tall. The hilt arched like a falcon mid-dive, wings

spread in elegant, deadly symmetry. At his belt a crossbow hung beside a pouch, and from another ring dangled the head of an Elf, neat as a warning.

“Get lost,” one of the men said, never taking his hand from the singer’s arm. “Find your own alley!”

The figure said nothing. He went on walking. He passed them in three unbroken strides and continued toward the far end of the alley where a wanted notice had come half-unglued from the wood. Rain worried at its corners. He stopped and peeled it free with two gauntleted fingers. The drawing was clumsy but certain. The square-headed man’s face looked out from the paper with an old bruise under one eye. Five hundred crowns for Daryle Worelin.

The men laughed behind him, sloppy with triumph. “You heard me,” Daryle called, pressing his lips to the singer’s temple. “Keep moving.”

“Give Daryle another kiss,” one said to the girl, ugly with delight. “Then we’ll take turns passing her around.”

The black knight turned a fraction. He studied the paper for a breath more, then turned all the way and walked back to them.

“What now,” Daryle asked, tightening his grip on the girl, making sure she could feel his knife between them. “What? You want to have at her as well?” Daryle said as the men laughed.

The black knight lifted the paper to show the face and then lowered it to Daryle. “You,” he said. His voice was flat, iron on wet wood. “Five hundred.”

“What is that to you?” the leader answered, laughter flaring again. “Do you know who I am? A lord’s man. You lay a finger on me and you answer to Abbottstown’s Lord Kaegin.”

“Five hundred,” the knight repeated.

“Walk away,” Daryle said. “Take your dead Elf and your mood and walk away. I’m busy.”

The visor’s slit was perfect darkness. The man staring into it saw nothing. One of the thugs stepped up to push the knight back. But he might as well have shoved the post of a gate. His palms slid on cold metal. He stumbled. “Who in the neth’rose are you?” he demanded, cheeks flushing. “I have not seen you here before.”

The knight did not answer. The rain sounded louder in the pause he left. Swords hissed free. The three followers made a rough half-ring and pointed their short blades at center mass. People along the street edge had slowed in

the rain’s shelter to watch outside the alleyway without admitting they were watching. Snatches of dialogue passed like the rain itself.

“Is that a Drakhar knight?” someone whispered.

“I don’t know.”

“Who wears black like that? A Cree man?”

“A knight, not a Cree,” someone else muttered. “Look at the sword.”

“Look at the head,” another breathed. “He keeps trophies.”

The first man jabbed his point at the knight’s chest. The knight reached out, closed his gauntlet over the blade, and squeezed. Steel snapped in his fist with a sound like a twig. The man stared at the stump of his sword, blinked, and lunged anyway. The knight’s hand found the man’s throat. He pulled him close, almost gently, then drove his fingers in with calm force until the cartilage gave and the blood came fast and choking. The body dropped in the mud like a sack of wet grain.

“Holy rauk!!“ one of the men croaked.

“Drekk,” another cried. “What is he?”

“Just kill the wretchborn,” Daryle barked, panic sharpening his voice into something thin and brittle. The second thug roared and raised his blade overhead, swinging with blind fury rather than skill. He never brought it down. The knight stepped forward. His fist drove into the man’s face with a wet, crushing force. Teeth shattered and sprayed outward, white fragments slicked red as blood burst from the man’s mouth and nose. The skull flattened inward, caving beneath the blow.

The thug’s head snapped back unnaturally. He struck the wooden wall behind him with a dull, hollow crack, blood smearing the grain as his spine slackened. His eyes remained open, glassy and unfocused, his face gone.

The third man threw his sword at the knight, lost his nerve, and ran. While Daryle cursed him as a coward and yanked the singer tight, dagger flashing at her throat. She squeaked, still trying to breathe.

“You come any closer,” the leader warned, “I spill her.”

“Do it,” the knight said, and kept walking.

Daryle stared at him, but saw the truth there, and he shoved the girl aside. She fell and rolled, scrabbling to the wall. The man turned and ran, splashing, yelling for help into the rain. The knight drew the crossbow from his belt, set a short bolt from the thigh quiver to the groove with practiced care, winched once, steadied, and fired. The click was almost polite. The

bolt took the man clean through the back of the skull. The body ran two more steps on habit and collapsed face-first, arms hugging mud.

The alley went quiet except for the rain. The singer crouched with her back to the wall, arms wrapped around herself, trembling hard enough to shake her teeth. She started to say thank you and stopped when the visor turned toward her. He had walked past her once. He would have done it again. He had not come back for her.

He sheathed the crossbow and knelt by Daryle, drew a knife, and sawed with a firm economy at the neck. When the head came free he held it by the hair and rose. He walked by the girl without a glance, then out to the street where the porches were crowded with men and women who wanted not to be there but could not get themselves to leave.

“Who the drekk is that?” someone whispered.

“Hush.”

“Is that a Cree?” another asked, half excited and half afraid.

The knight ignored them. He crossed the street to a pub whose windows steamed and whose sign swung wildly in the wind. Men outside parted to let him through and then closed the space after him as if nothing had passed. Inside, voices snapped off, then came back as a low buzz. The knight scanned the room until he found a familiar shape in a corner booth. The broker was in his fifties, short, thick through the chest, gray side-burns set like bars along his jaw. He wore a trench jacket and the expression of a man who hated to see the exact person he had asked for.

“What do you want?” the broker asked, not bothering to hide his disgust.

The knight set the severed head on the table. The bolt still jutted from it at a neat angle. He placed the wanted notice beside it. The broker’s face flinched before he got it under control.

“Five hundred for Daryle Worelin,” the knight said.

“Hm…no one ever brought him in,” the broker replied, voice suddenly airy. “Lord Kaegin posted and forgot him.”

The knight unhooked the other trophy. The Elf’s head rolled until it rested facing the broker, eyes half closed as if bored.

“Loreign thief,” the knight said. “You posted it.”

“I am not paying for that Elf,” the broker said quickly.

The knight drew his knife and let it drop point-first into the table. The wood accepted it with a thick sound. He slid the rolled notice for the Elf

forward. “Pay.”

The broker leaned back, chair creaking, hands up. “No need for theater.”

“You will stop playing,” the knight said. “Or I will break every rauking bone in your body and toss you into the Wychpine Forest to see what the arachnids like.”

The broker swallowed. “Right. My apologies.” He fished a leather bag from inside his coat and shoved it across. The knight opened it and counted in silence.

“Short,” he said. “Five hundred for the bald man. Five hundred for the Elf. You paid four-fifty for the Elf and nothing for the man.”

“You should be glad to get anything,” the broker muttered. The knight’s hand moved. The knife lifted and fell, embedding through the top of the broker’s hand. The man hissed, then forced a grin for the room. “We are fine,” he called to the staring faces. “Just a misunderstanding.”

No one wanted to understand it better. The broker fumbled with his free hand and produced two silver and ten gold coins. The knight did not move the knife. “Another fifty crowns,” he said. “For the inconvenience.”

The broker glared, jaw tight, then added one more gold crown. The knight pulled the blade out and wiped it on the man’s sleeve.

“We are finished,” the knight said.

“Rauk you! Your loyalty is worth dirt,” the broker spat, clutching his hand.

The knight turned away. And then the door burst inward. Rain swept a wave of cold across the room. Drakhar soldiers entered in a tight wedge and the pub fell quiet again. A sergeant with a wet plume raised a scroll and read, voice trained to carry. “By order of King Magnus the Fifth of Drakhar,” he shouted, “we seek Cree for a royal commission. Torm Orwin, younger male, white skin, white hair, golden diamond set in his brow. Wanted for the murder of forty and more of Drakhar’s royal and noble servants. Heads taken on the roads between keeps. Witnesses report aetheris. Path: Strider. Class: Phantommirith. Believed to have gone south into Eldoria. We have no jurisdiction there. Dead preferred. Dead or alive accepted.”

“Forty?” someone whispered. “How?”

“Quiet,” another hissed.

“How much?” a voice called from the back.

“Fifteen thousand crowns,” the sergeant replied, and the sound of it changed the room. Conversations broke and reformed. Men stood. Tables shifted. The soldiers crossed to the posting wall near the hearth. One of them smoothed a new sheet up with both palms. The drawing was better than Abbottstown’s own scribe could manage. White hair. Set jaw. The diamond like a coin of sunlight in the skin.

When the soldiers were gone, the room exhaled and surged toward the board. The black knight approached at an angle and looked not only at the new face but at the older layers beneath it. Karnak stared back from one—a part of the Bakarin race—with green scales and a hood, eyes red under the cowl. Another was nothing but a name and a set of eyes beneath ash smudges from the hearth. He stopped at a page that had browned at the edges. White hair pushed back, skin pale, jaw strong. Silvanus, it read. Wanted by Belfour. Five thousand crowns.

“Silvanus,” someone said behind him, drawing closer to look. “You remember that?”

“Who does not,” a second answered. “Cut through a company after he murdered Princess Beth. Sister of King Althren.”

“That was thirty-eight years ago,” an older man ventured. “He is dust or a story now.”

“Why do they even have this wanted poster up anymore? The man is probably dead now.”

“Do you think the other white hair is like him?” a woman cut in, anxiety making her voice bright. “This Torm. With the diamond.”

“Forty royals,” a drinker muttered, already counting the crown in his head. “Fifteen thousand.”

One of the drinkers edged to the black knight’s elbow and stared at the Silvanus sheet with him. “You know him?” he asked, voice shaky with the courage it took to ask.

The knight’s gauntleted hand tightened on the paper. He stared until the lines blurred and steadied again. He exhaled through his nose, ripping the paper and dropping it, and said nothing.

“Neth’rose,” the knight murmured once to himself, so low it might have been only breath. Voices swelled around him, trading story for story, the names passing from mouth to mouth until they were warm and misshapen. The knight reached up and tore Torm Orwin’s notice from the wall.

“You cannot just take it,” the short man protested, then thought better of touching him.

“Leave it for the rest of us,” a Cree from the corner called. “Others need to know.”

The knight kept walking, the paper in his hand, the room peeling away to either side. He pushed through the pub’s heat into the wet and the cold and the watchful porches. Heads turned and then turned away.

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9

THE COUNCIL OF ELDORIA

Dusrelon the 25th, Year 11,219 - Morning
(The tenth month)

GOLD-TINTED PANES SOFTENED THE MORNING LIGHT INTO LONG, WARM BARS across the council table, and Aurora sat within them. Her tiara was set just so, her green dress arranged to fall in ordered lines. She had done prayers with her mother at first light and had not yet shaken the quiet those rituals left behind. The room smelled of beeswax and vellum and the faint metal tang of the window casements.

She watched the dust float in the light and let her mind slip, just for a heartbeat, to the memory that sometimes rescued her from these mornings. Four months ago: a courtyard dark with rain, and General Vince, the knight who never spoke more than needed. That brief, impossible charge in her blood. She could still feel it, the hush of a secret. She clasped her elbows and breathed in and out. Enough.

Footsteps came, and the mask of posture slipped over her again.

Her father entered first, all tired authority and the careless wave he gave his daughter when he wished to seem softer than he was. Behind him: Kael the Master of War, broad-shouldered and alert; Barnobus the Master of Ravens, tall and severe in his dark green; Tamber the Master of Guidance, cane in hand, eyes kind and worried; Arcius the Master of Crown, already smiling as if coin itself were a private joke; and Carter the Master of Law, the law’s edge, mouth set hard.

“Good morning,” Aurora said, bright enough to satisfy the room’s expectations. She glanced at Kael before anyone had settled fully. “Master of War, forgive me for asking before we begin, but how fare the northern squads?”

Kael paused at his chair. “Why does the princess ask so early?”

“I overheard General Ludwig, yesterday,” she said, smooth as she could make it. “He mentioned the situation up north. I wished to be prepared.” It was a lie, and it sat oddly in her mouth. But Vince’s name beat behind her ribs anyway.

“We will speak to it,” Kael said, uncertain and measuring. “It is on today’s docket.”

Aurora inclined her head, pretending that settled it. Ronan took the high chair at the head of the table, Aurora at his left. Sun made a thin crown along his dark hair as he laced his fingers and regarded his council. “News,” he said. “Begin.”

Kael rose half from his seat. “Drakhar’s units are pulling back from the Eldergrove Mountain pass. Belfour’s troops and our line held. We should consider a small trade concession to Drakhar to keep their captains from raiding the route to Belfour again.”

Ronan’s fingers flicked. “Drakhar just rattles for the sound of it. They aren’t actually hungry enough to bite, Kael.”

“Well in that case, Elandor’s Stonewatch remains secure,” Kael continued. “Scouts report Grimrave movement along the Stoawyk River by Skyplain Fields. Minor. Contained. General Vince’s column is due later this morning.” His voice stayed professional.

She contained the lift of her shoulders and made it careful, “That is good news. And the rest of the men?”

A brief stiffness crossed Kael’s face. “The majority return intact.”

Ronan nodded once, already moving on.

“Oh, and Ludwig’s cohort of Aetherians have entered first stage of training. Paths were chosen in the Chambers of Maelor yesterday. Prince Nere is progressing well I hear.”

Of course he is, Aurora thought. Outwardly she smiled the small courtly smile and breathed through the ache of envy. She would never begrudge Nere’s goodness, not truly. But the sovereigns had placed a torch in his palm and handed her a candle, then told her to make it blaze.

Carter cleared his throat. “If his majesty is pleased, crime has dipped in the low quarters. We have shuttered two dens and dismantled a ring.”

“That is welcome,” Aurora said.

But Carter’s gaze moved to her and away again, like a dagger tested against a thumb. “But there is another matter,” he went on. “A presence in the city that ought to be noted yesterday.”

“Yes, the Elf,” Aurora said, too quickly, grasping for the obvious thread.

But Carter’s eyes sharpened. “The Elf is accounted for, my lady,” he said. “I am speaking of someone else.” He leaned back, palms flat to either side, making space for the words. “Reports of a man with white hair and a gold diamond set in his brow. Little else. He walked through the mid-market toward the inner wards.”

Ronan’s attention fixed. “Did you arrest him?”

“No. He committed no wrong in my sight when I saw him. There were whispers of trouble in the lower alleys last night. Unconfirmed. Rumors that two men were murdered in a shop somewhere downtown. Witnesses who were not there say they heard from those who were. I presume it was the white-haired individual.” Carter said.

“Keep a lookout,” Ronan cut in, the casual tone stripped away. “And bring that man in if he is found. Dead or alive.”

Aurora turned to her father. “But why? We still don’t know if it was him. We should check the shop and check for evidence from witnesses. We should not drag travelers into the keep because they look unusual.”

Ronan’s jaw worked once. “If word is true, that man is a murderer in Drakhar. Dozens. Not random. Royals.” He looked at her directly. “Think of your cousins. Ellarie in Keensin. Maelyn. Rhiadel. Would you want a knife walking into their bedrooms because we were incurious?”

Ellarie’s name soured on Aurora’s tongue; Maelyn’s smug laughter brushed her ear as if the cousin stood at her shoulder. The shame rose immediately after. “No, father,” she said. “Of course not.”

Carter settled back as if he had been arranging this moment. “There is also the matter of the Lumanians,” he said. “Their people have been… forward. The city complains. They press in the streets. Arguments. Altercations. Lots of preaching.”

Tamber’s hand stilled on his cane. The soft sound of his breath was suddenly very present at Aurora’s left. He said nothing yet. Carter’s voice stayed measured, almost pleasant. “We cannot have a priest with a book

shouting down a baker at his stall. The Sovereigns of Light may be good to them, but our markets must open on time. This is a kingdom. Not a sermon."

Arcius rubbed at his trimmed beard as if coaxing coin from it. "I have observed the same," he said. "A certain…zeal in the corners. Rules spoken as if law."

Tamber lifted his head. "This is poor speech, and you know it. The faithful are told in the Solvaran to obey their rulers, unless asked to do what is wicked. They are taught to serve and to keep their hands clean. To pray for the king." His gaze moved to Aurora, then to Ronan. "You would silence the one voice in this city that still speaks of love and mercy?"

Carter smiled at him, but not kindly. "The one voice? It is not one, elder. It is a swarm."

Aurora saw where this was sliding. "If there are true abuses," she said, "we should correct them, lawfully, not broadly. It does us no honor to strike at the peaceful preachers with the guilty ones. And it turns them into martyrs in the alleys if anything."

"Princess," Carter said, "if the king makes a law that contradicts their book, your 'peaceful' will become less so. They have already said they answer to other rulers not of this world."

Arcius's eyes warmed with mischief. "To be fair, Elder Tamber did just say they would resist if asked to do what they call wicked. That is not strictly obedience."

Tamber's knuckles whitened against the cane. "You twist my words. That is not what I said."

Aurora leaned forward. "We can hold both of these truths. The city must be kept in order. The faithful must not be hounded into shadows for practicing their faith. We can draw the line forcefully in the streets. Arrest those who threaten or force. Leave the rest to worship."

Carter opened his mouth.

"Please, Carter," Aurora said, voice low now, the long fatigue of these arguments dragging at her. "We all know you would prefer Lumanity erased. There is no need to dress it with finer language every week."

"Aurora," Ronan snapped, not loudly, but the room leaned from the sound. She dropped her gaze.

Ronan exhaled, long. "I will have order in this city. Carter, draft a measure to curb public accosting. Quietly identify and remove the loudest

agitators to the dungeons. No grand displays. If they raise hands, answer. Otherwise, restraint.” He turned to his daughter, and for a breath there was a father in his face instead of a king. “And no, you are not poison, nor is Tamber. But I will not have this kingdom driven by a pulpit.”

Only the scratch of Carter’s quill moved in the silence. Aurora stared at her folded hands until the heat at the corners of her eyes receded. There were fights to pick and fights to plan. This one she would plan. Aurora drew a steadying breath. “Khazadryn, then. The armories.”

Barnobus straightened, pleased to be summoned to his purpose. “Ravens have flown, my lady. We have requested more steel, more plates, a fresh run of mass blades. Bork is already at work in the camp for immediate needs. From the provinces: grain from Scone for the flood relief in Keensin.”

“Good,” Aurora said.

Arcius cleared his throat. “Before we grow too fond of wins, the numbers.” He laid a thin stack of pages on the table and touched the topmost with two fingers. “We are six million crowns in debt, majesty.”

Color left Ronan’s face as if drawn out by string. “What?”

Arcius did not flinch. “Four for the Belfour–Drakhar campaign. One for Keensin’s floods. One for the army’s rebuild and the border security edicts. The shift has taken place over the last two to three months.” He kept his voice gentle, which did not help.

Aurora felt her stomach drop, then steady. “You are sure?”

“As sure as the ledger,” Arcius said. “I have the itemization.”

Ronan’s eyes closed for a moment. “Why am I hearing this now?”

“I have tried,” Arcius said, and for once the glibness was gone. “You have been on the lines my lord. The rest of us were keeping the roof from leaking. We ran out of buckets.”

“Options?” Ronan said.

Arcius spread his hands. “Raise taxes further, sell parcels, land, or devalue the crown. None are painless, my lord. All will make enemies. Besides, we already have louder foes.”

Kael gave a short, humorless huff. “Sell land, and invite Grimrave to our gates?”

Aurora rubbed at her temple. “Skyplain Fields. If we had to cede for crown, we could cede to a friend—keep a foothold in the open fields of the north past the Noradic Mountains.”

Kael tilted his head, considering. “Bringing Belfour closer is leverage.”

Carter set his jaw. “Or invite them to squat. We should just start another war.”

Tamber let his cane touch the floor twice, a small knock. “War unravels what it stitches. We cannot keep telling others we are a people of peace, then choose the sword because it is expedient.”

“Elder,” Carter said, “we are speaking of collapse. If we press taxes, the streets will boil. If our neighbors scent blood, they will come. Grimrave believes this land is theirs by the bones of their faith in their sovereign, Gordu. Serakos would like our river mouths. Drakhar likes crown and pretext both.”

Kael nodded. “The lawman is, regrettably, not wrong. The crowds grumble. They will not carry this weight forever.”

Aurora listened, watched their faces arrange themselves into the same tired arguments they loved. She let the pieces move in her head and turned one of them another way. “Then we should strike where our blow will actually mean something,” she said. “Grimrave is the constant instigator of our kingdom. Belfour already stands beside us. Drakhar is neither friend nor foe by nature, only by appetite. We should feed that appetite. Buy a season. A coalition against Grimrave makes sense. Offer Drakhar trade, crown, some theater to soothe their pride. Point them at the real enemy.”

The room paused. Ronan’s mouth curved, it was genuine.

Kael’s gaze flicked across the table. “It is not mad,” he said. “It may be our best shape. The people want a banner to rally under. Give them the right enemy.”

Carter rubbed his brow. “And you will charm Drakhar to our side, how exactly? Yesterday they were our foes. Tomorrow our companions? This will not go well.”

“With promises we intend to keep for as long as they are useful,” Arcius murmured.

Ronan lifted a hand, already leaning into the path. “Draft it,” he told Kael. “Barnobus, be ready to send ravens, to test Drakhar’s mood. We will wait for Belfour’s delegation today.”

Aurora blinked. “Belfour is coming?”

Ronan nodded. “Yes. We will discuss such matters later. We will ask them to make a great show of disliking Drakhar less than they loathe Grimrave.”

Kael slid a scroll forward; Ronan stamped it with the seal, signed with a quick, decisive hand. Decisions felt like air after the weight of debt. As chairs scraped and men stood, Arcius paused by Aurora and dipped his head. “Wisdom, princess. I look forward to more of it.” For once, the compliments did not feel sharpened. He left with a swish of robes and the satisfied gait of a man who had placed a wager on the house and won this morning.

Carter did not look at her at all. He gathered his papers in even stacks and left in a low current of irritation. Barnobus moved to Ronan’s side, speaking low about ravens and wording. They left together, the king’s hand already sketching terms in the air. Tamber remained seated, gaze fixed on the far windows. Aurora hesitated. “Elder,” she said. “I am sorry.”

He did not look at her when he answered. “Faith that fears the dungeon is not faith that will last long. Work with your father where you can, and where you cannot, we must keep the doors open in our hearts. The Sovereigns of Light see farther than the throne and understand what must be done. Even…when it is hard to do.”

She nodded, throat tight. “Yes, I know.”

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10

THE WINDOW OVER THE SEA

AURORA'S BLACK HAIR SPILLED OVER HER SHOULDERS LIKE INK. EACH careful step down the curved stair echoed faintly, a soft rhythm. She was still thinking of the council meeting, her father's decree, the strange, unspoken weight that followed when he'd mentioned Belfour's coming arrival. Could it truly be just another political visit? A trade arrangement? Or something more personal, something she had not yet been told? Aurora pressed her hands together as she walked, the cool air brushing her dress as she moved through the corridor below.

The green carpets stretched the length of the hall, muffling her steps. Today would not offer rest. The castle was stirring again for its weekly banquet, a lunch for nobles and their families, full of velvet, perfume, and gossip.

Aurora dreaded it.

She could already picture the familiar faces, the cluster of women who came only to flaunt, to whisper about the latest scandal, or to discuss which men were competing for whose favor. And the men, half of them drunk before midday, the other half pretending not to be. They would all try to charm her for what she represented. She could almost hear them already—laughter a little too loud.

Her father called them suitors. Most were cousins or distant kin matches made for name and lineage, not love.

Aurora sighed and continued on, shoulders squared, readying herself for another day of performance. A door creaked open along the corridor, and

out stepped an older woman, stooped but sharp-eyed, Puruna, her attendant and oldest confidante.

“Ah, there you are, my lady,” Puruna said, smiling faintly. “How went the council meeting this morning?”

Aurora’s sigh was immediate. “Apparently, Tamber and I are poison to society.”

Puruna blinked. “Poison?”

Aurora waved her hand dismissively. “Not his exact words, but close enough. Father didn’t mean it toward me directly, I think. He just—” She hesitated, choosing her tone. “He’s convinced that Lumanity is becoming weathered. That faith will make us weak. He believes culture itself is shifting, and that clinging to the old ways will ruin us.”

Puruna frowned, her lined face deepening with concern. “He may not be wrong, my lady. But what do you believe?”

Aurora’s lips thinned. “I don’t know Puruna. Carter and Arcius cornered him on it, they practically forced his hand. He’s going to slowly push Lumanity out of the capital first…then, I suspect, the whole country. Eventually.”

Puruna’s shoulders sagged. “Oh, I see.”

“Perhaps,” Aurora said softly. “Perhaps Carter is right. I’ve never left these walls. How should I know what the people truly want?”

Puruna’s tone softened. “I believe you know more than you think, my dear. Without faith, this kingdom loses its compass.”

Aurora gave a small, thoughtful nod. “Maybe this is just a test of faith,” she said, more to herself than to Puruna.

The older woman smiled faintly. “Then let us pass this test, no matter what the others choose.”

They continued down the long hallway. Maids swept floors and polished the tall windows, stopping to bow deeply as Aurora passed. She returned each with a gentle smile—courteous, but distracted. At the end of the hall stood a great oaken door, carved with the image of a tree whose branches spiraled into a sun. Two guards flanked it, motionless.

“When does the banquet begin?” Puruna asked, eyeing the soldiers.

“Not until noon,” Aurora replied. “I have a few hours yet.”

“That is good. Time to think and breathe.”

The guards opened the doors, and Aurora stepped through. The library greeted her. Towering shelves lined the walls, their wooden spines

stretching to the high ceiling. In the center of the room lay a large circular carpet, couches and desks arranged neatly upon it. At the far wall, an enormous window opened over the southern cliffs with a balcony outside—spilling daylight into the room and revealing the blue sea of the Luvarian Expanse.

Puruna turned to the guards. “Go on,” she said kindly. “I’ll see to her here.” The soldiers bowed and departed, closing the doors behind them with a low thud.

Aurora sank into one of the sofas, her posture immediately collapsing. She draped her arm along the rest and let her head fall back with a groan. “If I have to smile one more time today, I’ll melt,” she muttered.

Puruna laughed, easing herself into a chair beside her. “A very un-lady-like sentiment, your highness.”

Aurora tilted her head and smiled weakly. “This and my bedroom are the places I can breathe.”

“Your mother only means well,” Puruna said, though even she sounded unconvinced.

Aurora let out another laugh. “My mother has never truly smiled in her life, I swear it. The banquets are dreadful, the men insufferable, and the women—” She exhaled sharply. “They care more for dresses and rumors than for sense. No one reads, no one listens.”

Puruna chuckled softly. “I still read, if that counts for anything.”

“That doesn’t count,” Aurora said with a small grin.

“Books are the one thing that slows time down,” Puruna added. “Reading makes me live more quietly.”

Aurora nodded, half-smiling. “I wish more people felt that way.”

Puruna’s eyes gleamed. “And yet, you sound like someone who’s found another reason to be distracted lately.”

Aurora frowned faintly. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, only that your mind seems elsewhere. Perhaps on a certain general?”

Aurora’s composure cracked. “Puruna!” she hissed, blushing as she leaned forward.

The old woman only laughed, clapping her hands. “I knew it. You needn’t deny it, dear. I’ve known for quite some time.”

Aurora covered her face. “How long?”

Puruna smiled. “Long enough.”

“This is humiliating,” Aurora groaned. “Even if I were interested, what am I supposed to do? Tell him? My father would have me hung from the hippogriff pens or tossed into the sea for a leviathan to eat.”

Puruna laughed again. “A dramatic fate for a confession. My dear, when I was young, I asked my lover to court me myself. Our families despised each other, but that didn’t stop me from dragging him onto the dance floor. One waltz was all it took.”

Aurora blinked at her. “You make it sound simple.”

“It wasn’t,” Puruna said fondly. “We nearly caused a war.”

Aurora smiled despite herself. “Then you see my problem.”

Puruna rose, glancing out the window towards the sea. “And yet, even impossible things begin with a little courage, princess.” She adjusted her shawl. “I’ll give you peace for a while.”

Aurora frowned. “Leaving already?”

“Only for a bit, need to…stretch my legs,” Puruna said, waving her hand. “Try not to overthink.”

With that, she slipped through the door and closed it gently behind her, leaving Aurora alone with the soft hum of the sea breeze.



An hour had passed since Puruna left. The silence of the library had settled thick around her, like wool. Aurora had lingered in the same narrow aisle for too long, pretending to study the worn spines of volumes she’d seen a hundred times before. The scent of old parchment and binding glue clung to the air, mingling with the colder trace of stone beneath her feet. She wandered toward the back shelves, where fewer hands reached. Her fingers drifted along the books as if by habit, grazing cracked leather and fraying cloth. Then one caught her attention, not for its cover, but for its name. Lovers in the Garden, by Shaffer Dean. The gold lettering was almost rubbed away.

“Interesting,” she murmured, her voice barely breaking the hush. A flicker of dry amusement crossed her lips. She returned to the couch, the one with the sag in its middle and the cushion that always held warmth. Laying back, she let her hair spill freely over the side. The light filtering through the high stained windows had softened into gold. The first few pages turned easily. A woman leaves home to find herself, no quests, no kingdoms. Just soil, silence, and uncertainty. Aurora smiled faintly. “This author knows too much,” she chuckled under her breath, almost as if she were afraid the book might hear her.

She read on, and the weight in her chest lightened by imperceptible degrees. The rhythm of the story steadied her pulse, drew her down and away from the world outside the library’s doors. For a while, there were no alliances, no expectations, no echo of Puruna’s departure. Just two imagined hands brushing together and the small impossible wish that someone might wait for her there.

But then came the sound of a door opening, only halfway, cautious. Voices followed.

“Go on,” Puruna’s voice whispered. “Inside, boy. Inside!”

Aurora sat up, startled, just as someone stumbled through.

It was him.

General Vince.

Aurora froze mid-breath. The book slid from her hand and thudded to the carpet. In her flustered scramble to rise, she tripped against the sofa, hit her shin on the table, and nearly fell again. Vince straightened, equally embarrassed. “Your highness! Forgive me—I didn’t realize anyone was here.”

Aurora tried to stand upright, smoothing her hair, face burning. “General Vince,” she said quickly, her hands clasping together. “What… what can I do for you?”

“I—” he glanced toward the door, his tone uncertain. “Actually, I’m not entirely sure myself.”

She followed his gaze. The door was closed again. Puruna had vanished. Aurora sighed inwardly. Of course she did. Vince shifted, his robes glinting in the sunlight.

Then, to fill the quiet, he walked past toward the massive window in the back of the room. “Beautiful view,” he said softly. “Seems like a good place to write.”

Aurora blinked. “Write?”

He looked back at her. “You read so much, I assumed you might try writing yourself.”

She hesitated, brushing her fingers through her hair. “I used to,” she admitted. “But it always felt foolish. Writing things I’d never show anyone.”

“Not foolish,” he said. “Private things…are often the truest.”

She smiled faintly. “Do you write?” she asked.

“Well…yes…poems. Some poems.”

Her brow lifted. “Poems?”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “They’re honestly just terrible ones. I’d rather face a sword than read one aloud to anyone.”

Aurora laughed lightly. “I doubt that.”

“Then I’ll let you keep your illusions,” he said, and smiled—a real smile, small and unguarded. He glanced down at the book she had dropped. “Lovers in the Garden?”

Aurora’s cheeks warmed again. “It was just lying there,” she said quickly.

He chuckled. “That’s what books do.” He reached for it. “May I?”

She nodded, and he picked it up, running his thumb along the spine. When he handed it back, their fingers brushed, but neither pulled away.

Her pulse jumped. “It’s…interesting,” she managed.

“Your highness…” he began, then stopped.

“Aurora,” she corrected quietly.

He looked at her, the name soft on his tongue. “Aurora.”

Silence.

“I promise,” he said at last, “I didn’t know you’d be here.”

“Of course not,” she murmured. “That would’ve ruined the plan.”

He laughed under his breath. “Puruna told me she had rare books and tea waiting. Then shoved me inside before I could argue.”

“Sounds like her,” Aurora said, crossing her arms. “She told me she needed to stretch her legs.”

“She’s not stretching anything,” Vince said, glancing toward the door. “I can feel her standing there.”

Aurora smiled. “She’s guarding the entrance.”

“Or matchmaking.”

“Both, probably.”

“Unforgivable,” he said with mock gravity. “Trapping two unsuspecting souls in a library with nothing but an ocean view and polite conversation.”

“Cruel indeed,” Aurora replied. “We may never recover.”

He grinned.

Her laugh broke softly between them. He shifted, his shoulder brushing hers as he turned slightly toward the window. Then, quieter, “Truthfully, I think she knew I wanted to see you.”

Aurora’s breath halted.

“And I wouldn’t have said so myself,” he added.

She turned her head, eyes fixed on him. “Why not?”

“Because I wasn’t sure if you wanted to see me.”

Her heart clenched at the honesty in his tone. “It’s been four months,” she said quietly.

“I know,” he replied. “A hundred and twenty days.”

“And now you’re back.”

“For now.”

“For how long?”

“Until they send me out again. Could be tomorrow.”

Aurora nodded slowly, the air thick between them. Neither looked away from the window, but they both felt the nearness. Then came the sound of the latch. The door opened, and Puruna’s calm, firm voice cut through the stillness. “Your highness, it’s time.”

Vince stepped back immediately, clearing his throat. Aurora turned, mask sliding back into place.

“Thank you for the company, general,” she said, her voice even.

“The pleasure was mine, princess,” he answered, bowing slightly.

Puruna stood aside as Aurora walked past, giving Vince a single dry, knowing glance. “Come, child. If we’re late, your cousin Ellarie will have half the table whispering before the bread is even broken.”

Aurora followed her into the corridor. The door shut softly behind them. After several paces, she gave Puruna a sidelong look. “You wicked, meddling woman. You planned that.”

“Of course I did,” Puruna said without missing a step. “You both needed it.”

Aurora sighed, though a smile crept onto her lips. “You’re irredeemable.”

“Yes,” Puruna said. “And you didn’t stop me.”

They reached the corner of the hall, sunlight streaming through the tall windows. Aurora hesitated, looking back once toward the closed library doors.

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11

QUIET BEFORE THE FIRE

MATTHEW SAT HUNCHED AT A LONG TRESTLE TABLE IN THE TOWN HALL, elbows on the scarred plank, breakfast cooling in front of him. Tin plates clinked, spoons scraped bowls, men laughed too loudly at nothing. The smell was broth, wet wool, and smoke. Overhead, iron chandeliers swung a little in the draft, their chains ticking. He wasn't tasting any of it. His mind kept circling the same ground: aetheris, paths, classes, Strider, Stormblade. Yesterday he'd gone under in the Chambers of Maelor with the others, breath slow, thoughts empty as Ludwig had said, then that thing had looked back at him from the dark between thoughts.

The dog.

Too large, head too heavy for its body, eyes wrong. He could still hear its breathing scraping the silence of the aetheris realm. "You woke me," it said.

And later, as the others stirred from meditation and the stone under him came back into feeling, Zeen had told him his left hand had gone black with fire, the flame twisting up his forearm like something alive. Three hours under instead of two.

Matthew flexed his left hand under the table now. Warmth moved there. Nothing showed on his skin. No soot, no blister, only the memory.

"What do you want with me?" Matthew whispered to himself. "What are you?"

He rolled his shoulders; pain lit along the blades and down into the hips. Sword work had sounded romantic when Greg told stories on quiet nights

when Matthew was young. But after that duel with Greg, and now, after the army's training here. Practice meant sore feet, hot lungs, and a dozen small humiliations. He wasn't terrible. He could keep a guard and step without tripping himself, but as soon as swords met, he was always a second behind. The prince, Nere, moved like water. Iris, that dark-haired girl with the quick mouth, was nearly as fast. Ludwig had reminded them, again and again, that aetheris or none, tired bodies lost fights; that the power ran dry; that if you leaned on aetheris too long you'd empty yourself and be a corpse before your enemy touched you. Someone—of course it had been Iris—had said, very primly, that "breathstones replenish spent aetheris."

Ludwig had grunted. "You're not wrong," he admitted, "but you shouldn't count on it."

Matthew remembered him stalking along the training line yesterday, explaining that breathstones are scattered across Korineth. If you find one around, that's luck, not strategy. And that you won't have time to go looking for them.

But then Ludwig doubled the footwork drills, and by the end, half the recruits were lying on the ground. Matthew let out a breath and looked at the food he hadn't touched. He forced himself to lower his head and pray the way he'd been taught at home, hands folded, eyes closed.

"Sovereigns of Light…please. Guide me. Look after them. Elara, Finn, Greg, Azeel, and the rest of the crew. And my family. Please, I beg you." His voice was a rasp. "Look after Elara and Finn. I don't know what I'm doing. I don't even know where I am. Show me a way. Any way to escape this kingdom and reach them. I'll take it."

He paused, the words hanging there, thin as smoke. He believed, he did, but doubt kept slipping its fingers inside him. If the sovereigns heard, would they answer an Elf lost among enemies? Would they answer someone who asked only when he was terrified? Matthew opened his eyes. The ache in his chest hadn't softened. He wiped his palms on his tunic and reached for the stew. Boot soles thumped onto the bench in front of him and a shadow fell across the table.

A girl perched on the far edge of the tabletop, brown boots on the plank, hands braced behind her, dark curls spilling over one shoulder. Black eyes, sharp. A slight, satisfied smirk. "So you are Lumanian, then," she said. "Huh, Elf?"

Matthew blinked at her. He'd been so buried in his head that her voice sounded too close. It was that girl from before, Iris. "Something I try to be," he said. "Is that a problem?"

"For some," she said lightly. "Not for me."

"You're Lumanian?"

She snorted. "No, never. Not as the churches here practice it. Too much man dressing himself up as the sovereigns. Legalism is everywhere in these churches. Don't get the wrong idea. I'm not spitting at faith. It's sweet-faced, believing in something. I just think the whole religion is legalistic."

"Well, where I'm from," he said carefully, "we try to stay close to what the Solvaran actually says."

"Well, where you're from isn't here—and I would be careful about what you believe, in your book. After all, it was written by mortals," she said, and for a breath, the smirk relented into something like curiosity. "Iris by the way," she added. "From Rohland. North beyond Frostveil Mountains. Bored out of my skull there, so when I found out I was gifted with aetheris, I did the sensible thing and joined the army. Aetherians get better rooms than the rest of folks."

She tipped her chin at his plate. "But you should eat Elf. You look terrible."

He took the hint, tore a piece of turkey from the bone. She watched him a beat longer, then, "So what's an Elf doing in Eldoria anyway? Shouldn't you be out in Valdorin snatching children with your cousins, or hiding in a forest plotting the end of the world?" The sentence was airy, but her eyes were measuring.

"We don't do that where I'm from," he said. "I grew up on an island. Liora."

"Never heard of it," she said, almost pleased. "What kind of place is it?"

He hadn't let himself look at it in his mind since the night on the docks, when he left home. And when the memory came now, the picture came slow. "Quiet," he said. "My home has cliffs where the sea breeze tears at you and you still don't want to leave. Mornings when the sea and the sky are the same color and you can't tell where one ends. Just an endless sea with no islands in sight." He stopped, aware he'd said too much. "Honestly, I haven't really thought about it until I left. It's…home."

Iris tilted her head, rolling her eyes. "Drekk. That's very poetic, but not my place. I enjoy trouble." She slid off the table, boots hitting the floor.

“Also, you should come sit with the rest of us, Elf. It’s rude not to eat with your squadron.”

At the windows, the Aetherian table was a small island, Zeen, shoulders relaxed, gaze quiet; Shil, hair in a severe knot, arms folded; Baron, thirty-something and affable, laughing with the young soldier Pete who placed the aetheris lock on Matthew yesterday, and who also looked twelve when he grinned. Eero, sharp-eyed, wearing his arrogance like a ring; and Iris slipping into her seat, already talking.

Nere wasn’t among them. For all Matthew knew, the prince had been up since dawn running drills or hearing three different briefings at once. It hardly mattered.

“What’s an Elf doing in Eldoria?” a voice called from another table.

Laughter sparked.

“Why’s the knife-ear eating our bread? Little drekk.”

Matthew kept his eyes on his plate. It never worked, ignoring men like that, but sometimes it made them bored faster. Boots scuffed. Four soldiers drifted up and around him. One plucked a turkey leg off his plate without looking at him and tore into it. Another tipped his bowl with a knuckle. The stew slapped the floor. “You want him gone, boys?” the one with the square jaw said, grinning. “Ship him back to Loreign or Sharlenten. They like ’em proud there. Or just cut him up and send the ears. Save the Elven leaders the tax.”

Matthew stood. He didn’t push the table back. He didn’t move fast. He just stood, heat rising in his chest.

“Looks like the Elf got some spine,” the man said, pleased. He leaned close, hands on hips, breath beer-sour. “Tell me, Elf. Why are the generals keeping you alive? Why are we feeding vermin like you instead of our own folks?”

“Enough.” The voice was quiet and carried. The soldiers turned as one, Matthew did too. Nere Darkmore was three steps away, hands loose at his sides, face unreadable. He didn’t raise his voice; he didn’t need to. The men bowed without thinking. So did Matthew.

“We were only—” the square-jawed one began.

“Elf,” Nere said evenly, eyes moving to him and holding. “Why aren’t you at your table?”

Matthew found himself picking up his cup and what remained of his plate and moving without arguing. He could feel the men bristle behind

him.

Zeen was hunched slightly over his plate, tearing bread in half. The seat beside him was empty, so Matthew took it. He could feel the quiet looks from the others at nearby tables. Zeen didn't look at him right away. He just spoke, voice low.

"I wouldn't worry about them. All talk. That's all."

Matthew kept his eyes on the wall opposite. "What's a nantherwin?" he asked, repeating the word he'd heard Eero spit yesterday.

Zeen gave a half-smile. "A slur. A curse for dark-skinned folk like me. You and they would be norwiches." He shrugged and whispered, "You get used to it."

"Oh…" Matthew hesitated.

"Don't waste pity on it," Zeen said, tearing another piece of bread. "You get used to being what people already decided you are." Zeen's tone softened slightly. "Listen Matthew, you've got it worse. You're an Elf for Oryneth's sake. Don't take my problems too."

But then Matthew finally asked, "But why exactly do they hate Elves so much?"

Zeen leaned back, glancing toward a group across the hall and then leaned close, speaking in a whisper. "Because most Elves in Valdorin act like they are the sovereigns of the world. They take what they want and never apologize for it. That's the story everyone's been told. People think Elves are demons. Most Elves in Valdorin are apparently very territorial. The ones here never leave their kingdoms. That is why everyone is shocked to see you and already have a bone to pick." He met Matthew's eyes briefly. "You say your people aren't like that? That's great. Keep saying it. But don't expect anyone to actually listen."

"Where I'm from—"

"I know," Zeen cut in, not harshly. "You're different. I believe you." He took a sip of water. "Just don't think that makes a difference to them."

Across the table, Iris leaned forward, resting her chin in her hand. Her eyes narrowed with a kind of distant calculation. "If you're keeping a list of Elves to actually worry about," she said, "I would start with the worst of the worst, the Queen of Sharlenten. Strongest Aetherian anyone's ever seen. No one knows what kind of power she's using. Her aetheris doesn't…quite match. Not even close." She shook her head once, slow. "Some say she's

not Aetherian at all. That she's something else entirely. A sovereign in mortal form."

Zeen gave her a look. "Probably just stories."

"Not stories," Iris said. "Records. According to those stories, Highmoor's best Aetherians tried to fight her once. She nearly killed them all. And currently, Gornhelm is at war with Sharlenten."

Baron—older, scarred, and all lines of suspicion—glared at Matthew as he reached inside his coat with deliberate slowness. Baron's smile faded. "I don't care what the records say about a varn Elven woman. Why are we housing an Elf in our kingdom?" he demanded, his voice rough.

The others around the table looked at Matthew with the same thinly veiled hate, eyes narrow, jaws tight.

Matthew's pulse thudded, but before he could answer, Iris cut through the tension. "I don't know if he's evil like the other Elves," Iris said, leaning forward just enough to be seen, though her voice carried a half-amused edge. "But let's not pretend we don't kill our own by mistake. If he's a traitor? We will kill him."

Pete, the younger soldier with eyes darting like a startled bird, spoke up, curiosity turning swiftly toward accusation. "But why is General Ludwig even accepting him in the first place?" Pete asked, voice louder. "What good is he? And what about that black flame of his? Is that some sort of ancient power from the Elves? Some secret aetheris he's going to use to secretly kill us all? Are the generals mad?"

A silence hit the table.

Matthew drew in a breath, trying to steady his voice. "I'm not here to hurt anyone," he said firmly. "That's not who I am. I don't know why I have the black flame. I've told everyone, many times—I'm not from here. I don't understand it any more than you do. I just want to save my siblings and go home."

Zeen stayed quiet, eyes down, shoulders tense.

Then Eero spoke, slow and serious, like he was weighing every word before it left his mouth. "If I tell my father about this," he said, gaze flicking between Matthew and the others, "my father will take it straight to King Ronan. And if King Ronan hears there's an Elf with an unknown flame walking free among us…"

The eyes of everyone at the table remained on Matthew.

Matthew didn’t answer. He didn’t know what to say. The weight of how different this world was pressed down on him again. Liora had been simple, quiet. Here, everything was drawn by lines, skin, faith, money, or borders.

But a moment later, a shadow fell across the table. A wooden bowl hit the wood beside Matthew, full of meat. Another bowl followed—bread and stew.

It was Nere. He stood tall and calm, eyes sharp and unreadable. “Eat Elf,” he said. “You’ll be useless by this afternoon if you don’t.”

Matthew hesitated. “I’m fine.”

“Eat.” Nere slid the bowl closer. His voice wasn’t harsh, but it left no room for argument. Matthew nodded, murmuring a thanks and taking a piece of bread.

Eero leaned back. “By the neth’rose Nere, we’re spoon-feeding them now? If my father hears—”

Nere didn’t look at him. “Your father isn’t here, cousin. Kael and Ludwig made their choice. I trust them. He’s one of us now whether you like it or not.”

Eero opened his mouth to reply, but Nere turned his head slightly, just enough for the look to stop him. Eero shut his mouth and went back to his meal. Nere took a single sip from his cup before speaking again. “If you can’t stand with the person beside you, you’ll die in the field,” he said evenly. “Doesn’t matter if he’s an Elf, Dwarf, or Human. If he fights for Eldoria, he’s ours.” He gave them a moment to think before continuing. “Morning drills and aetheris training. Ludwig will be showing each of you your first technique tied to your paths. Keep steady, don’t burn yourselves out. This afternoon, we’ll be doing unit exercises, shields and swords, then we go back into the chambers.” But Nere was cut short when the doors to the hall swung open. The noise in the room thinned on its own. A figure stepped in, feathers bright white under the morning light, eyes gold and unblinking.

General Ludwig.

He scanned the room quickly. His eyes found Matthew at once. “Elf,” Ludwig said. He didn’t raise his voice, but the sound carried. “With me.”

Every conversation at the table stalled. Zeen made a face around a mouthful of bread. “Well,” he muttered, “guess breakfast’s over.”

Eero’s smile turned thin. “So much for being part of the unit. Maybe the generals finally came to their senses and will hang the varn Elf.”

Nere didn’t look up. “Go,” he said simply, and returned to his food.

Matthew’s stomach twisted. He stood, wiped his hands on his tunic, and walked through the lines of tables toward Ludwig. He could feel the eyes following him. The same soldiers from before whispered to each other.

Ludwig looked at them once. That was enough to stop the whispers. “Walk,” the general said when Matthew reached him.

Matthew followed him out into the camp. The air was cool and clear, touched with approaching frost. Beyond the walls, the rhythmic strikes of training weapons rang like distant judgment, punctuated by the rare, echoing cry of a hippogriff circling far above.

He didn’t ask what this was about. He kept his head high, matching Ludwig’s long, unrelenting stride.

What’s changed?

Had the generals made their decision? Had they met behind closed doors? Had they finally agreed that he wasn’t worth the risk?

Execution? Slavery?

His stomach tightened, refusing breath. He tried to focus on the chill in the air, the measured sound of boots on stone, but his thoughts twisted faster than he could bury them. Maybe this was it. No trial, no explanation.

He clenched his jaw and forced his limbs to move evenly, even as the panic pressed hard against his ribs.

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12

WINGS OF A DEMON

THE TAVERN IN ABBOTTSTOWN WAS LOUD WITH MIDDAY LAUGHTER AND THE smell of roasted meat. Smoke drifted up to the high beams where banners of Drakhar hung, purple cloth embroidered with the coiled serpent of the crown. At the center table sat Lord Kaegin, broad as a barrel and gleaming with rings, his heavy robes straining against his girth. Around him, rough-cut men and crooked women crowded the benches, their laughter raw, their manners bought.

“Bring the ladies over!” Kaegin’s voice carried through the room. A group of beautiful servant women hesitated by the counter before crossing the floor, heads bowed, hands folded.

“Greetings, gentlemen,” one said with practiced grace. “What can we do for you?”

“More mead!” shouted a red-faced man, pounding his cup. The others echoed him, their eyes crawling over the women.

Kaegin chuckled, fingering the small pile of crowns in front of him. “Patience, patience. All in good time.” He ruffled through the coins, letting them ring together before tossing one to each of the crooked men at the table.

The men snatched the coins and sniffed at them like hounds. “Real crown!” one hissed. “See, I told you the lord was good for it!”

Their laughter was harsh. Kaegin raised his cup, wine staining his beard. “There. You’re paid, aren’t you? Now, enjoy yourselves. You make my hall look lively.” He rose, his motion sending his chair scraping

backward, and waddled toward a separate table set in the shadowed rear of the room. Two Drakhar soldiers in black-steel armor followed him, their armor carved with the serpent sigil in deep purple enamel. They stood behind him as he sat again, his robe spilling over the bench like a blanket. A serving girl, dark-skinned, clear-eyed, far too young to be in such company, approached with a tray. “You nantherwin. You’ll serve me from now on,” Kaegin said.

The girl hesitated, then lowered her head. “Whatever Lord Kaegin wishes.”

“Good answer.” He pulled her down to sit briefly on his knee. “You smell better than this whole wretched town.”

She stiffened.

“Kiss me, girl. Then massage my shoulders.” She obeyed, kissing him and standing up setting her hands uncertainly on his thick neck while he tore into a plate of venison.

One of his under-stewards appeared beside the table, hat pressed to his chest. “My lord—news.”

Kaegin groaned. “You always bring news when I’m eating.”

The man shifted his weight. “It’s about your men, my lord. Three of them were found dead in the alley last night.”

“Three of mine?” Kaegin’s tone was distracted; he waved his knife lazily. “Daryle among them?”

“Yes, my lord. He was…beheaded and brought in.”

“Mm. Good. He was a varn thief anyway.”

The steward blinked. “I thought you might be concerned—”

Kaegin slammed his knife onto the table, the sound sharp. “Do I look concerned? Daryle stole from me. The town is cleaner without that rauking fallow. What else?”

The man licked his lips. “Well, there have been talks…about who did it.”

“Get to the point.”

“They say it was a black knight, my lord. He was roaming the town last night.”

The name snapped Kaegin’s attention. He stared for a beat too long before letting out a laugh that didn’t quite hide the strain underneath. “A black knight, is it? Come now. Folk tales.”

“I saw the bodies myself. Every one struck down with precision. It—”

Kaegin raised a pudgy hand. “Shut the rauk up.” He leaned back, muttering under his breath, “Oryneth the father help me, if it’s him…” He reached for his cup again. “Why would that knight waste his time here? One bounty? Bah.”

The steward said quietly, “Some think he’s hunting someone. Not for money.”

Kaegin scowled. “Obviously. Use your head before I remove it.”

The servant girl’s hands faltered on his shoulders. But he didn’t notice. He rubbed his temple. “Why is my life a pit of trouble? First Arameth, now this nonsense—”

“Arameth, my lord?”

“Don’t speak that name aloud!” Kaegin snapped. The steward flinched back. Kaegin breathed heavily, forcing a laugh. “I need a quieter town. One without fools.”

But then from the stairway at the far end of the room came a flutter of movement. Two young women descended, pretty servant girls from the upper rooms, giggling and smoothing their sleeves. They looked relieved, radiant even, as they stepped onto the tavern floor and joined the others behind the bar.

Kaegin watched them, envy curling in his chest. “What are those fallow women so happy about?” he muttered. The term, fallow, was a cruel word, whispered in taverns and backrooms to describe women considered ‘used,’ no longer pure, no longer worthy. Damaged goods, as the world saw them. “Varn it all, curse those fallows,” Kaegin coughed.

He tore another bite from his meat, the grease shining on his fingers.

“My lord,” the steward tried again, “if the black knight is truly here, perhaps we should—”

Kaegin didn’t answer. His eyes had gone distant, fixed on the stairway. A figure had appeared there, tall, shrouded in black armor and cloak. No crest. No color. Only the dull reflection of light of a greatsword’s hilt. Kaegin’s cup froze halfway to his mouth. The knight descended step by step. He reached the floor, drew two gold coins from his pouch, and tossed the crowns lightly toward the two servant girls who came from upstairs. They caught them, startled, but grateful, and the sound of their laughter turned brittle in the silence spreading through the room. Kaegin’s pulse drummed in his throat. He shoved back from the table.

“Drekk—” His voice cracked as he cursed. “You can’t be here! Do you hear me? I am Lord in Abbottstown! My word is law!” But the knight didn’t respond. He walked forward, the greatsword resting on his shoulder now. “Do you understand?” Kaegin’s shout rose in pitch. “I command this place!”

Then the two Drakhar soldiers stepped in front of their lord, blades drawn and hands trembling, though they tried to hide it. The knight’s stride didn’t change.

Suddenly the first soldier lunged, desperate and loud.

The black knight moved. He lifted his greatsword high, the blade humming with unnatural weight, and brought it crashing down in a single, merciless arc. The steel carved through flesh and bone with ease, splitting the man from head to groin. The soldier came apart in two clean halves. One collapsed to the left, the other to the right, severed down the center as blood sprayed in a wide, arterial arc across the stone. Entrails spilled wetly between the split halves.

The knight’s blade struck the floor beneath him with a thunderous crack, sinking slightly into the stone. The second soldier froze, mouth working soundlessly, eyes locked on the steaming pieces of what had once been his comrade. But the man roared and charged anyway.

The knight turned his masked helm toward him, voice a low gravel. “Bad choice.”

The knight met him with a pivot, dragging the edge of the greatsword in a clean horizontal arc. The blow took the soldier at the waist, lifting him off his feet, legs crumpling one way, torso the other, blood spraying like rain over the tables and the stone floor. Kaegin screamed something behind them, orders, or curses, or both—and shoved the maiden girl aside. She fell hard with a cry, skirt tangling around her legs. Kaegin didn’t look back. He stumbled for the rear door, flesh rippling as he fled. Drakhar soldiers poured in from the hallway beyond. Some bore halberds, others axes, but all of them wore the same look of uncertainty turned to horror.

The black knight didn’t wait.

He lifted his greatsword and then spun, one full horizontal sweep that carved through armor and bodies. A dozen men came apart mid-motion, severed at the gut or collarbone or spine. Limbs tumbled free. The air filled with screams and the stink of open bowels.

Then came the stabbing, short, brutal thrusts through chests. Chairs shattered beneath flailing corpses. Tables collapsed under the weight of the dying. And then, stillness.

The knight stood among a ruin of men. Blood on his blade.

And Kaegin was gone.



Kaegin wrestled with the reins in the stable, sweat darkening the fine collar of his robe. “He’s after me,” he muttered, half in disbelief, half in terror. “Arameth was right…rauk. What the neth’rose. Why me?” His breath shook as he yanked the saddle into place. “I need to get out, back to Drakhar. Those men…they’ll hold him. They have to.” He hauled himself clumsily onto the horse’s back, the beast already skittish beneath him. With a panicked cry, he kicked it into motion. The stable doors burst open as he galloped out into the light. Dust flew behind him. The narrow street of Abbottstown blurred past as townsfolk leapt aside, startled by the flash of gold rings and purple robes flapping behind him.

“The next outpost…just west…if I can just—”

He never finished the thought. The sunlight dimmed. Heads turned. Fingers pointed. A few gasped. Kaegin dared a glance skyward, but the sun burned his eyes white. Then the sky cracked open. From the brilliance above, something massive plunged down, wings outstretched like a demon cast out from Empre’ya. The black knight landed in the street. One clean, sideways swing followed—

—and the horse’s head sprayed blood.

Kaegin flew forward in a blur of purple and gold, landing hard on the dirt, gasping as the beast’s body crumpled behind him in a spray of dust and blood. He rolled, coughing, face scraped raw, until he looked up. The black knight stood over the corpse. Wings unfurled behind him, huge and leathery, the texture like burned hide.

“RAUK!” Kaegin cursed loudly while he sobbed, scrambling backward, fat limbs flailing in the dirt. “Mercy! Please—!”

The knight’s gauntlet seized him by the collar, lifted him with inhuman ease. They rose. The knight carried him above the rooftops, wind howling around them. Kaegin shrieked until his voice cracked, flailing like a trapped hog.

Within moments, they reached the edge of the woods. The knight dropped him. Kaegin hit the earth with a grunt and rolled through leaves. Autumn had settled over the forest, boughs stripped bare, colors scattered across the floor. Wind whispered through dying branches.

The knight landed behind him with the sound of iron striking root. His wings pulled inward and vanished, merging back into the shape of a ragged black cape that swayed like a second shadow. Kaegin coughed, spat leaves, and crawled. “Please! I’ll give you crowns. Titles! Anything! I am Lord of Abbottstown!”

But the knight didn’t answer. He stalked forward, towering above Kaegin. “Where are they?” His voice tore through the woods.

Kaegin flinched, scrambling backward. “What?! I don’t know what you’re talking about! I can’t help you!”

“Don’t lie to me, pig.”

Kaegin whimpered, rolling onto his back. “I—I can’t say! If I do…”

“You fear him more than me?”

Kaegin didn’t answer. The knight raised a crossbow in one smooth movement and fired. The bolt punched into Kaegin’s arm.

He howled, collapsing in a heap. “Curse Lu to his bones!” Kaegin bellowed. “Curse you! RAUK!!!!!”

The knight reloaded without haste. “I know you know who I’m hunting. Where is Arameth?! Where is Legion?!”

Kaegin wept, louder now, shaking like a child. “Information! He wanted something! A place—a cursed place in the Sea of Aethira. I once saw it, years ago, when I captained ships. It was…wrong. An island full of evil. It terrified us. We turned back before it touched us.”

“And Arameth?”

“He thanked me,” Kaegin croaked. “Said I confirmed his thoughts.”

The knight narrowed his eyes. “What is he doing now?”

“I don’t know. He said something…a festival…in the south. I didn’t ask any more.”

Kaegin rocked against the tree, muttering, “I’m dead…I’m already rauking dead…”

The knight sheathed the crossbow. “You’ll be worse if you keep weeping.”

“I said too much. He’ll kill me—he’ll see me—”

Suddenly a sharp caw split the air. The knight turned. A crow perched above them on a branch, its feathers wet and shining like tar. Its eyes wept black fluid.

“What the neth’rose…” the knight whispered. The crow opened its beak—and something spilled out. A thick, black sludge dropped from its mouth onto Kaegin, spattering his face and hands. He screamed. The liquid burned as it touched him, not fire, but rot. More poured. The crow trembled, then burst into black vapor, coating Kaegin in a sudden, choking fog of tar. Kaegin clawed at his face. But the goo slid into his mouth, his eyes, and beneath his skin. His body stiffened. He staggered upright. His eyes rolled white, then black ichor began to pour from his sockets, his nose, his mouth.

The knight took a step back, shocked. “Rauk…”

The knight raised the crossbow and fired straight into his skull. Kaegin’s body burst apart into steaming black tar, bubbling in the leaves. For a long moment, nothing moved. Then the knight lowered his weapon. His shoulders rose and fell once.

“Arameth,” he breathed.

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13

WHAT LIES IN THE HALL

THE TOWN HALL FELL AWAY BEHIND THEM, STONE AND GREEN ROOFS AND the round glass window with teal eagles. Matthew kept one hand fussing at the hem of his issued tunic as he matched Ludwig's pace. Inside the south camp's walls, Eldoria felt less like a barracks and more like a walled town: tents in regimented rows, green, gold, and white—flags snapping with the eagle-and-swords crest; smoke from cookhouses; the clatter and call of morning drills rolling in from the open training field.

They passed cabins reserved for senior ranks and stone blocks for stores and armories. Even here, eyes followed him. A whisper would trail a step and then die when it met the general's shadow. Matthew tried to keep his face forward and his breathing even.

At the blacksmith shed, the hammering paused. A broad, stocky Dwarf peered up from behind the anvil—ginger hair to his shoulders, beard braided in three ropes banded with little gold rings, eyebrows so thick they looked like furred shelves.

Bork.

Matthew recognized him from the chatter in the city yesterday, and from how the camp spoke his name.

"Oy! Ludwig!" the Dwarf called, voice like gravel. "Get over here."

Ludwig angled his head, beak shaping into a smile. "Bork."

They crossed. The Dwarf clocked Matthew at once. His hand slid to the hilt at his hip on instinct, shoulders rising.

Ludwig lifted one clawed palm, “He’s not one of the Loreign Elves that attacked Darlimir during The Sundering,” Ludwig said, calm. “He’s not from any of the Elven kingdoms actually.” Ludwig paused glancing at Matthew, “He is from Liora apparently. He’s not your trouble.”

Bork’s eyes narrowed under those brows. “How do you know that, then?”

“He would have tried to kill us immediately.”

A beat. Bork’s fingers eased from the hilt. “Hmm.” He gave Matthew a hard up-and-down. “All right, Elf. But you can’t be too careful after what your kind did in the Mines of Roynar. I’m watching you.”

Matthew ground his molars and kept his jaw still. “I’m not one of them,” he said. “Or like them.”

“We’ll see,” the Dwarf muttered, then waved it aside. “If you’re from some ‘Liora,’ what in Lu’s name are you doing in Eldoria? I’ve never heard of it. And I’ve got a map in my head,” he said, jabbing his finger at his head.

Ludwig glanced at Matthew.

“It’s an island in the Sea of Aethira,” Matthew said. “Goblins took my younger brother and sister. I went after them. I fell overboard in a storm.” He flattened his tone so it landed like a simple fact.

“Fell overboard?” Bork repeated, offended by the physics of it. “What’d you do that for?”

Matthew stared. “I didn’t try to. The mast hit me.”

Bork scowled so deeply his mustache caved. “Hmm.” He turned back to his work like the Elf had failed a test of common sense. Without looking up, Bork asked, “When are you leaving us then, Ludwig?”

Ludwig’s feathers shifted at the shoulders. “Leaving?”

“Arendale,” Bork said, as if the word should have been on Ludwig’s tongue already. “Your people? Barnobus was yappin about it.”

Ludwig’s beak tipped into something like a grin. “Yes. Well, when the new Aetherians have their feet under them, then I will.”

“Arendale?” Matthew blurted it before he could stop himself.

Both of them stared at him.

“The Elf’s been sleeping in a cave,” Bork said, but there wasn’t real malice in it.

“I know where Arendale is. I meant…why is he here?” The question came out rougher than Matthew intended.

Ludwig regarded him for a moment, then spoke evenly. “I was found here. Elandor the Second—Ronan’s father—found me in Elmwood when I was an infant. Basket in a thicket. No parents. He took me in. I grew up within the Eldorian walls.”

Matthew’s mouth formed an apology before he could decide whether he meant it. “Oh.”

Ludwig’s gold eyes warmed. “Do not feel sorry. I ate well and learned to read. It could have gone worse.”

Bork lifted the finished blade, tilted its edge to the light, and nodded once, decision made. He stepped around the rail and shoved it toward Matthew. “Yours.”

Matthew blinked, hands staying politely back. “I shouldn’t—”

Bork’s brows crashed together. “You don’t refuse a Dwarf’s gift.” He jabbed a thick finger into Matthew’s chest to punctuate each word. “You. Take. The. Blade.”

Matthew swallowed. “Thank you,” he said quickly, and accepted the weight. It sat solid and balanced across his palms. Then Bork vanished into the shed and returned with a fitted sheath. “First of the new batch. The rest are still being swapped in the barracks for all the soldiers. Don’t nick it on stupid things.”

“I won’t,” Matthew said. He meant it.

Ludwig clasped Bork’s forearm with a promise to share a drink the next evening. Bork pretended to count his schedule on the air, then grunted his assent. “Aye. Tomorrow.”

They left the anvil’s heat and climbed toward the inner keep: a stone-faced fortress reserved for generals and captains, rising out of the camp with a round tower stitched with tall windows and capped in green. Two soldiers swung the carved doors wide; Ludwig set a brisk pace through a short hall and up a spiral stair, past one landing, then another. By the fourth flight Matthew’s thighs burned, yesterday’s drills still living in the muscle—and he was breathing harder.

Ludwig wasn’t.

At the top, a high-ceilinged office opened on either side to windows that washed the stone in pale morning. A map-littered desk sat under a bank of shelves; scrolls were tied in crisp rolls; a lantern guttered low. Beyond, double doors led to a balcony.

“Come,” Ludwig said. Outside, the whole south camp was a diagram of movement, lines at the practice yard; a pair of hippogriffs stamping while stablemen coaxed straps around their shoulders; cabins and sheds and the blacksmith’s plume of smoke; farther off, the castle’s knife-edged roofline sitting on the cliff.

“A good view,” Ludwig said.

“Yes,” Matthew answered. It was.

Ludwig’s voice dropped a notch. “You know why you’re here?”

Matthew didn’t answer. He guessed. And he didn’t like the guess.

“The Oblivion flame,” Ludwig said.

Matthew repeated it under his breath. The words felt heavier once spoken. He rubbed his left forearm, the memory still raw. “What is it?” he asked.

Ludwig didn’t answer at first. His gaze lingered on the camp below, where some of the soldiers cooked quietly, where steel rang in short bursts from a training circle. But finally, he turned to Matthew. “Before we talk about the black flame,” Ludwig said, “tell me what you know of aetheris.”

“Not much,” Matthew admitted. “I can…do things. Sometimes my hand catches fire.” He lifted it, half-expecting it to glow, but nothing came. Just skin.

Ludwig’s feathers shifted slightly in the breeze, his arms folding. “Aetheris isn’t just having a flame,” he said. “It’s not a trick or an illusion. It’s a gift. It awakens in certain people, between sixteen and twenty-two, usually. Most never receive this gift. But when it does come…it’s from the Sovereigns of Light. Lu, Elmira, and the Father, Oryneth.”

Matthew blinked.

“Some say it is just stories. Old myths mortals cling to because they fear death. But I believe otherwise,” Ludwig said. “The Heliorens are the reason this power exists. Aetheris is a touch of what they are.” He paused, studying Matthew’s reaction before continuing. “There are six known flames. Each one tied to different attributes in a person. Different spirits.”

Matthew took that in slowly. “And mine is none of those.”

“Correct,” Ludwig said, voice low. “Yours is something else.”

“The Oblivion,” Matthew murmured again. The name made his skin tighten.

“There’s no record of it,” Ludwig said. “None. It simply does not exist in our archives of aetheris. Not even mentioned in the Solvaran. But we’ve

now seen it on you."

"Then why haven't I been executed?" Matthew asked, bluntly. "Why am I not hanging from a tree with arrows in my chest? I'm an Elf, and I'm cursed. And I'm certain everyone here would rather me be dead."

Ludwig sighed and met his gaze. There was a long pause between them. Ludwig then returned to the subject. "You remember yesterday's lessons?"

Matthew nodded. "Yes."

"Three paths and three classes for each path," Ludwig confirmed. "You told me you chose Strider. And within that, Stormblade. Correct?"

Matthew gave a slow nod. "Yes, but what does that—."

But Ludwig cut him off, tone quieter now, more focused. "Each path has its own strengths. Unique gifts. Aetherians who walk them become something more than ordinary fighters. And kingdoms need them—badly. Aetheris changes everything. It allows mortals to do what others can't. That's why kings and queens hire them, protect them, and feed them. Because if they don't…someone else will. And a rogue Aetherian is far more dangerous than a loyal one. Like the Cree."

"Cree? I'm sorry general, but—" Matthew asked.

Ludwig raised a claw, stopping him. "Bounty hunters or exiles."

Matthew let out a breath and then looked down at his hand again, half-expecting the black flame to bloom across his left palm. "I still don't understand."

Ludwig straightened. "Away from public ears, the council wanted you dead, including the king. I stopped that and now I'm helping you, because I need to understand what that flame is. I want to see it again when you enter the Chambers of Maelor. I want to study it. And if I'm honest…" He glanced at Matthew one last time. "I'm not sure anyone else would've let you live if Kael and I didn't interfere. So take this as a blessing in an odd way. You can thank me later once we figure out this flame."

Ludwig then turned grabbing papers off his desk and nodded once. "I read Kael's report. Liora. Matthew Peregryn. You fell off a ship and washed up troublesome. I believe you are possibly telling the truth. But I'm still not certain."

Matthew let out a breath. "Thank you, sir."

"But I do have one question. When did the dreams start?" Ludwig asked, the smile gone.

Matthew blinked. "Dreams?"

“The nightmares,” Ludwig said. “The visions. Don’t make me ask twice.”

Matthew’s stomach tightened. He hadn’t told anyone. How did the general know?

“Two years ago,” Matthew said. “Off and on at first. The last few months…more often. Worse.”

Ludwig leaned his elbows on the rail. “Any last night after training?”

“No,” Matthew said.

“Interesting. Well, if they return,” Ludwig said, “I want you to tell me when we meet again. I would like to know more about them. We will talk more tonight after training in the Chambers of Maelor, about these dreams of yours. It will most likely happen again in there, understand?”

Matthew nodded, confused. “Uhh…yes, sir.”

“And in these dreams. What exactly did you see?”

Matthew hesitated, embarrassed by how childish it may have sounded. But the general’s face didn’t have mockery in it, only attention. “A dog,” Matthew said. “Black. Too big. Head wrong. Eyes like…like they see through you. It’s in the dreams. Sometimes I think I see it when I’m awake, but only for a breath. Back home, once. Here, in the chamber yesterday. It speaks sometimes.” He looked down at his hands. “Yesterday there were eyes in the clouds. Red. Watching. The dog stood on a cliff and said I was his and that I awakened him.”

Ludwig’s claws rasped lightly against his beak as he rubbed at his chin. He didn’t look surprised. “Very well,” Ludwig said. “I will tell the posted men to let you through at any hour. General Kael will also know.”

“Is it…dangerous?” Matthew asked.

“Yes, it could be,” Ludwig said at last, voice low, unreadable. His expression hadn’t changed, but something in the way he stood, too still, too measured. “I’ll be watching you,” Ludwig said quietly. “Closely.”

The silence after was brief, but thick.

Then, almost as an afterthought, he added, “Return to your squad.”

Matthew hesitated, then gave a short nod. “Yes, general.”

He turned and started walking. The hallway beyond the chamber was dim and cool, but his mind burned with unease. The weight of Ludwig’s gaze didn’t leave him. It stayed behind his shoulders, lodged like a knife waiting for a twist.

There was something Ludwig wasn’t saying. Not just caution. Not discipline. It was in the way he had spoken the word Oblivion—like it meant more than it should. Matthew didn’t know what the black flame truly was, but he knew, with cold certainty, that Ludwig did. And he wasn’t telling him.

Matthew took the spiral stair down, new blade bumping lightly at his hip. Elara and Finn rose in his thoughts like they always did when his mind had a quiet stretch. He needed to understand this flame, enough to escape Eldoria. Enough to find a ship. He needed to know the answers before he plotted his escape from Eldoria.

The second landing opened into a corridor washed in cold, colorless light.

Matthew turned toward it—and stopped. Something moved, not in the stone, but through it. A sound, thin and curling. Laughter, but not Human. He didn’t move. The sound came again, low, circling him without origin, like it slipped from the cracks in the wall. The hairs on his arms stood rigid. He turned slowly, gaze shifting from ceiling to shadows.

And then he saw it.

The dog.

It sat in the far pool of light beneath the window, silent, still, like a statue someone forgot to remove. Head too large for its body, lips curled over damp teeth. When it panted, thick threads of red ran from its tongue, trailing to the stone. Matthew stared.

“Murderer,” the dog said. It pressed into his skull.

Matthew’s hand flew to the sword at his hip. His grip slipped. His fingers were wet.

He looked down.

Blood ran across his knuckles, thick and fresh. It dripped to the floor, joining a slick pool already soaking the stones around his boots. He staggered back. The warmth reached through the soles of his shoes. And a body lay in front of him. Slumped. Face turned half-away.

Armor torn open. Eldorian green.

Matthew moved closer, crouching, reaching for the shoulder, needing to see. Then breath touched his cheek. He turned. The dog was inches from his face. Its golden eyes bored into him, unblinking. Saliva, red as rust, hung from its jaw.

It barked. The sound hit him like a war hammer to the chest. He flew back into the wall, collapsing onto the ground. But when he pulled himself up, the blood was gone. The body was gone. And the dog was gone.

Only a broken vase remained, shattered across the stone where the corpse had been. Water fanned out from the fallen vase.

He stared at his hands.

No stain. No proof.

His breathing came too fast. He pressed his palm to the wall.

“Oh, for the love of Elmira, Elf. What the blazes are you doing?”

He jolted. A maid stood on the stair bend, apron folded under one arm, eyes narrowing with practiced disgust. She scanned the room, the shards, the mess, and her mouth tightened. “Of course,” she muttered, kneeling. “Of course it’s you. Should’ve left you hanging from the gate instead of feeding you with the rest. Varn Elf,” she cursed him.

“I didn’t—” he began, but the words dried out before they reached his teeth. She cut him off with a glance and swept the shards into a pan, quick and practiced. She wasn’t scared of him. She was tired. He turned and took the stairs two at a time, hand pressed tight against his chest to steady the ragged drumbeat of his heart. Murderer, the voice had said. But of what? Of something he had done? Or something he hadn’t done yet?

The cold outside helped. Drill chants rang from the fields. A sergeant cursed a recruit into tears. Someone fed strips of meat to a hippogriff tied near the stables. Normal sounds.

And Matthew walked stiffly back toward the hall, where the others waited.

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14

CREATURE WITH THE RED EYE

"GET TO THE VARATHEL," TORM MUTTERED, KICKING A LOOSE STONE FROM the path. "Always walking, always dirt."

His tone shifted between complaint and mockery. "A horse, perhaps? Or a hippogriff, anything with wings would do. But no. Bastion has a sense of humor." The forest road was narrow, winding between black pines, the air cool and damp. He'd left Eldoria barely a day ago, heading northwest toward the Mountains of Musetafer. The world around him was green.

"This world grows stranger by the hour," he muttered, pushing his white hair from his eyes. He brushed a leaf from his shoulder as if it had personally offended him. The trees here were taller than any he had seen since leaving the Eldorian valley—ancient pines bending under the weight of the season, their needles whispering secrets above him. Somewhere far off, a river moved. The air smelled of frost and pine sap and decay. Torm sighed dramatically, the sound carrying through the stillness. "Would it be so difficult," he mused aloud, "for aetheris to grant me the dignity of convenience? A little whoosh, and I could be there already." His voice had the casual arrogance of one used to talking to himself. No one else would listen to him, after all, not for long.

He stopped to adjust the strap of the gold winged blade in his sheath. The weapon shimmered faintly in the pale light, veins of silver twisting along its surface. He was thinking again of Marriott, the merchant with the skeletal body and the know-it-all look. The memory soured his mouth.

“That thing knew something,” Torm muttered. He spat into the dirt. “I should have cut him open just to see what secrets he kept inside.”

The wind rose suddenly. The hairs on the back of Torm’s neck lifted. He did not draw his sword immediately; he only smiled. “Finally,” he said. “Company.” The air behind him folded inward. A patch of shadow deepened, pulling light into itself. Out of that rippling dark stepped a figure. Torm turned sharply, blade half drawn, and exhaled with theatrical disappointment. “Oh,” he said. “It’s you.”

It was tall, hooded, its robe the color of coal left too long in a fire. Beneath the hood, where a face should have been, burned a single big red eye. The rest of the head was a void, but along its shoulders, back, and the rest of its cloak, smaller red eyes blinked open and shut like embers winking through ash. Its hands were skeletal, gray skin stretched tight over bone.

“Do you always arrive like that?” Torm asked, sheathing his sword with a flick. “You know, creeping out of the dark might impress most, but for me? It’s getting old.”

“I don’t have time for your games, Aeralynian,” Bastion said, his voice deep and cold. “I came to give a message.”

“How thrilling,” Torm said, pretending to stretch. “Does it involve a horse? I was just saying to myself how convenient it would be if one fell out of the sky.”

Bastion ignored the sarcasm. “You need to move faster. We are running out of time.”

“Running out of time?” Torm scoffed. “It’s only the twenty fifth of Dusrelon. I have two months until the year’s end, and plenty of ground to—”

“Enough,” Bastion cut in sharply. “You made a spectacle of yourself in Eldoria yesterday.”

“Oh please,” Torm said, brushing his shoulder. “You make it sound like I committed a sin.”

Bastion ignored the insult. He stepped forward, leaving no footprints in the half-frozen soil. “You have been careless, mortal.”

“Careless?” Torm spread his arms as though to embrace the insult. “I’ve been magnificent. You should have seen them, their faces when I walked through Eldoria without hiding what I am. Terror. Awe. A proper reaction.”

The red eye flared. “You are a fool! You were told to remain unseen.”

“I was told to deliver death when the time came,” Torm snapped back. “Not to cower like a goblin in a cave.”

Bastion’s hands flexed, the joints creaking faintly. “Your arrogance is a danger to our purpose. The Nihilkins grow impatient. They have granted you a purpose to fulfill, because your vengeance serves theirs.”

Torm’s grin faltered just a hair. “The Nihilkins,” he repeated softly, almost reverently. “Your masters?”

“Our true lords,” Bastion corrected. “The true kings of this world. You would do well to remember that their generosity is not infinite.”

Torm turned away, pretending to study the trees. “Generosity,” he said. “Interesting word for creatures who feed on despair.”

“They feed on what exists in abundance,” Bastion said. “And you, Torm of the Aeralynians, are a feast in waiting if you continue to test them.”

Torm’s jaw tightened. “My people were destroyed by men, by these vermin who call themselves kings. If the Nihilkins wish to use my hate, let them. I will use theirs in return.”

“And yet you draw every eye in Eldoria upon you,” Bastion said. “You killed two men in a shop! You let witnesses live! Do you wish to be hunted before the work even begins?!”

Torm waved a hand dismissively. “They were nothing. Dust. They insulted me.”

“They spoke,” Bastion corrected. “You answered with blood. And now there are whispers of a white-haired stranger walking in daylight. The king and lords of Eldoria have heard. They are already on the lookout for you.” Then Bastion turned away and sat on a rock at the edge of the clearing. “I do not have time to lecture you further,” he said. “There are bigger things at play beyond what you can comprehend. Wars across Korineth and great awakenings have just occurred. The Cloakwar, Battle of the Four Armies, has begun today in the Serulean Deep. Etheria is already on fire. So I have other matters I must attend to.” He paused. “And another issue. A Cree is hunting you now. A black knight.”

That made Torm’s grin return. “A black knight?” He swept a strand of hair from his eyes. “Let him come. I’ll show him what it means to die properly.”

“Stop this foolishness! He may not come for you first,” Bastion said. “But you are on his list.”

Torm chuckled. “Then I’ll be sure to make his wait worthwhile.”

A noise rippled through the forest, the jingle of bridles, the rhythmic beat of hooves on earth. Torm leaned forward, eyes narrowing. A procession moved along the forest road, twenty soldiers in blue and silver, a carriage draped in matching banners, each embroidered with a silver wolf and sword.

“Belfour,” Bastion muttered.

“What are they doing here?” Torm asked.

“It doesn’t matter. Keep your distance.”

Torm smiled faintly. “They look comfortable. Rich.”

“I said keep your distance Aeralynian,” Bastion repeated, stepping closer. “You see what I mean? You can’t wander openly.”

Torm sighed, exaggerated. “Yes, yes. Hide in the shadows, avoid attention, move quietly.”

Bastion ignored him and pointed into the trees. “There’s a man and his son traveling east through Elmwood here. They have a horse. Kill them and move quickly. We need sacrifices prepared before the moon wanes.”

“Sacrifices,” Torm echoed, running his thumb along the edge of his blade. “I’ve always admired that word.”

“Do not admire,” Bastion warned. “Do.”

Torm smirked. “You worry too much. The great Harbringer, Bastion, errand of the Nihilkins, trembling over a few mortals.”

The creature’s many eyes blinked once in unison. “I do not fear mortals. I fear what the kings will do to you when you fail them.”

Torm looked skyward. The morning sun hung high, slipping behind clouds. “I don’t intend to fail anyone,” he said. “Not them, not myself.” Torm turned sharply, but the messenger was already fading, his form unraveling into smoke. “Wait,” Torm said. “Tell your lords this, I do not serve. I partner.”

But the last thing left of Bastion was the echo of his voice. “You serve, whether you name it or not.”

Then the forest was empty again. Torm stood for a while, staring at the place Bastion had been. He sheathed his sword and started walking again. “I hate him,” he said to the trees. “Self-righteous pile of bones. ‘Do this,’ ‘don’t do that.’” He kicked at a frozen mushroom and laughed.



The path narrowed ahead, leading into a slope of withered ferns and frostbitten grass. Beyond that, voices, quiet, Human, ordinary. Torm slowed his pace, adjusting his gold armor on his right arm. Two figures came into view through the thinning trees, the man and the boy, leading a small brown horse burdened with packs. The man's shoulders were bowed from travel; the boy's cheeks were red from the cold.

But Torm smiled.

He stepped out onto the road. "Good day, darlings."

The man looked up, startled. His hand brushed the hilt of a worn sword. "Afternoon to you, stranger. Something you need?"

"Yes," Torm said, his tone almost polite. "Your horse."

The man frowned, uncertain whether to laugh or worry. "You'll forgive me, friend, but we've a long road still ahead to Eldoria city. Not selling."

"I wasn't asking to buy."

The wind stirred again, lifting a curl of pale hair from Torm's face. His eyes caught the light. The man's hand went fully to his sword. "Son," the man said quietly. "Step back." The boy hesitated, sensing the wrongness before he understood it. "Go," the man urged. "Back down the road." The boy obeyed, retreating a few steps, still clutching the horse's reins.

Torm sighed. "It's always the same," he said softly. "They never just hand it over." He moved his fingers in a small gesture. The air shimmered faintly, just enough to make the world tilt for a heartbeat.

The man blinked. His grip faltered. The father drew his blade and shoved the boy back. "Run!" he barked. The boy hesitated, then obeyed, sprinting down the road, calling for help. The father faced Torm, sword trembling slightly in his grip. "Stay back!"

Torm's smile widened. "If you insist. Leh'garo!" he shouted the word and moved. The air warped.

One heartbeat, he was before the man; the next, a clone behind him. The father looked confused before Torm's clone slid the blade cleanly through

his chest. The man collapsed, blood spreading across the grass. Torm looked up, annoyed. The boy was far down the road now, running toward the edge of the forest. Beyond him, the soldiers gleamed in the far distance —Belfour's carriage and soldiers.

"Varn," Torm hissed. "Of course." He raised his left hand, palm open toward the fleeing child. The aetheris in him stirred, blue and bright. "Varium!"

Blue lightning leapt from his hand, splitting the air in a savage arc. It struck the boy mid-run—his body seized, convulsed violently, then collapsed in a heap.

Smoke rose from the blackened shape crumpled on the wet earth.

The Belfour soldiers shouted, their horses rearing. The carriage stopped. Torm didn't wait. He untied the horse, and wrestled it into submission. "Quiet, beast," he hissed, mounting in a single smooth motion.

Behind him, the Belfour soldiers shouted orders, their armor converging on the place where the boy had fallen. Torm looked once over his shoulder, saw the flash of armor through the trees, and laughed.

"This was almost inconvenient," he said between breaths.

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15

THE FEWER WHO KNOW

THE MIDDAY SUN PRESSED THROUGH THE STAINED GLASS, SPLINTERING across the marble floors in bands of red, gold, and green. Servants hurried ahead straightening portraits, setting candelabras, and whispering to one another in low tones so their words wouldn't travel.

Aurora moved through the corridor like someone fulfilling a duty rather than entering a celebration. Her gown, deep emerald with silver-threaded cuffs, rustled softly as she walked. The silver belt around her waist had been tied by one of the maids earlier, its knot so tight she could barely draw a full breath.

Puruna followed at her shoulder, the old woman's posture as still and upright as ever, eyes always scanning.

"I truly despise these meals," Aurora said quietly as they walked.

"I know," Puruna replied.

"They stare," Aurora murmured. "They whisper. They want to pull a piece of me for themselves."

"They just envy, my lady," the older woman said simply. "And envy always finds its excuse."

Aurora gave a faint shake of her head.

They reached the double doors of oak and silver that opened into the inner greenhouse. The smell of flowers met them first and the sound of practiced laughter followed it. When Aurora stepped through, sunlight poured over her face and shoulders.

The garden of silk and silver was at its peak in the middle of the day. Marble pillars framed the long tables; silver dishes glimmered in the light; woven banners drifted gently from the beams above. Every inch of it was beautiful. The daughters of the high houses of Eldoria—House Verlain of Keensin village, House Corven of Mire village, House Aras of Rohland village, and of course her family, house Darkmore. They all sat scattered in graceful postures, their dresses layered in pale colors and fine lace. Their brothers lounged with their goblets half-empty, laughing too loudly for the hour. Nere wasn't here, nor was her cousin Eero of House Aras.

But the moment Aurora entered, heads turned.

It was never loud. Never obvious. Just a ripple, small glances, the hush of voices. She felt it settle over the room. She always did. Eyes followed her steps, studied her shape, searched her face for softness or flaw. She'd learned long ago to keep her posture proud and her gaze forward. To never flinch under attention.

The one thing about being beautiful that most people didn't understand, was that every woman hated you for it. And they especially did not want to be your friend.

Men adored her, wanted to be seen with her.

But every cousin, every courtly rival, every other girl in her shadow, made her pay for it in their own quiet ways. None more than Ellarie Verlain.

Ellarie had always been pretty. Everyone said so. But not enough. Not next to Aurora. And Ellarie knew it. The court knew it. Even the men who flirted with her eyes always tilted slightly toward Aurora when they thought no one noticed.

And Ellarie had never forgiven her for that. Aurora moved through the room with quiet elegance, ignoring the way the whispers shifted behind her back. She didn't need to see Ellarie to know she was already watching, waiting.

"Lady Aurora," came Ellarie's voice at last, too sweet, too rehearsed. She stood with both hands draped lightly over her chair, that smile stretched just far enough to border mockery. "You look stunning. Green suits you."

Aurora paused. She turned her head only slightly. Just enough to let the tension show, just enough to keep the upper hand. She offered a smile as sharp as a jeweler's blade. "And you look…timely, as always."

A few ladies stifled laughter. Someone at the next table coughed into a goblet.

Ellarie’s smile stiffened, but only for a second. Pretty wasn’t enough, not in Eldoria. Not in these halls. She had never chased the envy or the desire, but it found her all the same. And it left her surrounded by rivals who called themselves kin.

Ellarie blinked, then laughed lightly, recovering her poise. “Well, one must do what one can.”

“Of course.” Aurora inclined her head slightly and walked past, choosing a seat opposite her.

Maelyn Aras was already leaning toward the table, eyes glittering with curiosity. “You look like you’ve come for reading, not a banquet. Have you been reading again before lunch?”

Aurora let out a soft breath through her nose. “Better that than gossip before lunch.”

Maelyn raised her brows. “Are you always this charming?”

“Yes,” Aurora said firmly.

That earned a thin smile from Maelyn and a small laugh from one of the servants setting down plates.

To Aurora’s right sat her mother, Orkora Darkmore, draped in crimson silk that caught the sun with every movement. Her circlet was understated, the mark of a woman who didn’t need to prove her rank. She did not speak, but her look toward Aurora said enough: behave. Observe. Do not start quarrels. Her father, King Ronan sat at the head of the table, already in the middle of a deep conversation with two of the lords. His laughter filled the greenhouse easily.

Aurora folded her hands in her lap and waited. The first course arrived —fruit, bread, and wine poured with care. The nobles filled the silence with talk of hunts and festivals.

“Tell us,” Ellarie said after a while, turning slightly toward Aurora, “do you still read that old scripture? What’s it called…the Solvaran?”

A murmur of laughter followed. Aurora took a slow sip from her goblet, setting it down before answering. “I do.”

Ellarie gave a pitying smile. “Chasing light from a book written by dead men. How sad, Aurora.”

“It’s not chasing light,” Aurora replied. “It’s remembering where it came from.”

Maelyn leaned her chin into her palm. “So you believe it? All of it?”

Aurora didn’t flinch. “The Solvaran is no more foolish than trusting history to guide politics, or bloodlines to determine wisdom. We all follow something, we simply name it differently.”

Ellarie recovered first. “Spoken like a true poet, Aurora. Faith and flowers. But there are so many religions out there.” Ellarie paused looking at her fingernails, “Have you ever thought…that maybe….you chose the wrong religion to believe in? What makes you think the Solvaran is truly right?”

Aurora smiled faintly. She didn’t have an answer. And then Aurora’s mother’s fingers tapped softly once on the table, a quiet signal to stop there. Aurora listened.

Ellarie reached for her wine again. “And what of men, Aurora? Surely faith isn’t the only thing keeping your mind occupied. Rumor has it some dashing knight has been, what is the word—‘admiring’ you?”

Aurora’s eyes flicked toward her, calm but direct. “If you’re referring to the rumors you started, I hope they at least made for good storytelling.”

Sera Corven snorted into her cup, failing to hide her amusement.

“Oh, we only speak what people say,” Ellarie protested.

“Then perhaps you should listen to better people,” Aurora said, taking another sip of her wine.

Her mother’s hand paused mid-cutlery movement, a sign she’d noticed but would let pass.

Behind Ellarie, Puruna stepped forward quietly. “More wine, Lady Ellarie?” she asked, voice mild but edged with something colder.

Ellarie straightened. “No thank you.”

“Perhaps some candied figs,” Puruna said. “They keep the tongue from drying out.”

The table went still for a heartbeat. Ellarie’s eyes flashed, but she said nothing.

Aurora hid her small smile behind her goblet.

The meal continued, conversation moving again with forced laughter and softer tones. Aurora watched it all, the way people leaned in when her father spoke, the way the younger nobles mimicked their parents’ mannerisms without realizing it.

The sound of silverware and chatter echoed faintly against the high walls. Her father’s voice broke through the noise, deep, certain, commanding without trying. “We’ll go to war with Grimrave soon,” he said

to Lord Baeryn of House Verlain. “They’ve overstepped, and Eldoria’s patience is done.”

The table around him quieted slightly, everyone listening now, even those pretending not to. Aurora’s eyes narrowed faintly, her heartbeat slowing as she turned her head toward her father. Ronan’s words rippled through the room. Servants slowed their steps; nearby lords leaned subtly forward in their seats. Aurora lifted her eyes toward her father, watching the small shifts in his face. His tone was even.

Lord Baeryn of House Verlain leaned an elbow against the table, his silver rings catching the light. “War with Grimrave, you say? I never thought I’d hear it from your mouth, Ronan. You’ve held restraint longer than any of us would’ve managed.”

“Restraint has its place,” Ronan said, his expression faintly amused. “But so does resolve. They’ve pushed the trade routes and our borders too far. They test the Stonewatch again and again, thinking we’ll keep turning the other cheek. The crown can’t afford patience forever.”

Baeryn chuckled, but the sound was humorless. “And what stirred your resolve, my king? Some whisper in council?”

Aurora’s gaze flicked downward.

“Aurora mentioned it.”

She hadn’t expected him to say that. But the lords’ attention shifted toward her for a moment, polite but evaluating. She met their stares calmly.

Baeryn smiled. “Then your daughter should make a fine council member with more practice, and a fine wife.”

Aurora felt the familiar tightening in her chest. She didn’t react, not outwardly, but she could feel her mother’s gaze from beside her, cool, warning.

Ronan’s tone flattened slightly. “She has her uses for now. Marriage will be discussed when the time suits.” The subject was closed. It always was.

Across the table, Benedict Aras lifted his goblet. His voice was smooth and practiced. “Well, Ronan, if war is to come, we’ll be ready. But we must think further than Grimrave. The times are shifting. New powers rise, some seen, some less so. The wars out east have proven that.” Benedict sighed, taking another sip.“Sharlenten and Gornhelm…what a war that will be.”

The words struck Aurora differently than they should have. Some less so. It was said casually, but Benedict’s glance toward Baeryn wasn’t casual

at all. Baeryn nodded slowly. “True. There are matters we’ll need to settle soon, before others settle them for us.”

“Agreed,” said Ronan. “But patience. There are steps to take, voices to hear, and…certain approvals we must wait upon first.”

Their tone had changed. But Aurora had learned how to listen.

“Still,” Benedict continued, “the lords are restless. The lady wants word soon. It’s not like before. I don’t know what they have planned now, but it is something big. They want to see you and Orkora.”

“Yes, I’ve been made aware,” Ronan said. “We will be leaving shortly in the next few days to meet them. But for now, the fewer who know, the better.”

Aurora’s brow tightened. The lady? She didn’t know who they meant. Another noble? Perhaps visiting another kingdom? Or someone else entirely? She pretended to sip her drink, keeping her posture loose, her ears keen.

Baeryn leaned forward slightly, his voice dropping further. “And the others?”

“I do not know,” Ronan said, quiet but certain. “They all understand the reward. But we will continue this conversation another day.”

“Right,” Benedict said.

Ronan nodded once.

Aurora’s pulse quickened. The rest of the conversation blurred into pleasantries and laughter again, but she barely heard any of it. They’d said so little, and yet it felt heavy. Something was being built in secret. Something that her father, her king, didn’t want his court to know. The fewer who know, the better. She glanced down at her plate, suddenly aware that her hands had gone cold. Around her, conversations picked up again, Ellarie was talking about dresses; Sera Corven was teasing one of the younger lords.

Her father raised his goblet, smiling again for the crowd. “Eldoria stands strong,” he said, his voice carrying through the greenhouse. “And it will only grow stronger.”

The nobles cheered and toasted. Aurora lifted her cup with the rest, the motion automatic.



After the meal, the nobles rose in small clusters, moving to the shaded corners of the greenhouse where the servants refilled goblets and small groups exchanged gossip. The golden light slanted through the windows now, gentler, warmer. Aurora stayed seated a moment longer, her gaze following her father as he stepped aside with Baeryn and Benedict again. Their words were lost to distance, but their faces told enough.

She finally stood, smoothing her gown, and drifted toward one of the long windows. Ellarie, Maelyn, and Sera, had gathered nearby, already laughing over their cups. Their conversation spun through names and faces of men.

Aurora tried to ignore them, but fragments carried over.

“I heard Sir Vince returned this morning,” Maelyn said, her tone laced with feigned innocence.

“Back from the north,” Ellarie added. “And charming, as always. You’d think the war with Drakhar would have taken his charm, but apparently not.”

“Or perhaps that’s what makes him charming,” Sera said, sipping her wine. “I’d take him in a heartbeat.”

Aurora turned slightly, her gaze following the motion of the crowd as the banquet doors opened again. Carter, the Master of Law, entered first, tall, lean, his presence quiet but commanding. Beside him walked General Vince, the sound of his boots cutting through the chatter.

A ripple of whispers spread.

“There he is,” Ellarie whispered, hand to her throat.

“He’s even finer in person,” Sera murmured.

Aurora rolled her eyes faintly, but her stomach had tightened before she realized it. The men crossed the grass, heading toward King Ronan. Their conversation was short, urgent. Aurora couldn’t hear the words, but she saw her father’s expression shift, first focused, then troubled, then calm again. Decisions were being made; she could always tell.

Ellarie and the others hardly noticed Carter, though he was the higher of the two men. Their attention was entirely on Vince.

“Look at the cut of his jaw,” Maelyn said, smirking. “Imagine him without all that armor.”

Aurora clenched her jaw, looking away toward the banners.

As the men turned to leave, Ellarie moved deliberately into their path. “General Vince,” she said with affected surprise, bowing slightly. “We were just speaking of you.”

He stopped. His face was calm, measured, polite. “Were you?”

“Only kind words,” she purred. “Tell me, will you be at the winter ball this year? You mustn’t always be training.”

Vince gave a faint smile, “That depends on where the king needs me. But perhaps.”

“Perhaps you’ll make time for us,” she said.

Aurora watched the exchange, a dull ache spreading in her chest.

“If the crown permits,” Vince smiled, his tone formal but not unkind. His eyes passed briefly, just briefly, toward Aurora before he inclined his head and turned to follow Carter out the door.

Ellarie’s smile faltered slightly as he passed. The others tittered behind their hands. Aurora exhaled slowly, her shoulders easing. The laughter of the noble girls returned to its usual tone, bright, shallow, and cold. Aurora looked toward the door where Vince had left.

The fewer who know, the better.

The banquet had begun to thin out. Servants cleared the long tables, gathering empty goblets and half-eaten fruit. The scent of spiced wine lingered in the air as the nobles drifted away in groups, some laughing, some already whispering about the next gathering. The sunlight through the high glass windows had turned from gold to a muted amber.

Aurora stood a while longer, her eyes on the grass, listening to the echo of footsteps fading toward the corridors. Then Puruna approached quietly. “Shall we?” she asked.

Aurora nodded, grateful for the excuse to move. Her shoulders ached from holding herself still for so long. She gathered her skirt, gave a polite nod to those still watching, and turned toward the archway leading out of the greenhouse.

As they stepped through the threshold, the noise of the banquet dulled behind them, replaced by the hollow calm of the stone hallway. The air was

cooler here, and quieter. Aurora breathed easier for the first time all day.

“They’ll talk about that for days,” Puruna said as they walked.

“About Vince or about my father’s war?” Aurora asked.

“Both,” Puruna replied.

They walked a few more paces in silence, the echo of their steps threading softly through the corridor. Aurora’s thoughts still clung to fragments of the conversation she’d overheard earlier. Certain approvals to wait upon. The lady’s word. None of it made sense, but every instinct told her it mattered.

Ahead, voices carried faintly from a side passage. She recognized her father’s tone first, low and measured, the sound he used when he didn’t want his words traveling. She slowed her pace without meaning to, glancing toward the open archway that led to one of the inner balconies. Puruna followed her gaze but said nothing.

King Ronan stood near the railing with Lords Baeryn and Benedict, their backs to the hall. The breeze stirred the edge of Ronan’s dark green cloak as he spoke. His voice was calm, but Aurora caught the tension beneath it.

“—it’s one man,” Benedict said. “Let’s not lose our wits over a single ghost.”

Ronan’s reply came sharper. “He’s not just a ghost, Benedict. You know what he is. If he’s truly one of the escapees, then this isn’t something we can ignore. He has to be stopped—dead or alive.”

Aurora froze mid-step. Escapees? The word sent a pulse through her chest. She looked toward Puruna, who gave a slight shake of her head, urging silence.

Benedict exhaled slowly. “You’re overreacting. It’s been over seventy years. Even if he is who you think, one man can’t undo what’s already buried. No one will believe him even if he does speak. The races have forgotten about those varn people.”

“Buried?” Baeryn’s voice lowered but grew more urgent. “You don’t know what he’s told people. How much he remembers, Benedict. If he’s spoken of it, to anyone—”

“The real question we should be asking, is if attacking Grimrave is actually wise. Did the lords even approve?” Benedict asked.

Ronan cut him off, the authority in his tone final. “I will ask the lords and we will see. Grimrave is clearly a threat against us all, and the war is a

good way to restore the crown's coffers," Ronan sighed. "And that white hair freak, we will find him. Even if he did tell others, who would actually believe him?" There was a moment of silence between the three men, as Ronan adjusted his robe. "But in the meantime, you'll both keep this quiet until I say otherwise. The last thing we need is panic over an insect."

There was silence then, broken only by the faint rustle of banners above the balcony. Aurora could just see the edge of her father's profile as he turned away from the others, his expression unreadable.

Puruna placed a gentle hand on Aurora's arm. "Come," she whispered.

Aurora nodded faintly, though her mind was already racing. They continued down the hall. When they turned the next corner, Aurora finally spoke. "Did you hear them?"

"I heard enough," Puruna said.

"What did they mean—escapees? And who are these lords? I've never heard of this before."

Puruna's silence was enough. She didn't know.

Aurora looked ahead, her expression distant. "And this white-haired man, why does father care so much?" The echo of her father's voice lingered in her ears.

Outside, through a narrow window, the sky had begun to gray with the coming afternoon. She thought of their words again, buried, escapees, dead or alive. And of the other thing she'd overheard earlier—the fewer who know, the better. For the first time in years, the palace felt unfamiliar.

Whatever secret her father guarded, it wasn't meant to stay buried forever.

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16

TRIALS OF THE STORMBLADE

THE CHAMBERS OF MAELOR WERE FILLED WITH THE MURMUR OF FALLING water. Mist hung in the air, soft against the skin. The Aetherians filed through the chamber in single file, boots echoing across the smooth old floor. Matthew walked between Zeen and Nere, hands at his side, eyes wide as they stepped again into that vast chamber. Even after yesterday, its enormity still took his breath away. The deep scent of stone, the low hum that seemed to live beneath the air.

Zeen leaned in as they approached the circle of stone seats. “Didn’t get to ask,” he whispered. “What path did you pick?”

Matthew hesitated. “Strider,” he said. “Stormblade.”

“Stormblade?” Zeen smirked. “Huh, I’m an Aegisoul. Within the Vaylin path.”

But before Matthew could respond, General Ludwig’s voice cut across the room, sharp, commanding, but calm. “Enough. Sit.”

The Aetherians took their places. Ludwig lowered himself into the ninth seat. His talons rested lightly on his knees. “Today,” Ludwig said, “we go deeper. Yesterday, you opened the door to aetheris. Today, you walk your chosen path within it.” He paused. “Aetheris is not an illusion. It is not confined to that realm. What you learn there, you can bring here.” His eyes sharpened slightly as he scanned the room. “These abilities are what will set you apart from ordinary soldiers. You have heard the stories. The legends of great Aetherians. Today…you will begin earning them.”

The circle grew silent. Even Iris stilled.

“Begin,” Ludwig said.

Matthew shut his eyes and exhaled. He tried to focus, but his thoughts scattered: the dog, his siblings, Greg, the black flame. Darkness pressed in behind his eyelids. He gritted his teeth, trying harder. He drew a long breath and he didn’t fight his thoughts; he simply let them pass. And then, his surroundings slipped away.

He stood above clouds beneath a violet sky. A lake spread before him, fed by a colossal waterfall. Pines rose behind him, mist curling between their trunks. The air hummed with quiet life. Stars shimmered in the dark.

He did it.

Then light appeared, small, golden motes swirling together, forming a figure. A woman, delicate and radiant, her shape made entirely of drifting fireflies. She turned in the air, laughing softly. Matthew froze. “Hello?”

The figure tilted her head. When she spoke, her voice seemed both near and far. “Greetings! I am Sorlena. A reflection and guide for those with aetheris.”

He blinked. “Sorlena?” He took a step closer.

She smiled, faintly. “I am a spirit of the aetheris realm, a guide for the gifted,” she said. “And you, are Matthew Peregryn, yes?”

He nodded slowly. “You know my name?”

“I know every Strider who’s ever tried to wield the storm. I know every mortal with aetheris.” Her golden eyes softened. “And I know when one carries something very unfortunate.” She glanced down. Matthew followed her gaze to his hand—the black flame flickering faintly around his hand. Instead Sorlena gestured toward the lake. “You came seeking more about the Stormblade. That is what your path demands. Let me help you.”

“What is it?” he asked.

“Gale step is the first ability of the Stormblade. Speed, yes yes, but more than that! It is the art of moving with the world instead of through it. The Stormblade answers those who do not fight its rhythm.” She stepped backward onto the lake’s surface. Ripples spread beneath her feet, but she didn’t sink.

Matthew stared. “That’s impossible.”

“Belief makes anything possible, Matthew,” she said simply. “Now come.”

“I’ll drown.”

“Then you’ll have to learn faster."

He hesitated, then stepped forward. The water held him, solid, humming faintly beneath his boots. He let out a laugh. “You’re serious?”

“Always.” Sorlena’s grin widened. “Now—imagine the wind at your back. Feel where you want to be, and let your body follow.”

He tried, bracing himself, taking a running start—and promptly fell forward, slamming chest-first into the water’s surface with a grunt.

Sorlena’s laughter rang like distant chimes.

“Crask. It’s not that simple.”

She giggled turning, dashing effortlessly across the water, her body blurring into light. “Again! Again! Again!”

Matthew breathed in, then out. He pictured the next step ahead. Wind coiled around his ankles. He blinked—and suddenly, he was there. The world snapped like a stretched string. He stumbled, laughing in disbelief.

Sorlena clapped once. “Oh? Good good. The storm moves for you. Go faster.”

Stone platforms rose from the water, guiding him. Each leap carried him farther, his body flickering with brief bursts of air. The exhilaration filled him, the freedom, the power.

He landed on the final island, high above the lake. A lone tree grew there, leaves swaying in the wind. Sorlena stood beneath it, radiant.

Matthew grinned.

She smiled back. “You did it! But, there is much much more, Elf.”

But suddenly her form flickered, gold light fracturing into shards. Her face turned uncertain, almost fearful. “What…” she whispered.

Matthew stepped forward. “Sorlena?”

The air wavered around her, outline thinned like smoke in wind. Her lips moved, but no sound came. Then, in a shimmer of gold and static, she was gone.

The light vanished all around and the air went still. Matthew stood alone atop the island as silence swallowed everything. Then the island shivered under his boots—first a quiver, then a full collapse. Sod and rock gave way, dumping him into the shallows with a dull, bruising slap—cold water lapping over his ankles.

The sky dimmed. A red wash crawled across it, and black clouds thickened. The neat green crown of the tree behind him withered as he watched: leaves crisped, bled their color, and fell; bark split; branches sagged.

Out past the drowned horizon, a rim of light rose—not a sunrise, but a moon dragging itself up from the edge of the sea. Not silver. Dark red. A blood moon, low and heavy, seated where the world ended. Something stepped on a dead branch behind him. The crack was small and clean.

He turned.

The dog stood there.

Same massive head, same too-small body, same coal coat. Its eyes yellow and hungry. The dog grinned.

Matthew jolted backward, shoulder striking the dead trunk.

“Ha…ha…he…who…ha,” the thing chuckled, as if it were learning how to laugh. Matthew had no blade here, no shield, no anything. His mind ran in circles and found only the same wall.

Then heat flared around his left hand. Black fire licked up his forearm. The dog turned its head slightly, watching the flame. “Clock’s tickin, Matthew,” it said, almost gentle. “You thought you were safe. But the Heliorens can’t save you now.” The dog advanced with an easy trot. Matthew turned and ran. He pounded off the sinking island and into the shallows, legs throwing sheets of dark water with each stride. He ran toward the blood moon because it was the only fixed thing.

“Look at the Elf run,” a voice called from somewhere to his left.

“Yes, look at him go,” another agreed from the right, bright with delight. More voices joined, layered and low, amused and mean. He didn’t turn. He just kept moving, lungs pulling hard, feet slipping on new roots that should not have been there. Dead trees shouldered up out of the water, one after another. Their limbs clawed across his path. He vaulted one, ducked the next, caught his thigh on a third and swore.

The moon swelled larger, and something inside it turned. A pale core spun into view as though a hole were opening from within the blood moon. The black clouds around it spiraled, and red points opened across the storming bands, eyes blinking awake inside the whirl.

The clock began to tick somewhere he could not see. Not a clock in a room—an old, slow tick that came from the air itself. The water below his knees seethed. Figures formed out of it, thin and dark red, with mouths open in silent screams. Above them and inside the red light, six shapes resolved at the heart of the moon’s glow: one tall and square at the center; one to its right—four others hulking and unfinished.

Matthew broke. He pivoted and sprinted for the trees.

The red dimmed behind him to a smear through trunks. Mist coiled low. He called for Sorlena once, twice, again, but heard nothing; then, faint and distant, a woman's voice as if shouted down a long stone tunnel: "Matthew —" but then it was gone.

Child-screams cut the woods. He knew those voices. He ran harder. He burst into a clearing with a pale beam from above. Cages sat in the grass, iron, cold, stacked in a rough ring. Children clung to the bars, faces wet and wild. At the front, two hands he knew as well as his own reached for him through the metal.

"Elara! Finn!"

"Matthew—help us!" Finn sobbed. "They're coming back! They're coming back!"

"Big brother, please," Elara gasped. "Please!"

A locust rasp began somewhere behind the cages. Heavy steps pressed into wet ground. The sound was close, steady, unhurried. Matthew grabbed the front lock and pulled hard. The bars didn't give. He hunted the hinges for weakness; there was none. He braced and tried to drag the cage itself, but the thing might as well have been built into the earth.

But the rasp grew.

Something big pushed through the brush out beyond the clearing, two jointed legs at first, then another pair behind those. He couldn't see the body, only the legs and the slow, eager patience in their step.

"Don't listen to them," a voice said right behind his left shoulder.

Matthew spun.

The dog sat, smiling. "You can't help them," it said brightly. "You can't even save yourself. Your time is up and you will take the mark of the Salrot!"

Suddenly the dog growled and lunged, jaws yawning wide.

Matthew threw up his left arm. The bite took him just below the elbow. Pressure met bone.

His blood sprayed his cheek, hot and metallic.

He tried to wrench away and only tore the wound wider. The dog clamped and chewed. The insect legs advanced into the light. He saw the scale of them now, thinner than a man's torso, with edges like sickles. He dragged breath into his chest to scream—

And suddenly a white light blew across the clearing from his right. The dog tore its mouth away and shrieked, a cracked, furious sound. Everything

went blank.

He came back to himself on the ground, choking on air. The roar of Maelor's falls returned in a rush. The stone benches were empty. Only General Ludwig knelt beside him.

Matthew pushed up on an elbow. But pain stung his arm. He shoved his sleeve back. The bite mark was there, deep oval pits from big teeth, not bleeding now but livid. He stared, then stared harder as the scars crawled before his eyes, teeth fading, red lines curling into a ring of narrow swirls, the shape shifting into something deliberate.

"What—" Matthew rasped. "What is this?"

Ludwig's attention flicked from the skin to Matthew's face and back. "Up," he said. "We're not staying here."

"Where is everyone?"

"Gone. Hours ago."

He hauled Matthew to his feet and moved. They crossed the chamber. Ludwig set a palm to the lift's sigil, stone rose bearing them up toward the forest mouth. They broke out into moonlight. Ludwig took the lead through the pines, large strides.

Matthew's breath turned thin. The woods were full.

Shapes hung between trunks, stringy, wrong-bodied silhouettes; faces where faces shouldn't be; mouths set wide and smiling. As he watched, one opened its jaw too far and kept going. Another stretched its arms, and the extra joints it shouldn't have cracked.

He grabbed Ludwig's forearm. "There—at the trees—"

Ludwig looked, then looked again, head canted the way a hawk studies movement. "There's nothing," he said, voice even. "Stay with me."

"They're everywhere."

"Elf." Ludwig's tone didn't change, but it got harder. "Eyes on me."

Matthew tried. But the shapes laughed. His arm burned. His vision smudged at the edges. His knees went soft.

He went down.

Ludwig caught him under the arms, slung him across his shoulders as if Matthew weighed nothing, and ran. Trees thinned. The road flared wide. The castle's walls rode past the trees to their left; the barracks city rose straight ahead. Somewhere a drillmaster shouted count. Somewhere a hippogriff squealed. Matthew focused on those small, ordinary sounds and swallowed against nausea.

A cluster of soldiers stood by the town hall. Zeen was among them. He saw Ludwig and started forward at once.

“Food,” Ludwig barked. “Food. Quickly. Hospital wing.”

Zeen didn’t ask which. He ran.

Ludwig shouldered through the barracks doors, the hospital wing was cool and clean and smelled faintly of boiled linen. He lowered Matthew onto a cot. Matthew tried to sit, but then spotted a horrific demon crouched in the back corner and froze.

Six arms. Two far too long and set in front like a spider’s; two behind positioned like hind legs; two curled against its sides like extra hands. No eyes. But a mouth full of tidy Human teeth, every one of them small and white. It grinned. “Cursed Elf,” it said without moving its lips. Then a loud scream came from the demon.

Matthew shoved himself back screaming and grabbing his ears, blanket twisting under his boots. Then more demons clicked and shifted along the eaves—other shapes peering in, interested.

Ludwig’s head snapped toward the corner. But he saw nothing. He turned back and put a hand on Matthew’s shoulder, firm. “Here,” he said. “Here.”

Zeen burst in, tray shaking in his hands. Bread. Stew. Cheese. Dried fruit. “Sir,” he said, eyes flicking from Matthew’s face to Ludwig’s and back. “What else?”

“This is enough,” Ludwig said. “Back to your unit!”

“Right.” Zeen set the tray down and jogged out.

“Eat!” Ludwig said. Matthew’s hands shook, but he ate. Spoon, mouth, chew, swallow. Again and again. The stew tasted of onion and marrow and salt. Then bread. Then fruit. Sweat crawled down his spine. The corner was empty when he looked again. The mouths along the rafters were gone. He drained the water tin.

“Better?” Ludwig asked.

Matthew nodded. “What just happened to me?”

Ludwig watched him for a long moment and then spoke plainly. “You’ve been branded.”

Matthew stared at his left forearm. The red swirls sat under the skin like ink. He flexed his fingers and didn’t feel heat anymore, only the itch of something new. “What does that mean,” he said, not a question. “Say it.”

Ludwig pulled a chair in close to the cot and sat. The lamplight picked out pale quills along his cheek and throat. “Sixty years ago,” he sighed, “I watched a man walk through this. An Aetherian like yourself. Not from Eldoria, a young Belfourian soldier. Talented. Kind. He woke one season with a black flame on his hand and dreams that weren’t dreams. We called it the Oblivion, because we had no better word.”

Matthew swallowed. “And?”

“It is a curse from what I understood. We kept it quiet out of fear that it may scare the public or the royal families. We wanted to study and understand it first.” Ludwig said. No ceremony. No long lead-in. “We do not know how someone receives the flame, I once thought it was only bad luck. But once the person is marked like you, it seems that the mind is preyed upon when the body is weak. Hunger opens the door fastest. Going into the aetheris realm, opens it wider. The visions come more often. They are not nightmares.”

Matthew held his breath and then let it out. “They’re futures.”

“They point to one,” Ludwig said.

Matthew stared at the ceiling. The plaster had a thin crack running across it like a map line. “Why didn’t you tell me this when we first spoke?” he asked, voice low.

“Because there are times when fear is a poison that kills quicker than the thing itself,” Ludwig said. “But also, because I was trying to study it like I told you before. I wanted to understand why you had this flame, and to see if it was the same. And it is...it seems.”

“What happened to him? That soldier?” Matthew asked, keeping his tone flat. “Your friend.”

“These visions of the futures, they meant death from what I understood,” Ludwig said. “Unfortunately, the young man decided he deserved what he saw and walked to meet it. I am not advising you to do that.”

“Death? These visions are showing my death?” Matthew bit out.

Ludwig nodded once. “Yes, but hear the practical parts. First: you must keep yourself fed. Not a little. Enough for your body to have fuel. Going into the aetheris realm drains anyone; in you, the drain is an invitation. Don’t give the invitation freely. Second: when you can bear it, watch. If the vision wants to show you how you die, you may need to see enough to know where not to stand.”

“You want me to stand there and let it happen?”

“I want you to look and then choose,” Ludwig said. “I won’t lie to you and say I know that choice will save you. I don’t know that. I know only what I’ve seen.”

Matthew rubbed at his face with his right hand. He stared at the mark again. It didn’t look like teeth now. It looked like a sigil someone had pressed into his arm with a hot iron. “In the vision,” he said, “there was the moon. Red. And…shapes. Six of them. And I ran. I didn’t watch long enough to see what they were. Then I saw cages. Children. My brother and sister were in one. I couldn’t get it open.”

Ludwig leaned back, thumb rubbing along his beak’s lower edge in thought. “So it isn’t only your death you’re shown.”

Matthew shook his head.

“That matters,” Ludwig said. “It means the visions are not a single thread. There may be more than one thing at work in you—the curse itself, and your own fears answering it.”

Matthew looked up. “Then what do I do tonight?”

“You go to your barrack,” Ludwig said. “You eat again. You sleep. If another vision takes you, do your best to watch without breaking. If you can see more, see more. Don’t chase. Don’t starve it out by stubbornness. This is a long fight, not a sprint. You may be able to avoid this death.”

“And if I don’t sleep?”

“At that point, I would pray,” Ludwig said simply. “To the Heliorens. Ask for help. If you can’t believe your own words, say them anyway. I’m not a priest, Elf. But I know where help comes from when nothing else makes sense.”

Matthew flinched at that, shame, frustration, and the throb of old doubt tangling. Instead he didn’t say anything and picked at dry bread until crumbs speckled his lap.

Ludwig stood. “You’re not alone,” he said.

Matthew gave a tight nod.

Ludwig paused in the doorway. “Eat more before you go,” he added. “Then straight to your quarters. Report to me at sunup. No aetheris work tomorrow unless I say. Understand?”

“I understand.”

He watched the door close. The lamp hissed softly. He finished what was left on the tray because Ludwig had told him to and because his hands

were steadier now.

When he rose, the ache in his bitten arm throbbed to remind him. He pulled his sleeve down to cover the mark. Outside, the camp was moving toward evening—voices, clatter, the ordinary business of soldiers at the end of a long day. He walked with his head low, cutting past knots of men who fell quiet as he approached and louder as he passed. He set his eyes on the Aetherian quarters—the clean stone, the green roof, the narrow stairs.

He reached the door and put his hand to it and stopped.

If Ludwig was right, if this mark would not leave him, if hunger and sleep and training were all just ways to buy hours, then staying here in Eldoria was a slow death. Elara and Finn were in cages. He had seen that much. Cages meant time. Not much. Some.

If he waited, that time would run out. The plan he'd been holding in the back of his mind: slip out after dark; skirt the lower road; cut to the docks; find a boat, any boat; then sail southwest toward Drearth. He would not be here when the next vision came.

He opened the door and went inside because someone might be watching. He sat on his bunk and unlaced his boots and laced them again. He set his new Khazadryn steel where his hand could find it in the dark and turned it so the light did not flash off the blade through the window. He forced down another heel of bread and a wedge of cheese he didn't want.

Then he lay back on the thin mattress, stared at the timbered ceiling, and tried to pray. "Help me. Help them. Show me what to do."

Silence answered.

Outside, somewhere farther off, a raven called twice. Matthew rolled to his side, he knew that he would leave before the moon climbed, while the camp changed watches. He would take a boat tonight. He would find the sea. He would go to Drearth, no more waiting.

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17

CAUGHT BETWEEN

THE KNOCK AT HER CHAMBER DOOR CAME JUST AS AURORA WAS FASTENING the last clasp of her earring. “My lady,” Puruna called through the wood, calm with a thread of urgency. “Your father is requesting your presence.”

Aurora checked the angle of the earring in the mirror—tiny, unnecessary corrections. “What is the matter?” She opened the door.

Puruna stood straight-backed, hands folded, the neatness of her posture saying what her face did not. “The delegation from Belfour has arrived a short while ago. They are in the east wing drawing room. Your father sent me to fetch you.”

“What!?” The word leapt out faster than she meant it to.

“They made excellent time,” Puruna replied, already stepping aside to let her pass. The corridor was warm with torchlight, servants crossing and recrossing with trays and folded linens. Aurora fell into step beside Puruna, green and gold silk whispering at her ankles. As they passed under the high arches she felt the old tightness gather at her ribs, Belfour, here, already?

She had a picture of Prince John from years ago, kind, courteous, and vaguely off, like a portrait hung just a little crooked. Easy to speak to; easier to forget. If her father had summoned her early and without ceremony…that usually meant something had already been decided. They reached the tall double doors to the east wing drawing room.

Puruna stopped, expression softening. “I will wait here, my lady. You may go in.”

Aurora smoothed the front of her gown, ritual more than need—and nodded. The guards swung the doors. Warmth and noise brushed over her. The drawing room was thick with conversation: courtiers in jewel tones, clusters splitting and reforming, the deep carpet swallowing footfalls. Fire blazed in the hearth, gilding faces and rings. She felt eyes tug toward her as the servant by the door announced, “Princess Aurora.”

She curtsied as she had a thousand times, muscle and memory aligning, and when she rose her father was already striding out from the center: King Ronan, smile warm, gaze measuring. “Daughter.”

She moved to him; he kissed her cheek, and in that close space she smelled spiced wine and the wax of his signet candle. Before she could ask anything, her gaze caught on Nere across the room. He stood beside a tall man in blue trimmed with gold. Older now, hair cropped close, posture that said prince even before the gilding did. John Titus.

Nere spoke with him easily, gestures open; some new steadiness in her brother’s shoulders told of long training with Ludwig and the Aetherians.

Near the fire, the royal women had gathered: Ellarie Verlain radiant in sapphire, Maelyn Aras and her older brother Eero composed and precise, others orbiting them. Eyes tracked Aurora. The flicker of an appraisal, a murmur, the brief press of smiles against their teeth. Ellarie leaned and said something to Maelyn; they laughed.

Aurora started forward, and her mother appeared at her elbow like a shadow stepping out of a wall. “Do you see him?” Orkora’s voice was a breath that wouldn’t carry beyond them.

Aurora startled. “Mother—yes, I see him. Why are you—”

“You and Prince John are being arranged for marriage,” Orkora said.

No preface. No cushion. A stone dropped into still water. “What?”

Orkora’s hand closed light and firm around her wrist. “Do not make a scene. Smile. We will speak with him now.”

A rush of heat pinched the edges of Aurora’s vision and then passed.

Arranged, marriage, decided somewhere without her in the room. Ellarie had turned, watching, the tiny satisfied curve near her mouth saying she had maybe known first.

So this was the surprise. The shape behind the lords’ careful laughter. The thread that tugged today’s talk of alliances into a knot around her throat and why Belfour was coming.

By the time they reached King Ronan, King Althren, Lord Benedict, Lord Baeryn, and Prince John. They all turned toward her. Aurora had her face back on: serene, even, untouchable as glass. “Your Majesties,” she curtsied deeply. King Althren inclined his head. Prince John stepped forward, took her hand lightly, and kissed her knuckles. “It has been far too long, princess.”

“It has,” she said, polite neutrality wrapped around the words.

“Why don’t you and John speak for a while?” Ronan suggested, command nestled in courtesy. “Althren and I have some matters to discuss.”

Done, then.

She was paired off and turned toward the long windows where cool night pressed thinly through the glass. John kept a smooth smile and a steady interest. His attention lingered a bit too long each time she answered. She felt the space between them as something she had to keep open with her own hands.

They spoke of safe things: roads in the north, Drakhar’s latest postures, raids held back at Elandor’s Stonewatch. He described the march past the Great Colosseum by the Weeping Run, and the winter storm that never ends —twisting like a white spear above Musetafer—The Varathel. Aurora repeated what Eldorians always repeat when Varathel comes up: some say Oryneth’s old wound, some say Sechera’s breath out of Ishd’kar. But who knows.

John finished with a soft laugh.

Books came up, as they often did when men were trying to please her. He used the word “fascinating” twice too many times. Then suddenly, the doors opened. General Vince entered first, quietly making his own path ahead of him. Her father’s voice lifted warm as he greeted him to King Althren. In fact, General Kael and General Ludwig followed, robes glistening in the firelight.

Vince’s eyes found hers across the room. He smiled, brief, precise. She let the smallest answering smile touch her mouth before Ellarie moved, smooth as a chess piece, and drew him into her radius—fingers light on his sleeve. The girls drifted closer, laughter. Aurora’s teeth met and stayed there.

“You seem…distracted,” John said, his voice finally pushing through her small storm. He studied her a beat. If a question formed, he shelved it.

“They appear to be enjoying themselves,” he said, curiosity without malice, nodding toward the hearth.

“They always do,” Aurora replied, even.

“That is Ellarie Verlain, isn’t it?” he asked. “I remember her…a little.”

“Everyone remembers her,” Aurora said. “She makes sure of it.”

He let that pass too. “Perhaps you might walk me through the castle. It has been so long since my last visit.”

“Another time, perhaps,” she said with the soft smile she used for refusals. “It is night and the event is already quite full.”

He didn’t flinch. “Then maybe we could join them by the fire? It would be good to meet the ladies of Eldoria again.”

By the fire, Vince would see her, and she could choose what to be seen doing. She tipped her head. “A fine idea. They would be glad to meet you.” They crossed. Chatter stuttered for a heartbeat as Aurora approached with a prince in tow, then resumed with that careful bright hum. Ellarie’s smile deepened to welcome John, voice warm as she set him into talk of trade routes and winter roads. The others weighed him in glances and half-questions. Aurora let it play the way such scenes always do, then let her gaze slip past them to Vince.

He was already watching, not openly, no one else would have noticed, but there was a line between them again, slight and steady as a hand on a door latch. She gave the smallest flick of her eyes toward the far door. Then to John, “If you will excuse me, your highness, I must attend to something. I will return shortly.” He inclined his head. The question in his eyes stayed polite and unanswered.

Aurora stepped away, posture perfect, pulse picking up. The door closed behind her. Puruna wasn’t in the corridor. She wouldn’t have stopped her if she had been. The torches here burned lower and for once Aurora didn’t correct her stride to the measured glide her mother preferred. Anger sat in her belly, at her father for springing a fate on her like a household announcement—at Ellarie’s satisfaction, at being moved as if she were only the weight of her dowry and the ink on a treaty.

And somewhere in that anger, the memory of Vince’s look across the room.

Soft footfalls behind her. “My lady.” His voice, quiet and warm.

She stopped because she wanted to, not because she must. She turned enough to see him in the torchlight, the set of him. She didn’t speak. She

reached for his hand, unthinking, and her fingers closed around his. A small stiffening—surprise—then he let himself be led. They moved through two turns and under a stone lintel to the library's tall doors. She pushed one, slipped through, drew him with her, and eased it shut.

Cool, ink-scented air. Pillars of shelves climbing into the dim, moonlight striping long tables.

"So you…and the prince?" Vince asked, finally.

"No," she said, quickly. "It's not like that. This wasn't—"

She tried a smile that didn't belong to her.

"You don't have to explain," he offered, careful.

"Yes, I do," she shot back, sharper than what she meant. "Because right now it feels like everything is being decided for me, and I don't have a say in any of it."

"You're the king's daughter," he said. There was no envy in it.

"That means I'm valuable," she said. "Not for who I am. For what I can be traded for."

"And the prince is…a good bargain?" he asked.

"For my father, perhaps." She huffed something like a laugh. "For me? He's…annoying."

His mouth moved, almost a smile, almost pity, then settled. "And what do you want, Aurora?"

She looked at him and almost told him. The words felt like a locked box; to speak them would be to tip it open. "I want to breathe," she said finally. "I want to choose. I want…" She stopped. "What am I even saying? It doesn't matter anyway. It's not mine to want."

Quiet settled in the open space between them. He stepped away from the table into a cut of moonlight. "You think you're the only one moved like a chess piece?" he asked. "You wear a king's daughter's gown. I wear a soldier's armor. Same board. Same hand."

"You chose to be a soldier, that's different."

"Did I?" His palm rested flat on the table. "I was born with nothing anyone could trade, other than having aetheris. No land, no name that opened doors. The army was the door that was open. You take it, and they say you chose."

She traced a groove in the table with her thumb. "So we're both here because someone else thought we should be? As if the sovereigns are moving us like chess pieces on a board?"

“That’s one way to look at it.” He glanced over, caught the earnestness she hadn’t meant to show, and let out a breath that had a hint of a smile in it.

She turned to the shelves to hide her face, skimming titles without seeing any of them. Their shoulders were near, not touching. “I suppose I shouldn’t be here,” she said.

“You suppose?”

“I know I shouldn’t. If anyone sees us—” Ellarie’s grin rose in her mind like a bruise.

“Then we’re lucky it’s just these books to witness us,” he chuckled.

It sounded easy, but it wasn’t. She drew out a random volume, opened it, turned a page she didn’t read, closed it. She could feel him as plainly as if there were a line of heat between them. “I should return before my absence is noticed,” she turned. A tug at her wrist. She looked down, then up.

Vince had reached out as she moved. He let go immediately, color touching his cheek. “Sorry. I don’t know what came over me.”

She didn’t step back.

“And the prince?” he asked, voice low.

“The prince will still be there. Waiting for me. I am afraid I don’t truly have a choice.”

“What? That’s it?”

“I’m sorry, Vince. I was being unwise. This…us…it’s a novelty. Nothing more.”

Something flickered in his face: the yes of a man given an order, the no of a man who doesn’t like it. The shadow of a smile, gone. Footsteps sounded faintly beyond the doors. Two voices, a laugh, the slide of a heel on stone. They looked at one another one last time.

An acknowledgement that this was the line and they were stepping back from it. He moved into shadow near the shelves; she gathered herself back into the shape expected of her and opened the door.

The corridor was empty, but the noise from the drawing room carried like a low tide. She set her pace to the measured glide again and rounded the angle toward the east wing. Just as her father’s voice lifted, clear and composed, from the small alcove off the passage. She slipped back into the drawing room with practiced ease.

The heat, the voices, a viol tuning back to life. John turned, smiling as if she’d returned from a pleasant errand. Her father’s voice rose behind her

again in the alcove, smooth as ever when he stepped out to join King Althren in public light.

Aurora took her place exactly where she was meant to be, her pulse steadying by force and habit. And under it, the small ember of the library, and the soldier who had let her lead him there and who she then let go. She lifted her goblet, and when Prince John asked if everything was well, she just smiled as if it were.

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18

THE NIGHTTIME ESCAPE

MATTHEW TIGHTENED THE LAST STRAP ON THE SMALL SATCHEL HE'D PACKED from the trunk beneath his cot. Waterskin, dried bread, the new Khazadryn blade Bork had pressed on him. His green army tunic felt heavier than it had hours ago.

Zeen lay on his back with an arm over his eyes. Baron slept on his stomach, breath huffing softly into his blanket. Eero's bunk was empty; Nere's was neatly made, untouched—both of them pulled to the castle for a royal event. Pete's blanket was folded too, but in the careless way of someone who hadn't returned yet. Matthew didn't know where the boy had gone. The women, Shil and Iris were in their own quarters.

Matthew slid his turnshoes on, the soft leather hugging damp feet. He should pray, he thought, but didn't. Words stuck when he tried. The cabin door was stuck against the swollen jamb. He eased it, eased it more. Then the hinge gave a long, low creak that cut through the room. Matthew froze, heart punching, every muscle going still. Baron snorted and rolled over. Zeen muttered something in his sleep.

"Sorry," Matthew breathed, to no one and nothing. He widened the gap and slipped out, easing the door back until the latch caught without a click. The camp at one in the morning felt like a small ghost city. The tall watchtowers cut black shapes against a cloud-clotted sky. Lanterns guttered along the lanes between barracks.

Matthew kept to the shadows.

Twice he stopped, listening; the hiss of his own breath answered. The eastern gate stood under its stone arch, two towers flanking it like blunt teeth. He peered out from behind a barrack corner and watched the entry. The dirt road beyond ran south toward the castle's silhouette on the cliff, dark roofs cutting hard angles against a faint starless glow. He counted guards, one on the right tower parapet, one on the left, two pacing the arch. Above him, the tower sentries' boots scuffed as they turned in bored loops.

He was deciding which timing was worse when marching feet came up the road. Low, steady. He pressed flat to the wall. A dozen men approached the gate, laughing too loudly for the hour. Eldorian green capes among them; others wore chain over blue tunics—Belfour men. They had the sway of soldiers who'd drunk enough to pretend they weren't tired. One banged the tower's door on his way down the steps to change the watch. Another climbed past him with a grunt.

"Crask," Matthew mouthed. He thought of the visions, the blood moon, Elara and Finn's hands through cage bars. The window for a dumb risk was now. He looked up once at the roofline, judged the angle, pulled a breath in—and ran.

Gale step.

He pushed off the hard-packed dirt, reached for the space ahead, and felt his body catch that new pull. The roof rushed up under him. He landed in a swallow of dust and old thatch, slid down the far slope, and flattened himself along the eave as voices drifted beneath.

Leather creaked. Someone laughed about Belfour ale. The tower guard complained that night watch was for men who'd angered General Kael. When their talk thinned and the lane opened, Matthew rolled to the rear eave, pushed off, and let the gale step tug him again. He hit grass in a low roll and came up running. Another step carried him across the open throat of the gate. He was out, on the road, the dark forest ahead. He didn't look back.

He ran until the trees took him in. Then he slowed, breath coming in burning pulls, and bent his hands to his knees. Thunder muttered someplace out at sea.

Matthew turned southeast, keeping the cliff on his right, and moved through brush until the woods broke toward stone. The castle dock path waited at the cliff's lip. A long stair of cut rock hairpinning down to the

royal piers. Lanterns bobbed where the waves knocked posts. The moon, smothered behind low weather, put only a skin of light on the water.

From the edge, he looked down. Rows of ships, sleek royal cutters, broad-bellied troop carriers, rocked against their moorings. Eldoria's eagle figureheads stared across the dark. He'd sailed six days with Greg. He could tie a knot. He could coil a line. But he could not command one of those things into the open sea. He'd need a smaller ship. Something with one mast, two at most.

Bootsteps crunched somewhere behind, coming toward the stair.

A patrol.

There was no more time.

Matthew swung over the rail and tried to descend the cliff face, shoes scraping against shale. Two yards down, the rock sheared into loose grit. He slid, elbows flaying open, tunic sleeve tearing from shoulder to forearm. The cliff tore his palms. The dock rose too quickly. At the last second he kicked out, grabbed the thread of aetheris inside him, and let the gale step translate that kick into height. He arced up and fell hard to the wet sand, tumbling until grit filled his mouth.

"Varn it," he hissed into his sleeve.

He spat sand, stood, and limped toward the piers. The rain began, first as a mist, then as a clean, cold curtain that flattened the sea's chop to iron-gray ridges. Only one figure moved along the dock. A single guard slumped against a barrel, hood low against the weather.

Then the boy lifted his head, and Matthew saw him.

Pete.

Of all people. The young man who had helped arrest him, and an Aetherian as well.

Matthew stiffened.

But he pulled his hood up anyway, the green fabric sticking to his wet hair, and padded down the boards with soft steps. The boy didn't hear him until the blade touched his throat from behind. The steel felt steadier in Matthew's hand. "Don't speak," Matthew said, voice low. "Walk. Slowly. The first boat that a single man can sail. Now."

Pete went rigid, then moved, shuffling forward with hands raised just enough to show he wasn't reaching for a weapon. They passed a skiff. Pete jerked a shoulder toward it. Matthew shook his head against the back of Pete's hood. "Sea, not a pond," he whispered. "Keep moving."

They moved past a troop carrier with a gold eagle prow and two rows of oarlocks. A cutter beyond that might serve; its mast was furled, lines neat on their pins. Suddenly Pete's pace changed. His shoulders rolled once under the blade. Matthew felt, rather than saw, the shift. "Don't," Matthew said. But Pete spun anyway, water flinging from his cloak, his own sword already in his hand. Matthew stumbled back, surprised into dropping his point.

"Elf," Pete blurted, more angry than surprised. Rain and shock cutting his voice thin. Matthew's hood had slipped. He dragged it up again too late.

"Lead me to a small-rig ship," Matthew said, trying to keep his voice calm, reasoned. "Nobody needs to get hurt."

Pete's eyes hardened. "You shouldn't be here," he said, loud enough for the wind to carry. "You shouldn't be down here."

"I don't have time to argue."

"You're a thief. A traitor, they shouldn't have brought you in. We all knew Elves were the same." Pete snapped. Then the boy came in with a straight thrust born of drill and fear. Matthew parried, badly. He had muscle memory for nothing more than basic cuts and blocks. Pete pressed, short, quick steps driving Matthew backward along the soaked planks. Their blades rang and skidded in the rain.

"Stop," Matthew said, catching a descending cut and feeling it jar his shoulder. "Pete—"

Pete pushed harder. "Elves are always evil," he spat. "We should've—"

Something inside Matthew went hot, then hotter. A fever under the skin. The black flame licked up his left hand with a soft, hungry whisper, as if it had been waiting for this exact moment. "Matthew." The voice hit him from inside, a low gravel scrape he knew too well. "Now…do it now…"

A lantern swung close, throwing their faces into stuttered light. Pete raised his sword for the same overhead drop, perhaps thinking repetition would break Matthew's guard. Matthew's body moved before his good sense did. He stepped in, twisted, let Pete's blade slide to the side—and drove his own point forward.

It punched through leather. Through the boy.

Pete's mouth opened without making sound. Matthew felt the resistance, then the give, and then the wrong warmth running down his hand where rain should have been.

He jerked the blade back and the boy folded to the planks, dragging Matthew's hood down as he fell. He pawed at his chest; blood welled between his fingers and ran under him in a quick sheet that pooled in the cracks between boards.

"No," Matthew said. "No, no—Pete." He dropped to his knees, hands pressing at the wound as if he could plug a punctured cask. "It's—it's not deep, it—"

It was deep.

The boy's breath came in small, thin gasps, each smaller than the last. Rain beat against the dock, washing red into black.

Pete's eyes found him and did not forgive or condemn. They only looked afraid. One more quick breath, and they stopped. The dock was loud and quiet at the same time. Rain roaring, the sea working the piles, and the lantern glass rattling. Matthew's own lungs forgot their work for a moment.

But then a laugh came from somewhere it had no right to be.

"Look at him," said the voice he knew. "Our righteous little Elf."

Matthew spun.

The dog stood at the edge of the pool of lantern light, water sliding off its black coat in long lines. Blood dripped from its jaw, though there was none to be had but Pete's, and that blood already lay on the planks.

"You did this," Matthew said. He wasn't sure if he meant it as accusation or truth.

But the dog cocked its head. "Me? No, no, no. You did. He wanted to be brave. You wanted to leave." Then the dog sniffed. "Oh my," the dog sniffed again, "you smell like guilt. You wear it well, Matthew."

"This wasn't supposed to happen! I didn't mean—" he cried.

"But you did," the dog said, voice soft as rain. "And now you are exactly what I told you you were."

Footsteps thumped at the head of the stairs. A guard's silhouette filled the top of the pier, then took the steps two at a time, lantern swinging. He reached the bottom and his light blew Matthew's shadow long across the boards. He took in the sword, the body, the blood, the Elf face. "Murderer!" the man shouted, voice cracking into the weather. "Murderer! Elf!"

He lunged for the bell fixed to the dock post and tore at the rope. The bell's clang kicked up the cliff and into the castle's stone. Above, figures leaned over the rail. Shouts answered. The guard turned back with drawn steel, rain pouring off his helm. Others were already coming.

The dog laughed, a quick hitching sound that made something behind Matthew's ribs twist. "Hahaha…uh oh. Looks like time's up Matthew," the dog said, and then it blinked out—gone as if doused, leaving only the smear of its mirth behind Matthew's eyes.

Matthew stumbled backward, mind blank of plans.

He turned and ran. Sprinting the length of the dock, boots slipping on the slick planks, the bell still hammering from behind. He leapt to the sand, nearly fell, found his legs again, and pushed down the strand with the sea at his right and the cliff rising hard to his left. Torches bobbed at his back. The rain did not let up.

Each breath scraped.

He threw three gale steps in quick sequence, each one a hard tug through space that landed him three, four body lengths forward, and burned his stamina to the wick. He felt the drain: the flutter of weakness at his knees, the edge of nausea rising, the fine tremble starting in his hands. The Oblivion brand on his forearm prickled as if something inside the skin had woken.

There was an opening in the cliff. A diagonal cut where the earth had slumped away, offering a way up. Matthew veered, sank to his ankles in wet sand, and clawed for the grass. His fingers slid. He swore, then dug his nails into the muddy seam and hauled. The hill gave in clods. Twice he slipped back, tearing both knees open on rock. Torchlight splashed on the beach below as the first line of soldiers reached the point where he'd left the sand.

"Up," he told himself out loud. "Up." He reached the top, belly first, and rolled into the black lattice of the trees. He did not stop. He ran until his lungs clawed at his spine, ran until the taste of iron crawled up his throat, ran until the smart choice would have been to lie down and let the men find him. But when his vision narrowed and his legs went soft, he crashed against a trunk and slid to a crouch, forehead against the wet bark. Voices moved among the trees—low, angry, scattered. Torches moved too, their light making thin curtains in the rain. He couldn't put distance between his breathing and the sound the men would hear. He looked up.

Branches laced the dark twenty, thirty feet up. The bark was slick. The rain made everything a moving thing. He put his hands on the trunk and started to climb. The first ten feet were easy with panic doing the work. The next ten were slow, hands sliding, shoes scrabbling for holds in knots. He hooked a knee over a crooked limb and pulled himself onto a branch. He

pressed his back into the trunk and pulled leaves over his front with shaking fingers until the rain beat them flat against him.

The patrols came through, torches hissing in the downpour. A sergeant with a scar at his jaw stood in the open patch below Matthew's tree and looked up into the wet dark. The firelight flickered across his face and died out at the leaves.

"The Elf is either in here or he's gone to the city," he said finally, voice thick with irritation. "We'll wake the whole camp and comb it again if we keep at this."

"We should've cut his ears when he came to the gate," someone said. "Kael wouldn't have had this trouble then."

"Drekk," a man cursed, "why did it have to happen tonight?"

"Shut the rauk up. That varn Elf just murdered one of our own!" The other man shouted.

Another spit into the mud. "Rauking Elves. Rotten lot they are."

"All of you, shut the neth'rose up. Let's get back to the road," the sergeant said. "We alert General Kael. Sound the posts. Every gate. Every patrol." He turned. "Move." They all moved—one line of light becoming three, then nothing but the water dropping out of the leaves and the far-off grind of the sea.

Matthew didn't come down. He stayed where he was and tried to breathe slowly. His hands would not stop shaking.

He stared at the back of his own left arm where the red brand lines had replaced the dog's bite marks, and he could not tell if it was warmer than the rest of him because of blood or because of the thing Ludwig had named.

He wiped his mouth with the back of his wrist and tasted salt and iron. "I'm sorry," he said, to Pete, to the sovereigns, to no one who could hear him. "I'm sorry," he cried.

But the rain didn't answer.

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19

EYE OF THE DEEP

RAIN WHISPERED THROUGH THE TREES IN A SLOW, WEARY RHYTHM. THE forest had gone still hours ago, save for the hiss of water sliding over bark and leaves. Matthew remained crouched on the branch of the great oak where he had hidden, arms wrapped tightly around the tree, his head bowed beneath the dripping leaves. His tunic clung to his skin, soaked and heavy. Numbness seeped through every muscle until even his own heartbeat felt distant.

He had lost count of the hours. The bell, the soldiers' shouting, the flashing torches—all of it had faded. Now there was only the memory of a single instant. Every blink conjured it anew, the shock, the betrayal, the way his own hands had trembled afterward. He pressed his palms against his face, trying to wipe it away, but the blood on his conscience was thick.

He thought of Zeen and of Ludwig. By now, they would know. Word would spread through the camp, through the kingdom, the Elf murdered a soldier. There would be no reasoning, no mercy.

"Murderer…"

Matthew flinched, glancing around the branches above.

"Murderer…coward…thief…"

The whispers were soft, drawn-out, curling through the rain like smoke. Shadows clung to the trunks, stretched unnaturally across the ground.

He squeezed his eyes shut, whispering to himself, "It's just in my head. It's just me."

But the laughter was not his own. When he opened his eyes again, he saw them—slithering shapes made of smoke and malice, their eyes flickering gold in the dim. The nearest one hung from a branch above, its form almost Human. Its grin stretched unnaturally wide.

“You think praying will save you?” it hissed. “Even your sovereigns have turned their faces from you.”

Matthew flinched, his breath catching.

Another voice joined it, smooth and mocking. “Murderer…look at him, crying in the dark.”

He pressed his palms over his ears. The voices were around him; but they were also inside him, crawling between his thoughts.

“Why run?”

“You can’t hide.”

“Even your maker won’t look at you now.”

Matthew’s chest tightened. “Stop,” he whispered. “Please—”

But the laughter only grew. More shadows crawled along the branches. The closest one dripped down the trunk like tar, whispering as it came.

“You don’t deserve to live, Elf.”

Matthew backed against the tree, shaking his head. “No…no—”

“Your parents would cast you out,” another said. “Your village would spit on your name.”

The chorus swelled, cruel and gleeful.

“You should end it. END YOU.”

He squeezed his eyes shut. For a single moment, he imagined it: no more pain, no more shame, no more waking to the weight of what he’d done. The idea chilled him, and yet some weak, broken part of him clung to it.

Maybe it would be easier.

He gritted his teeth. “No.” The word came out as a rasp. “No…I won’t.” He clung to the thought. “I can’t. I’m not done yet.” Thoughts of Elara and Finn steadied him, a small light inside the dark.

The laughter faltered—then rose again in fury.

“You think they’d forgive you!?”

“Fool. Gone because of you!”

“Cry again,” one hissed. “Do it!”

Matthew reached for the trunk, trying to climb down, but the wet bark slipped under his hands. He lost his footing and fell. The ground struck him

hard, driving the wind from his lungs. He lay there staring up through the rain at the black limbs overhead. The shadows leered from above, whispering, laughing, echoing his thoughts in cruel mimicry.

"What would your parents say if they saw what you've become?"

"They'd turn their eyes away."

"They'd call you what you are."

Matthew pushed himself up. "Stop," he whispered. "Please—stop."

But the forest itself seemed to mock him. His own sob caught in his throat. Maybe they're right, he thought. Maybe he should die. "Why did this have to happen…"

Rain pattered on his face.

And then—the laughter stopped.

Out of the trees stepped the black dog.

It padded closer, slow and deliberate, each step leaving a print. "Poor thing," it cooed.

"I didn't—I didn't want to!"

The dog tilted its head while circling him. "Want? Oh, no no. You did. You wanted him dead. You wanted to escape. And now you have. Isn't that what you wanted all along?"

Matthew's breath came in ragged bursts. The dog's words sank deep, threading through the cracks of his mind. "All that pain. All that guilt. You know how to end it. You could, right now." Its grin widened. "The pain would vanish. The voices would go quiet. No more suffering. Doesn't that sound, merciful?"

Matthew's hand twitched near his belt, near the hilt of the Khazadryn blade. He stared at it, then at the mud, caught between dread and exhaustion.

The dog's eyes brightened. "Go on," it whispered. "Just a thought, just a—"

Suddenly a sleeve settled on Matthew's shoulder.

The creature's gold eyes widened, a snarl trembling in its throat. Rain hissed harder against the leaves. Before Matthew could turn, light bled across the clearing, soft at first. The black dog flinched. Its ears pressed flat, its tail lowered, and the laughter that had haunted the air fell into a growl.

A figure stood behind Matthew. The robes it wore were white, but the rain never touched them. Gold traced the hems in a pattern, and at the

center of its chest hung a pendant shaped as an inverted triangle, burning faintly with its own inner sun.

Matthew twisted, half crawling away. He expected a face, but there was none, only seven wings of white feathers fanning outward from where a head might have been. Two wings curved inward, veiling the unseen features; the others opened in a halo, each feather veined with light. At the base of every wing glimmered an eye, seven in all, green and depthless, unblinking. The thing spoke, and the sound was not sound at all. It was music caught in language, each word a chord that pressed against the ribs. Matthew's mind reached for meaning and failed.

The dog howled, the shape of it shaking apart. "No—this one is mine!" it barked, backing toward the trees. The figure raised its sleeve, and a single note rang through the clearing. Shadow peeled from the roots and the dog shrank with it, yelping once before dissolving into the rain.

Silence followed, clean, enormous. Matthew could hear his own breath again, ragged in the quiet. The winged being lowered its arm. "Do not be afraid," it said, and now the words were plain, each syllable still edged with echo. "I am Frey'kro, an Apostle of the Light."

Matthew's mouth worked soundlessly. He had seen this figure before—on Greg's ship in the dream, that night the storm nearly took them. And once more, when he first set foot in Eldoria on the beach.

Frey'kro turned, robes shifting like slow fire. "Come," he said. "Lu is waiting."

Terrified, Matthew rose on unsteady legs. The rain had stopped within the circle of light around them though it fell everywhere else.

They walked through the forest until the trees parted around a monolith of dark stone. It stood twice the height of any tower gate, its face cut sheer as glass and shaped to a point. Runes crawled faintly across its surface, lines that brightened as the apostle approached. Blue light ran through them, branches of a glowing tree enclosed within a perfect circle.

"Step through," Frey'kro said.

Matthew stopped. "Through?"

The green eyes turned toward him, seven pupils narrowing together. "Do not fear."

Fear was all he had, but it yielded under that gaze. He drew a shaking breath and placed his palm against the stone. The surface rippled. Light swallowed his hand, his arm, and then his whole body. Then solid ground

met his feet again. Darkness surrounded him. The air was dry, colder than the rain outside. Behind him the stone had become a wall; he pressed his hand to it and felt only rough rock. No seam, no passage back.

A sound cracked the silence: the quick bloom of fire. Blue flame leapt along a row of torches, one after another, their reflections racing down smooth rock. Matthew stood at the mouth of a long corridor. He began to walk, still shaken by what had just happened. Every step left a faint print of water from his soaked boots. His mind was emptied by the pace of events, the horror of the dock, the voices in the wood, the impossible figure who had brought him here.

The corridor ended at a staircase that descended into vastness.

He hesitated at the top. The chamber below was too large to belong beneath any forest. Its floor was sand, pale as bone, broken by scattered stones the size of men. Blue torches stood on iron pedestals, their bases etched with reliefs: waves, scales, the curling body of a whale. And beyond the sand lay a wall of water rising higher than any hall, arched like a curtain drawn halfway back. The sea hung there, alive and still, its surface glimmering with light that seemed to come from nowhere.

Matthew stepped down slowly. The air was cool and heavy; the smell of the ocean. Despite the strangeness, a fragile calm settled in his chest. He reached the floor of the chamber and crossed the sand toward a wide stone platform at its center. When he stood upon it, the runes carved into the edge flared, tracing the shape of a tree encircled by a sun.

A tremor rippled through the air.

Out beyond the glass wall of water, something moved—a shadow the size of a mountain gliding closer. Matthew stumbled back behind a fallen column, heart pounding. The shape swam nearer, vast and slow, until its outline filled the sea’s barrier.

A whale turned its eye upon him.

The eye was the color of deep moss, and it saw him utterly. The sound that followed was neither roar nor song but both—a call that shook the chamber, bending the flame of every torch. Matthew dropped to his knees. He remembered what the apostle said from the dream on Greg’s ship, during the storm.

“Come forth,” said the voice, not through the ear but through the marrow. “Do not hide from what you have done.”

He stepped from behind the stone and stood upon the platform. The great eye regarded him without anger. “Why did you try to steal the ship of the king? Why break the law of those who sheltered you?”

Matthew’s mind spun and his mouth went dry. “I—because I was trapped. They conscripted me. They trapped me.” But the words felt weak the moment they left him. Something twisted inside him—fear, yes…but something sharper.

Rage.

Everything that had happened, it wasn’t his fault. He stood before a deity. Why hadn’t this sovereign saved them? Lu could have stopped this.

Then his voice broke free. “You could have helped me,” Matthew said, stepping forward. “You could have stopped it—“

But then the sea shuddered.

A pulse rolled through the chamber, strong enough to throw him backward. “Do not name your defiance as need,” Lu said. “Do not call your rebellion a prayer unanswered.” The water surged forward, flooding the sand around Matthew’s feet, cold as ice. “Where were you,” the sovereign’s voice deepened, “when my Father breathed the first tide? Where were you, when my siblings and I bound the stars of Korineth and created the realm of Orrindel? You, mortal, presume to weigh justice for what you cannot see.”

Matthew staggered against the rising water, choking on his own tears. “Then what am I to you? A pawn? Is that what mortals are? I trusted in the Heliorens, I prayed!”

“I placed you where the forge burns,” Lu thundered, “that you might be tempered, not preserved. You cannot save your siblings with those untouched hands.” The waters calmed, drawing back into the suspended wall. The whale’s eye softened. “I will tell you plain, Matthew Peregryn of Liora,” the voice continued, quieter now. “Your life was to end in Drearth. I turned death aside.”

Matthew’s anger collapsed into exhaustion. “What? I was going to die,” he whispered, then louder, his voice breaking. “I—I didn’t mean for this to happen, any of this!” He sank to his knees.

Lu’s eye glowed brighter, like the moon behind a thin cloud.

Matthew bowed low. “Why was I brought here?” he asked, voice barely audible.

But no answer came.

He lifted his head. And in the light of Lu's eye, he saw the whale more clearly, ancient-eyed and scarred with a thousand forgotten wars. It watched him from behind the water.

"What you did will not be forgotten by the people of Eldoria," Lu answered. "Their people will remember. And you must now live with that shadow."

Matthew nodded through his tears. The silence pressed in, but it no longer suffocated. It waited. Something still sat inside him—heavy and unsettled. He thought of Pete again. He was defending the docks. Defending the Eldorian kingdom and Matthew had cut him down for doing what was noble and honorable.

But even now, kneeling at the edge of the divine, surrounded by a living sea…he couldn't look away from that face. "I can't forgive myself," he said softly.

The whale blinked slowly, the weight of its gaze unmoving. "The journey would have been light had you obeyed. But now…it will be steep. I will have to send you away, outside of Rohland, to the Church of my father."

Matthew shook his head standing up. "But my siblings? You said, you brought me to Eldoria because I was supposed to die in Drearth. But what of the curse I have, the mark on my arm?"

Lu's eye dimmed, ancient and kind. "Those who carry it are destined to die."

Matthew stumbled back, "No. There has to be another way, please."

"No being may unmake the flame my brother made," Lu said. "But there is a way through it. That is why you were brought to Eldoria. The relic of Ek'sheera. This, Frey'kro has been seeking for a long time. Only to then point the way for you."

"But I have to save them," Matthew said. His voice cracked with urgency. "Please, tell me where they are, what those goblins will do to my siblings."

Lu's eye shimmered, vast and mournful in the dark. "Hope is the work of the living," the great whale answered. "There is always light in the darkest of places. But your path must go elsewhere, for now." The sea trembled, a silent quake rippling outward. Lu turned his gaze, listening to something far beyond the cave, beyond even the reach of sound. "They are moving faster than they should. Our time comes to an end."

Matthew clenched his fists. “What? Elara and Finn—I need to know. Please, can I save them?”

“Their lives are not yet lost, mortal,” he said at last. “But to reach them, to save them from the darkness in Drearth—this path demands more than bravery. It demands Ek’sheera.”

Matthew flinched at the name.

“You cannot go further without him,” Lu said. “Not against what waits there.”

Matthew looked down, his reflection fractured in the tide. The guilt in his chest shifted.

“I send you now,” Lu said. “The Cloakwar has begun, and they need me. Frey’kro will show you the road. May the light watch your steps.”

Matthew reached toward the eye, desperate. “How will I know when I’m close?”

The only reply was a surge of brilliance. Blue light wrapped him; the sea roared, the sand lifted, and everything broke into white.

He blinked and found himself standing.

Night wind swept through the ruins of the church. The roof was long gone. Ivy climbed the fractured walls, curling through the crevices. Blue flames flickered briefly in the torches flanking the stone statue, then died. What remained was silver light and silence from the moon.

Matthew stepped to the center of the floor. Underfoot, worn stone bore the carving of the same tree he’d seen deep in the cave.

A sound rose from the world’s edge, a long, low cry, calling from beneath black water. It echoed across unseen waves, shaking the stone beneath him. He stumbled through a broken arch and out onto the cliff’s edge.

Below, the sea stretched wide and luminous, the moon riding its back.

He stood there for a long while. Wind combed the rain from his hair, dried the fabric clinging to his back. But the guilt hadn’t left, it only shifted. Lu had been right. What he’d done could not be undone now. And something darker than guilt was rising to meet him. Matthew turned back toward the ruin, jaw tight. “Ek’sheera,” he said.

When he stepped inside, there was already a fire. It crackled low in the heart of the nave, throwing light against the broken walls.

And beside it stood the apostle.

Frey’kro.

The apostle said nothing, only watched him. Cloaked in the flicker of firelight, his presence was still and grave, as if he’d always been there, waiting for the exact moment Matthew turned to see him.

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20

AN ORDINARY DAY

A Day Later
Dusrelon the 26th, Year 11,219 - Nightfall
(The tenth month)

NIGHT PRESSED OVER ABBOTTSTOWN. THE STORM CLOUDS HUNG LOW along the Hook Mountains, swallowing the moon, and the town below. Splintered walls, sagging roofs, and the smell of old timber soaked in smoke and salt.

People spoke in murmurs as he passed.

“The knight’s here again…”

“Is it true he killed Lord Kaegin?”

The black knight walked in silence, each step a muted clang through the dirt street. He towered above the crowd, his armor jagged and black.

A villager, lost in thought, stumbled into him. The knight’s gauntleted hand rose before the man could fall, fingers like iron branches closing just enough to steady him. “Forgive me, sir,” the man stammered.

“Move,” said the knight, voice low, measured. The villager flinched, backing away into the crowd.

He continued on, rain hissing against his armor.

Ahead, lanterns swung outside a crooked building where laughter and music spilled into the street. The sign over the door read, The Rusty Flagon —its paint worn, its iron chain creaking in the wind. The black knight had

been here before. Two nights. Two nights of nightmares and the taste of blood from his past.

He had hunted howlers in the hills beyond the village—monstrous things, more instinct than flesh. He had carved through them until the ground stank of their rot. Their bodies were hulking parodies of man and beast, thick with fur and sinew, eyes yellow and starved. They screamed when they died. He would tell himself the work kept him sharp. But the truth was, it was the only thing that quieted his thoughts.

The doors to the flagon yawned open before him, releasing a wave of warmth and smoke. Music clattered from the back of the room, a rough melody carried by lute, flute, and drum.

“Sing and be merry, let troubles go blind,

Drink ‘til the past is far from your mind…”

The song rolled through the rafters as men shouted along, tankards raised high. The walls were lined with trophies: a goblin king’s head, its teeth still jagged and sharp; the hollow eyes of a howler; the carapace of an arachnid from the Wychpine Forest. It was a temple of survival more than celebration.

The knight stepped inside and the conversation faltered. A dozen eyes turned his way.

“Varn, help us, it’s him again,” someone whispered.

“Drekk. Does he even eat?” another muttered.

“Not if he’s come for someone. First Daryle, then Kaegin. Now he’s coming for us.”

He ignored them all.

His armor dripped onto the warped planks as he crossed to the bar. The innkeeper, a narrow man with trembling hands—straightened and tried to smile. “Evening, sir. W—what can I get for you?”

“Food,” said the knight. “A room. The same as before.”

The innkeeper bobbed his head, vanishing into the backroom and returning with a key and a menu scrawled in fading ink. “That’ll be ten crowns for the night, five for supper. Pork and mead still suit you?” The knight nodded once and placed the coins on the counter. Bronze clinked against wood, the engraved twin swords on their faces flashing in the candlelight.

“Room seven,” said the keeper. “We’ll bring it up once it’s ready. Matches in the drawer if you want light.”

The knight took the key, turned, and ascended the stairs. His footsteps boomed like hammer strokes against the boards. The chatter below resumed in uneasy bursts, voices rising just enough to drown the memory of him.

The corridor was crooked and narrow, carpet faded to violet by age. Doors lined the walls, each marked by brass numbers darkened with rust. He unlocked his room and entered.

The space was small: a single bed, a window curtained in purple, a wooden desk with an empty chair. He removed his helm and set it on the table.

White hair, streaked with gray, fell loose around a scar that traced down his left eye. His beard was trimmed but rough, his face the kind that had forgotten rest. He looked younger than his years, but only just. He opened the drawer, found the matches, and lit the candles one by one. Their light bled warmth into the corners.

The rain had started again. It tapped softly at the window. He turned to close the curtains, then froze. The flash of lightning caught the blue crystal of the necklace at his throat. For a moment it seemed to glow. He set it on the table beside his gauntlets and stared. The candlelight flickered across the gem’s surface, and something in him faltered. A tremor of memory, of a voice calling his name through the roar of another storm.

The sound of thunder rolled through the night. Lightning tore the night in half. The flash that filled the black knight’s room was the same white light that had haunted him for half a century.

When he blinked, the candlelight vanished. The desk, the window, the necklace, all gone. In their place came rain, heavier than any rain he had known since.



Fifty years ago. Year 11,169. The month, Dusrelon. The black knight was thirty years old.

He rode home through the low valley, his horse plodding against the rising wind, the wheels of the wagon creaking under the weight of tools and fresh-cut grain. The air smelled of coming rain. Ahead, the house waited: his house, its lamp still burning in the window.

He smiled when he saw the stables. “Erika!” he called, lifting his voice against the wind. “I’m home!” Lightning forked across the sky, throwing white over the yard. “Varn, the storm of Binox is coming in fast,” he muttered to himself. Then he noticed a wooden doll lying on its side, one arm broken, its painted face faded from too many games in the dirt. He swung down from the wagon, mud splashing around his boots.

“Kira?” he called, grinning. “You left your doll, honey.”

He bent to pick it up. The wind lifted his white hair; thunder chased it down the valley. When the next flash came, he saw the house. Door open, curtains snapping like flags.

He frowned.

“Erika?”

No answer.

The smell had changed—less like rain, more like iron. He dropped the doll and ran. The front steps were slick with rain, the boards groaning beneath his weight. The door creaked as he shoved it open, wood scraping against the frame.

The moment he stepped inside, silence struck him.

No fire. The hearth had gone cold, nothing but gray ash and half-burned logs. A chair lay on its side near the table. Shadows clung to the walls, unmoving.

Then he saw his dog. Soto lying at the foot of the stairs, stretched out on his side, eyes still open. He stepped closer, the boards beneath him creaking once—then he fell to his knees beside the dog. “Soto…” he whispered. The fur was still warm. He reached out and turned the body slightly.

A wound.

Driven straight into the side, between the ribs. A sword had done this.

The blood had dried around the edges, dark and thick where it had pooled on the floorboards. The gash ran deep, carved by someone who meant it to kill. “Erika?” His voice was shaking now as he tried looking for his wife, his daughter, and his infant child, Sith. “Kira?! Erika!”

No answer—just the soft creak of the wind through the house. He drew his short sword from his belt and moved through the rooms. The kitchen

floor was scattered with knives. One of the cupboards had been ripped open. Then he heard it, a child's cry. He ran to the back door, shoved it open. Rain exploded against his face. The shed out back loomed in shadow. Lanterns swayed. Mud churned where men had trampled. And there, near the fence, his daughters.

Kira. Bound. Held by strangers in a wooden chair. Her tiny feet kicking against the mud. While his infant daughter cried in the mud.

"Papa!" she cried when she saw him. "Papa, help!"

His sword came up. His left hand ignited with crimson light, the spark of aetheris blooming to life along his left hand. His voice boomed like thunder. "Let them go!"

The men turned. There were two of them, mercenaries, blades drawn, armor rough and mismatched. Behind them, a shape stumbled out of the barn, pushed by a third man. The woman fell into the mud. His wife Erika, her face was bruised, her hair matted with straw.

"Erika!" he shouted. "Who did this to you?"

She looked up. "Silvanus—don't—" she tried to say, but her voice broke. Then another individual stepped out behind her. A Half-Elf. Tall and calm. His hair was black as darkness, his features cruelly beautiful.

Silvanus froze where he stood. "Arameth?" he whispered.

"Silvanus." The name came soft, bitter. "You remember me then?"

"What are you doing here?"

Arameth brushed the rain from his cheek as if nothing in the world were wrong. Then he looked past Silvanus, toward the house and the wagon. "Seeing what became of you," he said in a controlled voice.

Silvanus raised his sword. "Let them go."

"Still giving orders." Arameth's smile softened. "That part survived, at least."

"I said let them go."

Arameth's gaze moved to Erika. He studied her with a calm that made Silvanus's stomach twist. "Erika," Arameth said. "After all these years, I finally understand."

"Don't speak to her."

"Why not? She seems to have spoke for you quite well."

Silvanus took a step forward. "Arameth."

"You vanished," Arameth said, voice gentle. "No farewell or word. Just…vanished."

“I left Gornhelm. Not you.”

Arameth’s eyes sharpened. “No,” he said. “You left because you were afraid. Frightened of what you wanted, your potential. Afraid of who you truly were. So you ran to this.” He gestured to the house, the farm, the family Silvanus had. “All this, with Erika?”

“Don’t,” Silvanus growled. “Don’t you dare speak of her like that!”

“Why not?” Arameth bit. “You ruined everything when you left.”

Silvanus’s knuckles whitened around the hilt. “Shut the neth’rose up! Are you telling me, that you came all this way because I found a life?” Silvanus took a step forward, but something crashed down from the stable roof. A Zanari, its black feathers glistening with rain. Talons pinned his shoulders to the mud. Before he could summon aetheris, cold stone was pressed against his throat. An aetheris lock—an Aetherian suppressant. He struggled, roaring, but the creature was stronger. Chains wrapped his wrists, bit his ankles, dragged him down until he could barely lift his head. Arameth walked closer, eyes calm as a priest’s.

“You broke the law when you deserted Gornhelm. The punishment is death under our king.”

“Arameth! Stop this madness! We’re friends!”

“Once.” Arameth said leaning in closer. “You always mistook peace for freedom.” He motioned to the men. They held Erika down.

“Please,” Silvanus said, voice breaking. “Arameth, listen to me. Stop this.” Silvanus cried again, voice cracking under the weight of it. “You don’t have to do this.”

Arameth looked down at Erika. For one brief moment, something like grief crossed his face. “I’m sorry,” Arameth murmured to her. He stood, drew his sword. Rain streaked down his blade.

Silvanus screamed Erika’s name, but the thunder drowned it out. He saw her fall, saw the red bloom in the water. He thrashed, chains biting deep into his flesh, screaming curses. “YOU RAUKING COWARD!”

Arameth only watched, eyes full of something like sadness. Then he looked at Kira, and the softness vanished. “You gave him roots,” he said softly. “And roots must be cut.”

“No! She’s innocent! Arameth, please—please!” Silvanus cried.

Arameth didn’t listen. Silvanus lunged against the chains. His wrists bled where the manacles bit, but he didn’t feel it. Kira’s wrists were bound. Her dress soaked through with rain. Her eyes locked on her father’s through

the storm. “Kira.” Silvanus said. Then the sword touched her throat and she let out one final cry. There was a single motion, and a red line swam down beneath her chin. The breath left her in a soft, wet gasp as the blood spilled down her front. She sagged forward, twitched once, and fell sideways into the mud. Her body landed inches from Silvanus’s second child Sith, his newborn daughter—the child’s wailing barely audible over the thunder. Arameth turned toward the newborn in the mud, picking it up. The infant’s cry was thin and raw, a fragile thing that kept trying to fill the rain. For a heartbeat he paused, watching the baby wobble in its wet swaddling. Then he looked back at Silvanus with sorrow.

“No,” Silvanus muttered, tears flooding down his cheeks. The word grew, breaking free of him into a hoarse, animal roar. “No, rauk…please—no!”

Arameth did not answer. He walked as if to a chore, the movement unnervingly calm. The bucket by the horses caught the torchlight; rain made rings across its surface. He rearranged the infant in his arms with a manner no one would mistake for tenderness. Silvanus strained at his chains. “RAUK…RAUK…RAUK—” he cursed, but the chains held him. Arameth stepped to the water and paused, just long enough for the world to tilt. Then Arameth tipped the child forward.

The splash was small—almost too small against the thunder, and the crying stopped.

Silvanus screamed Sith’s name. The sound bled from him raw and ragged, swallowed at once by the storm. He pulled until the manacles cut into his wrists, until blood slicked his palms. Around them the valley kept raining. Silvanus’s knees buckled. He slumped in the shackles, rain washing the tracks on his face, each drop trying and failing to cool the heat that roared in his chest. “Erika,” he whimpered. “my girls…”

Silvanus collapsed in the mud, his arms limp in the chains, his throat raw from screaming. Rain poured down his back.

Then a laugh cut through the storm. It wasn’t Arameth’s.

One of his soldiers, grinned and spat. “Skullknot’s barking like a tetherborn hound.”

Another joined in, pointing. “Quit weeping you spawnless cur. Bleeding like a rauking stuck pig.”

Silvanus’s head snapped up. The sound he made wasn’t a word. It was a growl. His body convulsed with the effort to rise again, blood seeping from

beneath the iron. He bit at the air in Arameth's direction, teeth bared like a wild dog. The Zanari tilted its head.

Arameth approached, boots soft in the mud. For the first time since he arrived, his face was still. Almost…solemn. He knelt in front of Silvanus. "It's time to wake up," he said quietly. "This family of yours was always a distraction from your full potential."

Silvanus lunged. The chain pulled taut, nearly wrenching his shoulder from the socket. He spat mud and blood, and slammed his fists into the ground so hard it echoed like war drums. "By the neth'rose! ARAMETH! YOU FILTHBORN BLIGHT! I'LL KILL YOU! I'LL RAUKING KILL YOU!!!!!!"

"You always were a dramatic one." Arameth's voice didn't rise. He stood again, brushing rain from his coat. He looked down at Silvanus with something unreadable—neither hate nor love, just finality. He turned to his men. "Send a raven to Gornhelm. Tell them we've found the deserter."

The men moved instantly. Laughter followed them as they mounted.

Arameth turned back one last time. The rain slicked his hair to his brow, eyes shadowed. His cloak caught the wind as he disappeared down the slope, the Zanari and the men at his sides. The sound of hooves fading with the storm.

Silvanus remained kneeling, broken and chained in the mud, breath ragged, blood pooling beneath him. Rain still fell, slanting across the ruined clearing, soaking the earth, running cold through the gouges in the mud.

He threw his head back and screamed.

"I'LL KILL YOU, ARAMETH! I'LL RAUKING KILL YOU!!!!" he roared, pulling hard against the chains. "I'LL FIND YOU AND RIP YOUR SPINE OUT THROUGH YOUR THROAT!"

He slammed his fists into the ground, over and over.

He howled again, voice hoarse, half-choking on the rain.

Then his strength gave out. His shoulders sagged. His head lowered. And he whimpered. A sound that barely belonged to him. His body shook as the fire drained out.

The sheer weight of what had been taken, his beautiful wife, his daughters, his home, his hope. His knees slipped out from under him. And he collapsed into the mud once more, face down in the filth, the chains hanging beside him.



The storm had passed, and Silvanus sat hunched over the table in room seven of the Rusty Flagon. The candles burned low to molten stubs.

He had not truly left the mud of that night, he only learned to walk above it.

Then suddenly a knock rapped on the door.

“Sir knight?” called a woman’s voice. “Your supper.”

Silvanus rose stiffly. When he unlatched the door, the serving girl stood there, tray in nervous hands. The steam from the food curled between them. She did not meet his eyes.

She nodded too quickly and turned away down the hall.

Silvanus shut the door, locked it, and set the tray on the table beside the bottle of mead.

Beneath, he wore only a dark shirt and worn trousers, his boots still caked with the blood of the hills. He poured the mead into a cup and drank deep. “Varn,” he cursed to himself, wiping his beard with the back of his hand. “That’s some good mead.”

Another swallow.

Then another.

The purple curtains at the window stirred as if something had brushed them from the outside. A sudden gust rolled through the room, snuffing one of the candles.

Silvanus froze, cup halfway to his mouth.

The second candle guttered, throwing the walls into long, jagged shadows. Then came the whisper—soft, thin, like silk sliding over stone. When the last candle went out, the room did not go dark. A red gleam flared near the bed, faint at first, then searing bright.

Silvanus drew his knife without thinking.

The thing that had come through the window was not flesh as men know it. Its body was a tangle of black fabric stitched with faint red eyes, every seam twitching. Dozens of eyes blinked open across the cloth, round,

angular, all blood-bright. Its hands were bone-pale, long and thin, pressing against the sides of its big red eye as though holding itself together. “Greetings, Silvanus,” it crooned. “Long time no see.”

Silvanus’s voice dropped to a growl. “Bastion.”

The creature’s central red eye whirred and focused.

“What do you want, abomination?”

“‘Abomination,’ he says,” Bastion chuckled. “You wound me.”

Silvanus raised his crossbow from beside the table and loaded it in one swift motion. “You have until I finish counting to three to vanish.”

“My, always so polite,” Bastion murmured. “No wonder you dine alone.”

“One,” Silvanus said. “Two.”

“Go on then,” the creature said. “You know what happens.”

Silvanus loosed the bolt. It tore through the air, straight into Bastion’s great red eye. The creature shuddered, hissed, and the arrow clattered harmlessly against the wall, embedded deep in the wood. Bastion laughed, the sound bubbling up. “You keep trying that. You’ll wear out the bolts before I wear out your patience.”

Silvanus set the crossbow down with controlled fury and dropped into the chair opposite the thing. “You only come for two reasons,” Silvanus said. “To deliver ill news or to give me another cursed errand. Which is it?”

The creature’s multitude of eyes blinked in lazy unison. “Both.”

“Get to it.”

“Very well.” Bastion lifted one pale hand and pointed toward the satchel on the table. “You carry a poster, do you not? The one with the bounty for Torm Orwin.”

Silvanus drew the crumpled parchment from his pouch and tossed it onto the table. “This one?”

“That’s the one,” said Bastion. “Let’s begin with the bad news.”

“Of course,” Silvanus said pouring more mead into his cup, his expression unreadable in the dim firelight.

“You’re not to hunt him anymore.”

The knight’s hand paused. He looked up slowly, eyes hard beneath the fringe of his hair. “Is that so?”

“He’s been…claimed,” Bastion said, as if testing the word. “A useful piece for my kings. He belongs to them now.”

Silvanus drank, then set the cup down gently. “Then I suppose I’ll have to find a new rauking pastime.” His tone was dry, but the fire in his eyes hadn’t cooled. He leaned forward slightly, voice lowering. “But it does make me want to hunt down this Torm Orwin even more…if it means he’s hurting you and the Nihilkins.”

Bastion stiffened. “You watch your tongue, filthborn,” he snapped, the words biting. “Say that again, and I’ll burn the whole tavern around us just to shut your mouth.”

Silvanus smirked, but there was no warmth in it. “Do it. I don’t give a varn—you’re rattled.”

Bastion’s hands unfolded slowly, long fingers tapping the edge of the table. “If you go after him anyway,” Bastion said calmly, “the old man and the little girl in Ardester—what were their names? Eb and Tina I believe? The ones who dragged you bleeding into their home? Who patched you up like you were actually worth something?”

The cup stopped halfway to Silvanus’s mouth.

“They may find themselves surrounded by nightwalkers. You know how it is. Such unfortunate accidents happen these days. In all the chaos, who could ever trace it back?”

Silvanus didn’t blink. “What did you say?”

“I said,” Bastion leaned in, voice soft, “leave Torm be. Or the people you care about will vanish before dawn.”

For a long time, neither spoke.

Finally, Silvanus said, “You’re bluffing.”

“Oh,” Bastion said, steepling his fingers again, “I never bluff. I simply predict outcomes.”

Silvanus’s jaw flexed. “Then tell me the other part. The ‘task.’”

Bastion spread its hands. “There is a name we’ve heard whispered in the world. Matthew Peregryn. A boy chosen by the Heliorens. His existence complicates things.”

“You want him dead,” Silvanus said flatly.

“See? You do understand me.”

“Why me?”

“Because you’re efficient, and because he matters.” Bastion drifted toward the window, its many eyes flicking to the storm beyond. “He walks with an apostle. He dreams strange dreams. He might yet undo work far greater than either of us.”

Silvanus’s lip curled. “Send one of your demons. Or the other Oathrackis.”

“Oh, we will,” Bastion said, voice airy. “But you’ll go too. Consider it a confirmation. I prefer insurance.”

“And if I refuse?”

The creature turned its great eye back on him. “Then the little girl and her grandfather will die before you finish your next drink.”

Silvanus stared at the bottle in his hand. His reflection wavered in the amber surface. He drank again, hard enough to sting. “Fine,” he said finally. “I’ll find the boy.”

“And kill him,” Bastion reminded, almost cheerfully.

“That’s fine. What’s new.”

“Good.”

The room grew colder. The edges of Bastion’s form began to fray, unraveling into ribbons of black smoke that twisted in on themselves. “Oh, one more thing,” the creature whispered. “The boy…is an Elf. You’ll find him in Eldoria, near the church of Oryneth, just over the border of Rohland. Try not to disappoint me.”

The black smoke whirled once and vanished through the seams of the window. The candles reignited themselves with a faint hiss. Silvanus sat motionless. Rain traced lines down the glass.

“Matthew Peregryn,” he muttered, setting the bottle down. “And what in the neth’rose are you supposed to be to them?”

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PART

THREE

Storm Among Thrones

Ruthford · Torm · Matthew · Silvanus · Aurora

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21

THE TOWER OF MUSETAFER

2 Weeks Later
Morvath the 10th, Year 11,219 - Snowfall Afternoon
(The eleventh month)

THE WIND TORE ACROSS THE SNOW-SWEPT EXPANSE OF THE MOUNTAINS OF Musetafer. Seven figures trudged through the snow storm, bound in a crooked line behind a giant creature.

Their chains rattled with every step, half-buried beneath the crust. At the front, leading them, rode Torm. He rode atop a creature called a kantapede. It resembled a massive deer, twelve feet high, its antlers branched like a tree. It was covered in thick white fur, matted with frost, and its heavy breath came in visible clouds. A large satchel hung from its side, and from its harness stretched the chains that dragged the prisoners across the ice.

“Where are you taking us?!” one of the villagers cried, stumbling in the deep snow. His voice was hoarse, nearly stolen by the wind. “You—animal! Let us go! Please!”

Torm didn’t turn. “Come along now darlings,” he called over his shoulder, voice cheerful. “We are nearly at our destination.”

The man fell to his knees, gasping. “You’re mad! Nobody goes near the Varathel! All of Scone knows that! You’re sending us to our deaths, no one who enters returns!” But his words vanished into the screaming wind. Behind him, the other six captives, including a boy no older than twelve,

staggered on. Their faces red, eyes wild with fear. They were yoked together like cattle, legs shaking with exhaustion.

Torm offered no reply. He adjusted the reins with a gloved hand and leaned forward into the storm. He reached up and touched the sapphire pendant at his neck. The Noctivity necklace. The relic handed to him by the shopkeeper back in Eldoria City. Ahead, the snow began to twist unnaturally. What had been a wall of storm suddenly rose like a spiral, a vortex of blinding white, howling with unnatural violence. The villagers screamed and even the kantapede hesitated, snorting.

The wind roared.

“I can’t keep up!” the farmer yelled again, dropping to one knee, dragged along as the kantapede plowed forward. “Please—!”

And then the necklace flared. A dark pulse of energy shot outward from the sapphire, swirling in a ring around the group. It twisted upward into a translucent black bubble, veined with thin threads of shadow. The winds slammed into it, and broke. Within the barrier, silence fell. The snow calmed and the air warmed slightly. Outside, the storm raged on, but it could not touch them. The prisoners collapsed to their knees, coughing, gasping, trembling. The boy whimpered. One of the women whispered a prayer to Elmira through her cracked lips.

“Is this…is this aetheris?” someone muttered.

Torm smiled as he looked around at the frozen tempest circling the black bubble.

But time lost meaning inside the storm. Minutes became an hour. They climbed slowly, the path rising steep and slick, the bubble clearing just enough to show jagged stone beneath their feet. The light faded to gray.

Finally, after what felt like a climb through the edge of the world, they reached it. A stone path revealed itself through the swirling veil. The snowstorm began to dim and then they emerged. They stood in a hollow pocket inside the very heart of the snow tornado. The storm still whirled around them, impossibly vast, rising like a wall of moving white, but within its eye, there was calm. Then the black translucent bubble faded around them. There was no snow underfoot.

No wind.

The air was still.

And before them, across a chasm of shadow, stretched a bridge. Black stone, old and flawless, stretched between two cliffs over a canyon so deep

it swallowed the light. Along the bridge stood towering statues, hooded figures draped in robes, skeletal faces gazing outward in eternal silence. Their hands were crossed over their chests. Each bore an empty bowl carved into their palms.

And beyond the bridge…a black tower. A monolith of obsidian and metal, etched with sharp geometric lines. Through the distant opening in the storm over the summit, a faint sliver of gray daylight filtered through, falling directly onto the tower's crown.

Torm drew in a breath, slow and reverent. "So this…this is what the great dragon Sechera of Winter was hiding?" he whispered. His smile returned—slow, wide. He pushed his hair back from his face and laughed once under his breath. Behind him, the prisoners watched in awe and terror, bound and shivering.

"What…what is this place?" one of them asked.

Torm didn't answer. He simply guided the kantapede forward. The prisoners said nothing as they crossed the bridge. Not even the boy cried now. The storm continued to rage around them, a spinning wall of white madness, but within the eye, the bridge remained untouched, clean stone, dry and smooth beneath their boots.

The kantapede's hooves echoed as they passed each skeletal statue. The figures loomed above them, each cloaked in silence. The bowls they held were empty. None of the villagers dared to speak. Even the defiant farmer's head was bowed now, sweat freezing against his neck despite the unnatural stillness. But when they reached the far end, the tower stood waiting. A pair of tall black doors stood at its base, seamless and unmarred. They made no sound, but opened before Torm without a touch.

He smiled, moving forward, his long coat flaring behind him. The prisoners followed only because the kantapede kept walking—and their chains pulled them forward.

Inside, the air was warm and very wrong.

There were no stairs, no other floors, just a single vast chamber, circular and domed. At its center sat a stone platform. Upon it rested a single object: a gray grail, carved with symbols Torm recognized, but could not read. Three skulls were arranged on it, cracked but intact. No torches burned, but the room glowed faintly from the opening above them.

The doors sealed behind them with a deep, final thud. The villagers turned, startled, but there was no handle, no seam. "What…what is this?"

one of the women whispered. “What are you doing with us?”

Torm stepped off the kantapede and walked slowly across the chamber, his boots clicking. “Leh’garo,” he said, softly.

The air shimmered and suddenly, there were four of him.

Three perfect illusions stepped away from his body, surrounding the prisoners. Each bore a drawn blade, elegant, winged in its hilt. They didn’t touch the villagers.

Torm himself approached the grail. His head tilted slightly. Then he gestured without looking.

The illusions raised their blades and herded the group forward, toward the platform. “No,” one of the men muttered, shaking his head, trying to back away. “No, no…” seven stone headlocks emerged from the platform floor, half-circular collars, each positioned before a narrow groove in the stone that led down toward the grail.

The villagers began to cry out in protest, begging, shouting, pleading.

Torm turned, his real body now behind them. “Kneel,” he said.

No one moved. The older farmer spoke up, voice shaking with both rage and fear. “You’re insane. We won’t kneel. None of us will. This is a ritual—this is a murder!”

Torm smiled—sadly. “Yes, darling.” Then he vanished. A heartbeat later, one of his illusions seized the young boy, yanking him forward.

“No!” the farmer bellowed. “Let him go!”

Torm traded places with his illusion, blade drawn. The other illusions shifted to keep the rest at bay. The boy sobbed, his face streaked with tears. Torm knelt behind him, fingers combing gently through the child’s hair. “You know,” he said softly, “when I was your age, no one cared about me.” He looked up at the group, his voice louder. “They begged the king to silence us. And he did.”

“What do you want from us?” one of the women cried.

Torm’s eyes gleamed. “The boy…or the task?”

The farmer stepped forward. “You won’t do it. You wouldn’t hurt a child.”

Torm’s smile vanished and the blade came down in a flash. The boy screamed. Blood sprayed across the stone. His hand fell to the floor, twitching once before going still. The room erupted with screams. Torm held the boy, whispering in his ear as he sobbed. “It’s only a hand. You’ve got another, haven’t you?” He stood, looking at the others, brow lifted in

mock confusion. “Darlings, why do we cry?” he laughed. It echoed off the stone.

The villagers obeyed after that. One by one, they lay down before the headlocks. The stone clamps turned on their own, snapping shut around their necks, locking them in place. The boy was the last, dragged forward by Torm himself, blood trailing behind him. The lock closed around his throat with a final click. Torm turned and descended the stairs in front of the platform, his hair trailing behind him. “Today,” he said, lifting his arms to the empty dome above, “is a glorious day.”

The old man begged, the one who had first resisted. “You don’t have to do this,” he pleaded. “Take me instead. I’ll give you anything. Crown. Service. Slavery, even. What do you want?”

One of the women sobbed again.

Torm stood still at the foot of the stairs, his hands folded before him. “I want my race back.” He knelt at the foot of the black stairs, his coat fanning the stone. He looked up at the imprisoned villagers, their bodies stuck. Torm twisted his sword in his hand. He traced the edge with his finger. Then, improbably, he brought it to his lips and tasted the blade. He then looked toward the boy. “What do you think of the blade?” he asked softly.

The boy swallowed, eyes wide, his remaining hand clenched tight, shock frozen in his limbs. But no answer came.

“This steel,” Torm continued, raising the sword, the faint glow from above, danced across its curved blade, “was forged in Darlimir.” He paused, letting the weight of the name settle. “One of the great Dwarven kingdoms of Valdorin in the world Korineth. Made personally by the great Dwarf, King Roynar.” He leaned in, so his voice dropped to a whisper. “My father always admired them. Humble, hardy, unbowed. When the Aeralynians built for Valdorin, they built with steel from Darlimir’s forges. My people were engineers, my father among them.”

He straightened, lifting the sword so the light caught the gold-winged hilt. “Until that ungrateful day when the Prince of Highmoor removed me… and my people.” He stood tall now, smile returning—bright, feral. “We fled from the skies years before we ever came to Highmoor. From my home, Caelithar. More advanced than your kind. Unconquerable.”

A man, voice quavering, spoke up. “When did this happen? I have never heard of this before. Highmoor is a holy kingdom. King Edward the second would never allow such a thing!”

Torm laughed. A slow, rich laugh that echoed off the black stone walls. “Holy?” he called. “You cling to words, farmer. ‘Holy,’” he shook his head, voice turned mocking. “This was long before your time. Five hundred and thirty years ago to be exact. A time they call the Sundering. When Prince Kordas took Highmoor’s throne, when I was only a boy, age eight.”

Murmurs spread through the villagers like a cold wind. Eyes darted. Another woman gasped. “Five hundred and thirty years? You’re saying you’ve been alive that long? You lie.”

Torm’s grin deepened. “For you, that sounds impossible. But yes.”

Another voice cut in, sharp, unnerved. “Yet you were conquered by Humans,” a woman spat.

Torm snapped his head toward her. The diamond on his forehead flickered with inner light. “Yes,” he said, flat. “It seems so. But all of that will change.” He let his words hover.

Torm turned again to the grail atop the platform, hands still holding the sword. He no longer addressed the boy. “This is it,” he whispered. “The moment the world will remember me and my people.”

The farmer shook his head, lips trembling. “We have families. Go after criminals if you must.”

Torm frowned lightly. “I lack time, sadly.” He sighed, as if forced to speak something he hated. “Hunting criminals is…quite tedious.” Then his voice rose. “Thank you all, for joining me on this most happy day! A day when power surges into the world and changes everything we know!” He swept his arms wide, voice echoing. “I am Torm Orwin, host of tonight’s event. And you are witnessing an Aeralynian becoming king over Valdorin! And Korineth will meet its match!”

A man snorted in disbelief. “You will never be king!”

Torm bowed deeply. He straightened, grin barely restrained. “Ah, I thank you for your sacrifices.” His body blurred, shifted, and for a fraction of a breath, he reappeared as one of his illusions behind the people, beside the lever.

“Joy to the world below! Heh, I forget how the truest of it goes.”

Torm pulled the lever.

The seven bound figures including the boy, spasmed in unison as the iron locks around their necks clenched tighter, screeching, grinding, then snapping shut with brutal finality. The steel jaws crushed their bones and flesh without pause. Heads were severed, each one popping free with a

sickening, wet crack. Blood sprayed as the lifeless bodies slumped forward, necks spouting dark rivers. The decapitated heads dropped into the narrow grooves carved into the floor, rolling like grotesque marbles into channels designed for slaughter.

A low mechanical groan rose from beneath them.

Stone plates shifted and a circular dome opened in the center of the chamber, revealing a waiting cavity. The heads slid in.

Then came the crunch.

The grail pulsed red.

A liquid glow climbed from bottom to rim. It stood vertical, radiant, hovering in its platform. The stone beneath shifted, pulling down into the floor. Torm walked down the stairs and the grail rose into Torm's awaiting hands. "It is time," he murmured, fingers closing around cold metal. He laughed.

Outside, snow blew against the tower's walls. The white tornado attacked at the opening overhead and now began to swirl into the chamber itself. Wind roared. Torm ran up the stairs, sliding fluidly to the kantapede. Ice and snow exploded in the doorway. Within seconds, the maze of stone vanished. Empty snow angled beneath his boots. The Noctivity necklace was now invisible. Gone.

Through the veil of snow, the village of Scone glimmered on the horizon. Torm looked at the grail, and then back at the swirling storm behind him. All that remained was the colossal white tornado in the far distance, and Torm smiling. "How exciting," he murmured. "Let's see what this power truly offers." He mounted the kantapede and surveyed the village of Scone before him.

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BLOOD IN THE NORADIC WIND

SNOW HAD NOT YET COME, BUT THE AIR CARRIED THE BITE OF LATE autumn; breath plumed white beneath helmets, and the ground underfoot was churned to a black wet mud that tasted of metal. Men shouted, horns roared, and above it all, banners—brown for Grimrave, green for Eldoria, flapped and snapped.

"Kill them all!" The command cut through the noise. Ruthford's voice had the hard edge of someone used to being obeyed. He stood six, maybe seven feet tall in plate that had been rough-forged and scored by countless winters. He had a scarred eyepatch, his crooked sword hanging from the sheath at his hip. Around him stood the men of Grimrave: broad-shouldered, bearded, lined with mud and blood.

Elandor's Stonewatch loomed ahead, a squat fortress of gray stone battered by centuries of war. Its ramparts rose stubborn against the siege: ladders scraped the walls, ropes moaned under tension, battering-rams roared against reinforced planks. In front of the walls, Grimrave's armies pressed their assault.

Inside, defenders of Eldoria poured arrows from the walls, hurled boulders like sovereigns of stone, and held the high ground. Advantage rested with the keep. But the Grimrave attackers had desperation, numbers, and a will that made the ground tremble.

"Vortax!" Ruthford barked, his voice a blade cutting through the chaos. He pointed with the edge of his gauntleted finger toward the fray.

His lieutenant responded like lightning: Vortax—lean, masked, a spear-length of shadow—was everywhere at once: one moment through a gap in the line, the next atop a broken parapet. He used the gale step with a terrifying economy, his spear appearing and rearranging enemies like a choreographer with knives. Overhead the sky raged with wings. Hippogriffs, massive, feathered beasts of war, twisted through the air. Talons forced screams from archers. One plunged, grabbed two Grimrave men, and ascended in a shriek of terror. Another arced low and dropped a jagged stone onto the men in the ditches at the entrance of the fort, crushing shield, bone, and flesh in one terrible instant. Smoke, iron, sweat: all of it weighed on the field.

Ruthford didn't watch that attack. He acted. In the tangle of dust and steel, he seized a long spear. Its shaft thick, tip still bright from the forging—and hurled it. He was a Titan Aetherian, class Ironborn.

The flight was perfect.

The spear spun, shaft glinting, heading upward at an angle no infantryman should attempt. It struck the hippogriff mid-wing, feathers bursting in the air. The bird screamed, talons unclenching, rider pitched forward, sword raised too late. The beast crashed through the air, tearing a path down through the attackers, scattering troops like rag dolls against the snow-flecked ground.

Ruthford turned, cloak whipped by the wind of the bird's fall.

Eldoria's defenders shouted from above, tipping cauldrons of burning pitch over the battlements. Fire splashed against shields and armor; men screamed as it clung to them, searing through their chain and skin. Still, the Grimrave horde pressed forward.

"Get the rams to the gate!" Ruthford bellowed. "We take this fort or we all die!"

The great ram ahead of Ruthford and Vortax creaked forward. Under cover of shields, the first strike landed against the oak gates.

THOOM.

The timbers shuddered but held.

THOOM.

Cracks spidered through the wood.

"Harder!" Ruthford roared, his voice hoarse but unrelenting.

Vortax appeared beside him, breath misting. "Ruthford, their archers are relentless! We'll lose half our troops before we breach!"

“Then we’ll make the half count!” Ruthford barked.

An arrow thudded into the ground inches from his boot.

Ruthford glanced down, expression unchanged. Around him, the wind whipped up dust and blood, bodies rolling, men shouting, steel ringing.

And then a volley of arrows fell from above, dozens of them, black-fletched, whispering death as they descended.

“Bor’barak!” Ruthford shouted. In that moment, his body stilled. His skin shifted, veins stiffened, muscle hardened. Time slowed. His skin hardened like rock. Arrows rained down—slamming off his armored chest, his head, his face, clattering from his stone skin. Ruthford’s men scattered; some raised shields, some simply collided with the earth. Screams rose. One man next to him crumpled as an arrow punched through his neck, lifeblood spraying across the snow-dusted dirt. Then, breath catching, Ruthford felt the transformation reverse. Flesh returned. Muscles relaxed. The last arrow glanced off his shoulder and hit the dirt.

Nearby, Vortax rippled out of existence, then reappeared behind a broken shield wall. His spear spun in his hand. No hesitation.

Ruthford exhaled, voice low with exhilaration. “Move!”

With that, he pressed forward. His men surged. The gate loomed ahead, battered but still closed.

Vortax appeared at his side again—silent, deadly, ready.

“Move up!”

The third strike from the ram split the gate wide, wood cracking open in a shower of splinters. Grimrave’s men howled as they surged through the breach. Inside the walls, chaos reigned. Eldorian soldiers fought desperately.

Ruthford stepped through the ruined gate. A sword came at him from the left, he caught it on his gauntlet, sparks flying, and he answered with a backhand swing that broke through armor. The next man fared no better. Ruthford’s sword was no ordinary weapon; its crooked blade was dark steel, jagged like a beast’s fang. “Push to the inner yard!” he thundered. “Take the fort!” Eldorian officers shouted counter-orders, but their men were faltering. The hippogriffs made one last desperate sweep, but Grimrave’s crossbows met them with a volley of black-fletched bolts. One beast crashed into the tower, exploding into feathers and blood.

By the time Ruthford reached the upper steps of the fort, the courtyard below was littered with bodies. His men dragged prisoners from the rubble.

Smoke curled into the evening sky. Vortax joined him, helmet under his arm, his narrow face streaked with soot. “The stonewatch is ours.”

Ruthford looked out over the ramparts toward the hills. The fort’s banners still fluttered from the high tower, stubborn and defiant. He gestured, and an archer loosed a flaming arrow. It struck the banner, and within moments it was burning, a bright orange flame.

“No,” Ruthford said quietly. “Now it’s ours.”

They gathered what was left of the defenders in the courtyard.

Ruthford’s soldiers stood in ranks around the surviving Eldorians, who knelt on the muddy ground, hands bound, faces pale beneath the grime. The captain, a tall man with a silver circlet and the hardened look of an officer, was dragged before Ruthford by two of his men.

Ruthford studied him for a moment, then asked, “Were there any Aetherians here?”

The captain spat on the ground. “Go to the neth’rose with you, barbarian.”

Ruthford sighed through his nose with disappointment. “That’s not an answer.”

He motioned, and one of his men twisted the captain’s arm behind his back, forcing him to his knees. “Tell me, or I’ll make you regret still having a tongue.”

The man met his gaze, defiant even in pain. “Eldoria has held these walls for generations. Grimrave has tried to break them a hundred times and failed. You’re nothing but dogs gnawing at stone.”

Ruthford smiled. “Then I suppose today is the first of many miracles.”

He reached down, grabbed the captain’s hand, and snapped his ring finger. The man screamed, writhing on the ground as Ruthford stood over him, unbothered.

“Take him to the cells,” Ruthford said. “He’ll talk when the pain settles in.”

Vortax watched from nearby, silent.

When the captain had been dragged away, Ruthford turned his gaze toward the battlefield beyond the fort walls. Smoke drifted across the valley; the cries of the dying were fading into the moan of the wind.

Ruthford’s voice softened, but only slightly. “Send a raven to King Ragnar. Elandor’s Stonewatch is ours,” he said to Vortax.

Vortax tilted his head, studying him. “Lord Ragnar will be pleased. They’ll call this a victory for Gordu.”

Ruthford’s single eye remained fixed on the horizon. “Ragnar will be pleased when Eldoria’s blasphemers burn. Until then, this is just a step.” From the walls of the courtyard they roared in one voice, fists beating chests in a rhythm as old as war itself:

“For Gordu! For Gordu! For Gordu!”

Smoke curled above, the air thick with the smell of burning wood and sharpened steel. The men leaned into their chant. Vortax stood in the gloom, watching them. He turned to Ruthford, voice low. “Do you think we can truly take Eldoria? Even with their alliance to Belfour?”

Ruthford’s lips twitched into what passed for a grin. “It will be ours,” he said. “But not yet. Patience and betrayal will win this war.” His gaze swept the ruins of the courtyard, the flicker of torches reflecting off his blade. “Carter’s already in Eldoria’s shadow as the Master of Law, and Olric’s men crawl beneath their sewers.”

“Then soon,” Vortax said, voice flat with the weight of belief. “We will reclaim the holy lands. The Lumanians will fall, and every false faith will burn with them.”

Ruthford didn’t answer immediately. He watched the fire rise from a collapsed tower and listened to the thunder of voices below. Then he spoke, quiet, but sure. “Yes, they will fall,” he said. “But not by might alone. We must trust Gordu’s timing. This land was promised to us long before the Eldorians claimed it. Every stone will be ours again. We will continue what Vladmin failed to do.”

Vortax nodded once, solemn. “Patience and faith, then.”

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23

WHISPERS AND RAVENS

5 Days Later
Morvath the 15th, Year 11,219
(The eleventh month)

AURORA SAT AT THE HEAD OF THE LONG OAKEN TABLE, HER FATHER'S CHAIR. The high back of the seat loomed over her shoulders. Across from her, the men of the royal council waited, their faces lined and thoughtful, their rings clicking softly on wood as they fidgeted with impatience.

It was Morvath the fifteenth. Five days since the fall of Elandor's Stonewatch, and the strange disappearance in Scone, a northwest village near the Mountains of Musetafer. Five days of sleepless nights, letters, and frightened whispers among the nobles of Eldoria.

Aurora finally broke the silence. "Scone? It's gone? What do you mean by gone?" Her voice cut through the room, clear but controlled.

Barnobus, always the first to sound inconvenienced, adjusted his coat and stretched with a grunt. "I truly think, my lady, we should discuss this matter once your father returns. He—"

"He's been away for the last few weeks with King Althren and my mother. We don't have time to wait, he left me in charge," Aurora interrupted, sharper than she intended. "And he won't be back for weeks. This cannot wait."

The words landed with a thud.

Carter, the Master of Law, was drumming his finger on the table, an irritating tick that matched Aurora's racing heart. Kael, seated to her right, was leaning forward, his gauntleted hands folded, his expression unreadable.

He hadn't spoken yet.

Aurora looked to Barnobus again. "Tell me what happened to Scone. I am part of this council, am I not?"

Before Barnobus could answer, Arcius—the Master of Crown, cleared his throat. "My lady, if I may…what Barnobus means is that this situation is rather above your purview. It is just odd to all of us, that your father and King Althren—decided to travel to the Island of Mirk during these troubling times. This council requires—"

"The full attention of the king?" Aurora cut in again. "Again, he's not here. I am. And he left me in charge. Remember?" A low murmur rippled through the chamber. Only Kael's gaze remained steady.

Aurora exhaled through her nose, fighting to keep her composure. "So. Tell me."

Barnobus shifted uncomfortably. "The truth, my lady, is that we don't know what happened. The people…" he hesitated, glancing toward the others, "…are gone."

Aurora blinked. "Gone? The people just vanished?"

"Yes." Barnobus swallowed. "Not a soul left. Houses torn apart, blood on the ground, but no bodies. No livestock. Nothing."

The fire crackled in the hearth.

Carter leaned back, smirking faintly, as though detached from the gravity of it all. "Most likely a misunderstanding. Superstition spreads faster than truth."

"It's not superstition," said Kael quietly. "I've seen the report from the scouts myself. They found no signs of life, and no tracks leaving the village. Not Human, not animal."

Aurora looked at him, searching for reassurance, but Kael's face was carved from stone. Tamber, the Master of Guidance, crossed himself nervously. "May Lu protect us…such a thing is not natural. Not even the Solvaran speaks of this."

Aurora's hand found her chest, almost reflexively. "General Kael," she said softly, "is this the work of Grimrave? Could they have something… some kind of Aetherian with power that could do this?"

Kael’s gaze fell to the map spread across the table, inked with borders, rivers, and the jagged Noradic peaks. “I do not know,” he admitted. “But no aetheris I’ve ever seen can erase a whole village of people. Not like that.”

Carter gave a scoffing laugh. “Aetheris can do many things, my lady, but making an entire village disappear is not among them. This sounds more like…folklore. The kind of nonsense old fishermen tell when the fog’s too thick to see the shore.”

Aurora gripped her seat. “Then what do you suggest we call it, Carter? Coincidence?”

He met her glare, his smirk fading just slightly.

“Destroyed homes,” Barnobus said quietly, almost to himself. “Walls crushed, as though trampled by…something large. Blood on the doorframes, the ground, even the wells. But not a single corpse. It was as if the people had simply—”

“—been taken,” Tamber whispered.

Aurora pressed a hand to her forehead, feeling her pulse there. Her mind was spinning. First the siege, now this. Belfour’s envoys still lodged in their halls, half the court whispering of murderers and omens, and now a village gone as if swallowed by the sovereigns themselves.

No one knew how the villagers had vanished, no trails, no bodies, no answers. Just silence where there should’ve been life. Aurora sat back, staring into the hollow center of the map before them. Her fingers clenched without realizing it. A face drifted into her mind.

White skin. White hair.

Her father had spoken of him once, no, not even spoken, not really. He had avoided it. The man was suspected for killing two men in the city, that much was known. Her father was afraid. But was this what he had feared? Was this one of those unspoken dangers? But the thought felt ridiculous. What would a single man, however strange—have to do with the disappearance of an entire village? It was a foolish thought.

Aurora exhaled slowly.

No.

She was just overthinking.

Still…something refused to let it go. She looked up again, forcing her voice to steady. “Has word of this spread among the people?”

“Some,” said Barnobus. “Not much. But it will.”

Aurora straightened her back, though she felt far smaller than the throne her father had left her. “Then we must act before this rumor becomes a panic. I want this matter investigated at once. General Kael, send your best scouts. And…report to me directly.”

Kael gave a short nod. “As you command, my lady.”

Aurora exhaled, her gaze flicking across the council table. The faces of men twice her age, each of them waiting for her to falter. “And Grimrave?” she continued, voice firm again. “They’ve already taken Elandor’s Stonewatch. If they march further south—”

“They won’t,” Kael interrupted, calm but sure. “Not yet.”

Aurora wanted to believe him. Aurora’s fingers drummed quietly against the table. “If Grimrave holds Elandor’s Stonewatch,” she said, “then the northern trade routes will be lost by week’s end. That’s a quarter of our iron supply gone, isn’t it, Arcius?”

The Master of Crown looked up from his ledger. “More than a quarter, my lady. The Dwarven mines rely on that route for shipments from Belfour. Without it, we’ll have to pay triple through the Khazadryn passage. There is also the eastern side of the Noradic Mountains. Unless…”

Aurora tilted her head slightly. “Unless?”

“Unless,” he said, smiling, “we find a new source of profit to make up the loss.”

Across the table, Tamber groaned softly. “Oh, here we go…”

“Arcius,” Aurora said coolly, “if you’re implying we profit from a war, I suggest you think twice before finishing that sentence. My father wanted us to hold off before continuing.”

He spread his hands innocently. “I imply nothing, my lady. I only point out what history has already proven—that conflict breeds crown. Supplies, rations, smithing, contracts with the guilds, it all flows back into the royal treasury. Grimrave is a threat, but they are also an opportunity. And aren’t you the one who mentioned starting a war with Grimrave? Why are we backing out now?”

Tamber looked appalled. “We changed our minds and stopped that madness two weeks ago. You sound like a vulture, Arcius.”

Carter chuckled under his breath. “He is a vulture. But now that Grimrave has attacked the stonewatch, war begins to look…necessary.”

Aurora pinched the bridge of her nose. “Yes I remember, Arcius. But we should wait till my father returns.”

They fell silent.

For a moment, the only sound was the rain and the faint creak of Kael's armor as he leaned forward. "My lady," he said, "forgive me for speaking plainly, but Arcius is not wrong. We should try moving forward with what you suggested weeks ago. It brings stability when it's won. We've lost one fortress, but if we act swiftly, we can retake it and remind Grimrave that Eldoria does not bend. We should not wait, we don't know how long your father will be gone."

Aurora studied him carefully. Kael's voice was deep and steady.

"And how would you suggest we 'act swiftly,' general?"

"Ludwig and I began planning quietly a few days ago," Kael said, his eyes never leaving hers. "We'll assemble a scouting party to assess the damage at Elandor's Stonewatch, then strike back before Grimrave can reinforce it."

She hesitated. "And when do you intend to move?"

"As soon as the weather allows travel," Kael said. "Tomorrow, perhaps. We'll need to coordinate with King Corg and the rest of the Dwarves."

Before she could answer, Carter leaned forward with an amused expression. "Forgive my intrusion, general, but if we're discussing military plans, shouldn't the entire council be informed? Or does 'quietly' mean behind our backs?"

Kael's eyes flicked to him, a brief, sharp look.

"Enough, Carter," Aurora said again, though more softly this time. "General Kael will debrief us when it's necessary."

"Of course, my lady," Carter said, though the smirk on his lips made it clear he wasn't finished.

Aurora exhaled, feeling the tightness in her chest grow heavier. She looked down at the table, the carved oak glinting faintly in the candlelight, her reflection faint in the polish. This was her second council without him. And the more she spoke, the more she felt the eyes of the others measuring her words, waiting for proof she wasn't ready. She straightened her back, forcing the feeling down. "General Kael," she said, "you mentioned Ludwig. I trust he agrees with this plan?"

Kael nodded. "He does. He'll handle logistics while I lead the men."

"Who will lead them north?" she asked.

Kael paused, as if considering his words. "I was thinking of sending General Vince."

The name left his mouth casually.

Aurora's heart caught in her throat. She felt her pulse quicken, the room closing in for a moment. "NO!" The word burst out before she could stop it, echoing off the stone walls.

Everyone froze.

Carter's eyebrows lifted.

Arcius smiled faintly.

Aurora realized what she'd done, her breath catching in her chest. She placed both palms flat on the table, trying to compose herself. "I—I simply mean…" She drew in a slow breath. "Vince is still young. Inexperienced. He's brave, but untested. Sending him north would be reckless."

Kael regarded her in silence for a long moment. Then he nodded once. "As you wish, my lady. He will remain here."

"Thank you."

Carter leaned back, chuckling. "My, my. She's not wrong. Vince isn't ready for that."

Aurora's cheeks flushed. "Enough," she said quietly, the edge in her voice silenced them.

Aurora sank back into her chair, ashamed of how her voice had broken earlier. She hadn't meant to shout, hadn't meant to reveal. But the thought of Vince being sent to the front lines, of losing him to the chaos north of the mountains…it had shaken her.

Kael turned back to her, his voice even again. "Ludwig or I can move north. Vince will remain here until further notice. But we have time to discuss that matter."

"Good," she murmured.

Barnobus, perhaps sensing her discomfort, decided to change the subject. "By the way," he said, scratching at his beard, "has there been any progress on finding that Elf? The one with the aetheris, the murderer? The one I mentioned we should have never accepted into Eldoria?"

The word murderer lingered in the air.

Aurora's head lifted. "You mean the Elf who served under Ludwig's unit?"

"Yes," Barnobus said. "The same one. Dangerous creatures Elves are. We can't afford more chaos on top of Grimrave's attacks."

Carter smiled, as though savoring the attention. "Ah, the Elf. No, I'm afraid there's been no sighting. My men have searched the countryside, but

the trail’s gone cold.”

“How convenient,” Arcius muttered, flipping a gold coin across his knuckles.

Aurora frowned. “And what happens if he’s still in Eldoria?”

Carter shrugged. “Then he’ll be found. Eventually.”

“Eventually,” Barnobus repeated with a sneer. “That’s not good enough. He murdered one of our own soldiers. It’s an embarrassment to the crown, and to you, Carter.”

“Do be careful with your tone,” Carter said smoothly. “I’ve already sent orders to every outpost in the country. If they find him, he’ll be taken. Dead or alive.”

Aurora rose slightly in her seat. “Then see that they do. I want this matter ended. We cannot afford another scandal. Especially since he is an Elf.”

Carter inclined his head. “As you command, my lady.”

Kael stood, brushing the edge of his cloak from his armor. “If we’re finished here,” he said, “there are preparations to make. My lady, would you walk with me? We can discuss strategy with Ludwig.”

Aurora nodded, grateful for an escape. The council rose with her, chairs scraping the floor. Arcius and Barnobus immediately drifted together, whispering in low tones. Tamber lingered by the doorway, wringing his hands. “My lady?” he said softly. “We have Solvaran studies this afternoon. Will you be attending?”

Aurora hesitated. “Not today, Tamber. Reschedule it for tomorrow. Please.”

He nodded quickly, bowing his head. “Of course. These are troubling times.”

“Yes,” she said distantly. “They are.”

She followed Kael out into the corridor, the echo of the council chamber faded behind her.

She felt hollow between duty and exhaustion. Even her faith felt dimmer now, buried beneath the noise of politics.

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24

THE ROAD BEFORE FIRELIGHT

SNOW WHISPERED THROUGH THE PINES. FOR TWO WEEKS, MATTHEW HAD walked beneath that sound, turnshoes crunching over frost-bitten leaves, breath clouding the air before him. The wilderness of Rohland was endless—white hills, dark forests, and the slow groaning of the Saraveen River that cut through the land. Every day he wondered if anyone in Eldoria still remembered that unfortunate night.

He lived now off what his father had once taught him: how to set a snare, how to dress a rabbit, how to make a fire. Without those lessons, he knew he'd be bones under the snow by now. When he caught his reflection in still ponds, he barely recognized himself, hollow-eyed, and half-starved. Greg was right, he would never be the same once he left Liora.

At night, when the cold bit deeper, Frey'kro appeared. The apostle came not like a torch in the dark but like music. A hum that carried through the trees. When he stood beside Matthew's campfire, the night itself bent back from him. Shadows that prowled at the edge of sight shrank away, their gold eyes glimmering from the tree line but never daring to cross the circle of light.

The black dog was always among them, its golden eyes gleaming between trunks, its breath steaming in hunger. When Frey'kro sang, the dog would growl low and fade back into the dark.

"I don't understand why you watch over me," Matthew had said once, shivering beside the fire. "I murdered a boy."

Frey’kro had not answered in words, only that melody again, like wind through chimes. Somehow it felt like forgiveness.

But by day, he walked alone.

Frey’kro would vanish with the dawn, leaving him directions that glowed faintly across his dreams.

Go north. Cross the river. Seek the man named Eb. It was strange, how specific his guide was. A name, a granddaughter, a village. All he knew was that the apostle spoke with the same calm certainty as Lu himself.

But the days blurred together, the ache of hunger, the sting of the Salrot mark burning on his arm whenever the demons crept too close. Sometimes he would catch the smell of woodsmoke on the wind—a village nearby—and force himself to walk the other way. The wanted posters must have reached these lands by now. Matthew Peregryn, the Elven Soldier of Eldoria. Aetherian Murderer.

And yet, even in exile, his thoughts were never of himself. Every night, before he slept, he whispered their names.

Elara. Finn. Greg.

He prayed that they were alive, even if he wasn’t sure he still deserved to pray.

Ardester announced itself first by its smoke. Thin blue threads curled up from chimneys along the Saraveen River, smudging the pale winter sky. Matthew crossed the stone bridge with his hood low, hands tucked into his sleeves for warmth, and kept to the edge of the road. Villagers moved quickly, shoulders hunched, faces wind-chapped and closed.

He angled toward the square. A tavern sat there with a signboard that swung and complained on its hook: Ruse’s Tavern. The windows glowed.

When he stepped inside, the heat was more smell than warmth—ale, wood ash, old rushes—barely enough to take the bite from his fingers.

Two men near the hearth were quiet, almost scared, and watched him over their cups. At the far wall, a cork-board had been hammered into the timbers, layered with notices: debts, missing animals, the county tithe calendar. And wanted posters, rows of them, the paper already curling from the damp.

Keep away from Morgar Forest at night, one read. Beware the nightwalkers, said another in heavy block script.

A man in a leather apron shouldered past him with a handful of fresh nails and a mallet. He smoothed a new sheet to an open board and drove the

first nail home. The face was a rough sketch, but Matthew knew it: the line of his jaw, the set of the eyes. MATTHEW PEREGRYN—ELF. ARMED. AETHERIAN. DANGEROUS.

He set his jaw, turned from the board, and went to the counter. “Excuse me. Looking for a man,” he told the barkeep, keeping his voice low. “Name’s Eb. He’s a farmer.”

The barkeep took his time answering, eyes flicking to the hood. “Weather’s clear,” he said. “No need to hide your face. Unless you’re a bandit.”

Matthew didn’t move. “I am looking for Eb. Do you know where I can find him?”

The barkeep eyed Matthew, “I know ‘em. Easy to know em. Only one Eb in this depressing village. You one of his buyers?”

“No.”

“Then why are you looking?”

“I am just staying with him for a short while before I travel again.”

The barkeep wiped down a ring of ale and sighed. “Eb’s north. Out past the winter fields, along the road toward Morgar. Last house in the pines.” He lifted his chin at Matthew’s hood again. “And don’t stay out at night in the forest. Nightwalkers come out at that time.”

Matthew nodded. “Right. Thank you.”

He turned—and stalled. A table by the window held five individuals who had not taken their eyes off him since Matthew arrived. They were a mismatched set, but there was a unity about them that wasn’t clothing. It was attention, coiled and exact. At the center sat a man with black hair and a pale, beautiful face. He resembled an Elf, but with short knife ears. A Half-Elf. A long, metal-forged sword leaned within reach, its crossguard squared and brutal, shaped like an iron cross. To his right, a lean fellow in a tall black farmer’s hat tapped the rim of his cup, unfocused smile going nowhere. On the left, a man fed crumbs to a black crow perched on his shoulder, the bird regarding Matthew with a cold, glassy bead of an eye. Beside him, a dark-skinned man breathed in as if scenting the room itself. And at the end, a Zanari sat, black eagle-headed and immense, razor-ed claws resting on the table like it was theirs.

The beautiful man crooked a finger. “You. Come here,” he said—not loud, but the sound carried. “Cursed one.”

Matthew didn’t move. The man’s mouth rose, almost a smile. “A Salrot mark burns through cloak and bone. Now come and sit.”

The room felt narrower. Matthew crossed to the table. Refusal would draw more eyes than obedience.

“Sit,” the man said.

Matthew took the edge of a chair, no further than he had to, no closer than they could make him.

The beautiful man laced his fingers. “I am Arameth.”

The crow clicked its beak. The Zanari didn’t blink.

Arameth tipped his head, studying Matthew. “I am an Oathracki,” he said. “We sense one another. Your curse is quite loud.”

Matthew’s hand touched his left forearm without meaning to. “You called me cursed,” he said. “You know what that means?”

“Oh, I know what it is,” Arameth said mildly.

“Then you know what it does?”

Arameth smiled without joy. “I do.”

The man with the tall hat gave a soft laugh. The dark-skinned man inhaled again, almost theatrically, and nodded to Arameth, as if confirming some shared note.

“What do you want?” Matthew asked.

“To invite you,” Arameth said.

Matthew waited. “Invite?”

“To a festival,” the man continued, voice almost warm on the word. “A gathering. In the south, closer to Eldoria city. Not far. Soon. We call it the Arkilal.” He watched Matthew’s face for change. “I think you should come.”

The crow shifted and muttered. The tall-hatted man was grinning now, a child watching a string pulled.

Matthew kept his voice even. “I don’t have time for festivals. Sorry.”

“But this one makes time for you,” Arameth said. “It makes time for everyone. And I believe you have something special to do with it.”

“What’s your festival about?”

“Kings,” Arameth said lightly. “True kings.”

Matthew felt the nape of his neck go cold. “The kings of Valdorin?”

“No.” Arameth said. He leaned in, lowering his voice until even the crow cocked its head to hear. “I mean kings who have not left this world in spirit. Kings who rule in the shadow. Kings who do not ask for your belief.”

The Zanari’s beak clicked once. The hat-man’s grin flattened into something hungrier.

“We who follow these kings are Narnavens,” Arameth said. “Those who are not Lumanian are already Narnavens, whether you believe it or not. You can be one, if you’d like?”

Matthew said nothing. He was even more scared to speak.

“You want to live,” Arameth went on. “Most marked ones do. You’re running. Eating just enough to keep those voices from taking your breath.” His lip lifted, faint and disdainful. Matthew kept his eyes on Arameth’s, the fear was kicking in, and lowering his sight would be worse. “Come with us,” Arameth said, “and your death can become negotiable. You can be transformed, like I was.”

Matthew couldn’t help it: he laughed once, short and wrong. “Negotiable? I’m sorry, but I don’t know what you are talking about,” Matthew lied.

“They can stay your ending,” Arameth said, voice very soft now. “They can give you purpose until it is time for them to collect.”

“And who are they?” Matthew asked, because he needed him to say it.

Arameth’s eyes brightened like he’d been waiting for the question. “They are the Nihilkins,” he said. The barkeep clattered mugs. Someone near the door coughed and left. “What do you think, Matthew?” Arameth said gently.

“You know me?” Matthew said nervously.

“Yes.”

The individuals around the table were not drunk and not careless. He looked at the crow. He looked at the Zanari, at the long sword with the crossguard waiting in the corner. He thought of the way Frey’kro’s music had made the forest breathe easier.

Arameth’s gaze sharpened, pleased and exact. “So…Matthew Peregryn. You have two roads. The one you are on. And ours. What will it be?”

“I’ll be staying on mine, thanks.” Matthew said.

Arameth sat back, as if a point had been conceded fairly. “Hmm… disappointing. But very well,” he rose. The others rose with him at the same calm pace. “Hopefully we’ll see you again, Matthew. Perhaps as a brother of the Narnaven next time.” He touched two fingers to his brow in something that was not a salute and not a blessing.

They left no crown on the table.

Matthew sat a moment longer watching them walk out of the tavern, hands flat on the wood. Then he stood, adjusted his hood, and walked out into the hard winter light.



He kept to the northern lane where wagon ruts had frozen into ridges. Snow squeaked underfoot. The wind came straight off the fields, the stalks cut to bristles and shining with ice. He didn’t look back toward the tavern, but he felt the weight of eyes easing off his shoulders with every step.

Eb, last house before the pines.

The road should have been nothing, just a track between stone fences, a stand of birches, a broken cart wheel half-buried in drift. But everything felt sharper after the tavern. Arameth’s words had slid into his head. The Arkilal. The true kings.

Matthew let the words fall away. He set his thoughts instead on what he could hold with his hands: the sword the Dwarf had given him; the bag with the last of the dried venison; the burn under his sleeve that had grown quiet for the first time that day.

The road narrowed and began to roll. Pines crowded close. He came to a simple house shouldered into a fold of earth. Stone lower walls, timber above, smoke rising steady. A low fence lined with snow. Lanterns glowed behind small panes of glass. He paused at the door, pulled his hood lower, and knocked.

A young voice called from inside. Light steps pattered across wood and a latch lifted. The door opened on a girl with braided black hair and black eyes, cheeks pink from the stove. She looked up at him with consideration, then back at someone over her shoulder.

“Tina,” an old voice called, cheerful and warm, “that will be our guest. Let him in before the wind does it for you.”

Tina swung the door wide.

The warmth of the room washed over him, real warmth, not tavern dregs. A table set for four, lighted by two oil lamps. Stew steaming, a loaf of black bread, a crock of salt. An old man stood near the hearth, pushing his spectacles higher on his nose, beard pointing in two brave directions from his cheeks like it had its own opinions.

“You’re late,” the old man said without malice.

Matthew blinked. “Late?”

“Yes, yes,” the man said, flapping a hand and smiling. “But the snow forgives who it will. Come in. I am Eb.”

Matthew stepped out of the door and into the room. He shut the door behind him, fingers stinging as the blood returned. “You know me,” he said —less question than fact.

“Frey’kro knows you,” Eb said, as if that settled the matter. “And I know Frey’kro. That is enough.”

“You’ve known him long?”

“Since this morning,” Eb said happily, and Tina giggled. “He is very polite. But he does not eat stew.”

Matthew’s mouth twitched. “No,” he said. “I don’t suppose he does.”

“Come,” Eb said. “Sit. Eat. The Sovereigns of Light will be honored in this house and so will his messenger’s friends.”

Matthew hesitated. “You trust quickly.”

Eb’s eyes brightened. “Boy,” he said gently, “if an angel comes to your front door shining and explaining he is an apostle for Lu, you don’t stand there arguing with it.”

Matthew found himself smiling back. He took the seat Eb pointed to and only then realized how empty his body felt. When he lifted the spoon, his hands were not steady.

“Tell him your name,” Tina said earnestly, clambering into the chair at Eb’s right. “He calls everyone mister or miss.”

“Politeness is a lost art,” Eb said. “We will bring it back one bowl at a time Tina.”

“Matthew,” Matthew said, as the old man passed him his plate. “Matthew Peregryn.”

“Yes,” Eb said, pleased. “That is the name he gave me.” He pointed with the ladle. “Eat.”

Matthew ate. The stew was rich with onion and something he couldn’t name. Tina swung her heels and watched him impolitely.

“What are Elves born from?” she asked seriously. “Grandpa says Zanari are born from eggs.”

“Tina,” Eb said mildly.

“I don’t know if I’m the right person to tell you that,” Matthew said nervously.

“Well, tell me Mr. Peregryn, do you have shal’kors? From where you live?” Eb asked abruptly.

Matthew looked up. “Shal’kors?”

“Yes yes…shal’kors. There are stories about these ancient things from long ago, mainly taught from the Dwarves of Khazadryn,” Eb said. “Well, did you see any? Do you have any? What model do you presume they are?”

Matthew frowned. “Model?”

“Design, function,” Eb said, already cutting the bread with unnecessary vigor. “Walker, burrower, watcher, most are asleep and most should probably stay that way, but the lines matter. The joints. The plates. The ancient language on them.”

Matthew shook his head. “My grandfather talked about them sometimes. Said they were created long ago for the kingdoms around. Said it was from a legend called ‘The Sundering’. There was one near the cliff where I used to sit.”

Eb’s smile went somewhere inward. “Marvelous,” he set the bread down, eyes soft. “There are places not far from here. Darlimir. The Mines of Roynar. The Dwarves always called the mines a grave when they are sober and something far worse when they are drunk. Those machines sleep in there and some are still moving I believe. I’ve only been in there a few times though. But I never dared to venture too deep because of the stories.”

Matthew’s spoon paused. “Are the mines actually dangerous?”

“Oh yes, highly dangerous according to the Dwarves,” Eb said, delighted. “I’m assuming they meant arachnids, nightwalkers or some other creature. We take care.”

“‘We’?” Matthew asked. But then there was a sudden sound.

Matthew turned.

A beautiful young woman stood in the doorway, one hand on the lintel. She had long black hair and smooth dark skin and a tired mouth, like sleep had not done much for her. She wore a white collar under a purple skirt and a look that said she had already made up her mind about Matthew.

“Tina,” she said, “you were supposed to call me when dinner was up.”

“Sorry Florencia. I forgot,” Tina said with no shame.

“Ms. Awin,” Eb said. “Please sit, our guest is here.”

Florencia crossed to the table and sat, putting her cup down with neat care. Her eyes met Matthew’s for a half-breath and then moved on. “I’m guessing he’s the one?” she asked.

“He is the one,” Eb said, pouring her water.

Florencia flicked Matthew another look. “You’re not from here.”

“I’ve been told,” Matthew said.

Eb cleared his throat. “Mr. Peregryn will earn his keep,” he announced. “Snow or not. I need more hands with the animals and meat in the smokehouse and wood before the next storm of course. You can follow orders, can’t you Elf?”

“Yes sir,” Matthew said.

“And you will sleep in this house,” Eb went on, lower now, looking at him over his spectacles. “Because Frey’kro told me shadows watch you.”

Matthew let out a breath, “Yes, thank you.”

Florencia leaned back, cup between her fingers. “Elves don’t often say that I hear,” she observed.

“Sorry to disappoint,” Matthew said.

“Mm,” she responded.

Tina was staring at Matthew again with wide, solemn eyes. “Do they really live inside trees?”

“We do,” Matthew said grinning. “And we have bridges that are so high the crows look up at them.”

Tina giggled.

Eb shook his head as if exhausting a patience he enjoyed having exhausted. “Come, Tina,” he said after another bowl and two slices of bread. “Storytime. Then bed. We will let our guest pretend he is not about to fall asleep sitting up.” They went down the hall together, Tina hopping the cracks in the floorboards as if they were rivers. Florencia took the plates and Matthew rose to help without asking. They moved around each other easily enough: rinse, stack, dry, set. When the table was clear, she leaned against the jamb and looked at him directly for the first time.

“You said demons,” she said.

“I didn’t,” he answered. “You heard Frey’kro say it.”

She tilted her head. “So they are real.”

“Yes, they are.”

“And you brought them with you.”

Matthew met her gaze. “They were always there I presume, I just couldn’t see them before.”

She considered that, then pushed away from the jamb. “Don’t wander far from the posts after dark,” she said. “Unless you want to be eaten, by the nightwalkers.”

Matthew blinked.

“Good night, Elf,” she said walking away.

He watched her go. He barely knew her, but something about her caught at him.

Matthew let out a breath, then turned to find the latch on the front door and opened it a crack. Night lay clean and cold over the front yard. Stars burned sharp, over the black shoulder of the Listoff Mountains, green light spilled in long banners, shifting and folding on itself—slow rivers across the sky. He walked out and stood on the porch until his fingers hurt. He thought of Elara and Finn again, and of Lu’s eye behind the wall of sea.

He didn’t notice the dog at first.

But it was only after the wind died that the sound found him: a soft panting, slow and deliberate. Two gold coins glowed between the pines. When the creature stepped forward, the porch light grazed the shape of it. Matthew’s hand found the hilt of his sword. The dog watched his fingers close and did not move. Behind it, the shape of the tree-line thickened. More demons stood in the gaps and did not cross into the yard. Matthew could not count how many were there.

Suddenly light opened beside him, soft and immediate. Frey’kro did not appear so much as arrive. The way a chord arrives when a hand finds the right keys.

“You will be safe here,” Frey’kro said. “The house has been blessed by the son. The posts will hold from the spirits of darkness.”

“They wait,” Matthew said.

“They do, but they cannot cross,” the apostle answered. “They can only watch. That is their second favorite thing.”

Matthew swallowed. “What is their favorite?”

“To feed on mortals like you,” Frey’kro said simply. “Do not leave the house at night, ever.”

Matthew nodded.

For a long moment they stood together, watching the line between the field and the wood. The green sky moved above them, and Matthew’s arm was only warm, not burning.

“I will be gone,” Frey’kro said at last, the light around him dimming to something almost moonlike. “Days. Perhaps weeks. I must find Ek’sheera.”

“You’ll find it.”

“That is our work,” the apostle said, with no pride and no fear. “Yours is to be patient. To eat. To sleep. These people will teach your hands to be useful.”

The glow lifted as if the apostle had looked up, though he had no face. “The tide is still wrong,” he added softly. “The air is turning. The darkness moves much faster this time.”

“What’s coming?” Matthew asked.

Frey’kro did not answer. “Stay,” he said instead. “Stay and hold the blessing you have been given.”

Then he was simply gone.

Not vanished—gone. Matthew stood until his legs shook. The dog didn’t blink. The things in the forest shifted their weight.

He exhaled, stepped back inside, and shut the door.

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25

A CROWN TOO HEAVY

Morvath the 16th, Year 11,219 - Morning
(The eleventh month)

AURORA MOVED THROUGH THE CASTLE HALLS WITH THE STRIDE OF SOMEONE who had been pretending she wasn't exhausted for far too long. The cold floor of Eldoria castle made every tap of her boots sharp.

Another meeting done.

Another argument.

Another crisis.

Another reminder that she was nineteen years old, while her parents gallivanted off to Mirk for…what? The tenth time this year? Eleventh? They always gave her the same answer: "Spreading the kingdom's influence. Expanding our reach."

She never bought it, not fully. Was it to meet with this lady her father spoke of weeks ago, during the banquet? Did her father and the other lords serve someone higher?

No. It couldn't be true. Aurora clenched her fists while she turned a sharp corner and the castle windows blew frozen air at her. Winter had come early. Clouds rolled in from the Luvarian Expanse, and even inside the corridor, Aurora felt the chill run fingers down her back. She pulled her cloak tighter.

If only she could get five minutes to breathe…just five minutes.

She hurried faster.

The library double-doors came into view. The guards standing watch pushed the doors open for her without being asked. Warm lamplight spilled out. The instant she stepped inside, heat washed over her face. The scent of old books, parchment, and dust, hit her. The windows rattled gently in their frames as the sea wind slapped the outer glass.

Aurora let out a long, frustrated breath and walked straight toward the nearest velvet sofa, collapsing onto it with a graceless flop. “Uuuugh…” she groaned into the ceiling, letting every muscle sink into the cushions. Her hair—long, black, straight, endless, spilled over her shoulders and down the back of the sofa. For the first time all day, she allowed herself not to sit upright. Just…exist. She rubbed her palms over her face.

If one more person interrupted her today, she swore she would—

A soft flip of a page broke through the silence.

Aurora froze.

She pushed herself up on her elbows. Squinted toward the far corner of the room. There, hunched awkwardly at a small table in the shadows like a startled creature trying not to be seen, sat Tamber. The Master of Guidance.

“T—Tamber?” Aurora blurted, mortified at the undignified pose he’d caught her in. She immediately sat up straighter, smoothing her cloak and hair. “How long have you been there?”

Tamber jumped as if she’d startled him, which she probably had. His round spectacles slid a little down his nose. His voice wobbled timidly across the room.

“Oh…um…only a few hours, my lady.”

“A few what?” Aurora blinked.

He waved his hand. “Hours. Just reading.”

Aurora stared. “You’ve been…sitting in the dark corner of the library… for hours?”

“Yes, my princess,” he chirped, cheeks reddening. “I enjoy the quiet, that is why I am here. I needed somewhere else to focus today.”

Aurora raised a brow. “You enjoy being mistaken for a ghost?”

Tamber gave a hopeless little shrug. “It has its comforts.”

Aurora sighed, standing and walking toward him. “What are you reading? Something useful, I hope? Maybe a book titled ‘Why Kingdoms Lose Villages For No Reason’?”

He looked downright wounded. “I’m afraid there is no such book, my lady.”

“I was teasing Tamber. Learn play for once.” Aurora said, dropping into the chair across from him and leaning forward, elbows on the table.

Tamber’s fingers drummed nervously on the thick book before him. “I have looked,” he offered gently. “Truly. No recorded event in our history speaks of entire people disappearing overnight.”

Aurora opened her mouth to argue, to snap something sarcastic or bitter. But then something flickered in her mind.

The white-haired man again.

She sat up straighter, eyes narrowing. “Tamber…may I ask you something?”

His head popped up, spectacles glinting. “Anything, my princess.”

Aurora hesitated. But she asked anyway. “Do you remember that man with white hair? The one who killed two men in Eldoria a few weeks back?”

Tamber blinked. “Yes. But what about him?”

Aurora leaned in. “My father was worried of him, Tamber. During the banquet, when my cousins were here. He kept whispering with Lord Benedict and Lord Baeryn about him. My father doesn’t whisper about common criminals.”

Tamber slowly set his book down, watching her carefully. “And…what are you suggesting?”

Aurora swallowed. “What if he’s connected to Scone’s people disappearing?”

Tamber blinked once. Twice. Then his brows bunched together. “My lady, with all due respect, that sounds wildly unlikely.”

Aurora’s jaw clenched. “I said what if. I’m trying to understand anything right now. Everything is unraveling and—”

“My princess,” Tamber interrupted gently, lifting a hand, “Hypothetically speaking, if a mortal man wanted to make an entire village vanish, then he would have had to receive power from a sovereign. It is the only possibility.”

Aurora leaned back in her seat, boots scraping lightly against the polished floor. “Right. And it wouldn’t be Oryneth the father or his son Lu. Or even his daughter Elmira. None of the Heliorens.”

“Exactly.” Tamber agreed hesitantly, “so the only other is…”

“Their oldest sibling. Zareth,” Aurora whispered.

Tamber shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “Yes exactly, hypothetically speaking of course.”

Aurora stared past him, toward the high window.

Hypothetically.

She pressed her fingers against her temples. This was too much. She took in a breath. “Is there any race with white hair? Any at all? Something rare? An isolated Elven sub-race? Dark-Elves? Mountain folk? Anything?”

Tamber frowned deeply. “No, my princess. The records only list the Elves, the Dwarves, the Incarni, Halflings, Zanari, Kolmariths, and Humans living here in Valdorin. That is all. The only white hair I’ve ever heard of belongs to the elderly.”

Aurora pushed herself back into the chair with a frustrated sigh.

“But,” Tamber added hesitantly, “he is a dangerous outlaw according to your father’s knowledge. Drakhar kingdom is hunting a white-haired criminal who slaughtered several nobles. He is a wanted man there. You do remember?”

Aurora’s head snapped toward him. “Yes, I remember.” Aurora stared at him, the frustration settling into something…heavier. More hollow. “After all that worry—he’s just an outlaw. With nothing on why the people went missing.”

“Yes. But the people were most likely kidnapped by Grimrave or killed by some sort of beast. They said the village was destroyed with blood stains everywhere.” Tamber said flipping a page, though his eyes stayed on her. “I’m placing my bets on the fact that it was a wild animal or many. It could be that those giant ape-like animals…those…what are they called… nightwalkers! Yes, nightwalkers. They did this to the people of Scone,” Tamber said. “We should not assume the impossible when the simple answer exists.”

Aurora slumped back in her chair. Could it really be Grimrave? Or those giant gray goblin-like creatures? The nightwalkers? That would be the logical answer. The simplest one. Maybe Grimrave was playing a trick, some illusion, some misdirection. There had been blood everywhere in Scone…too much to ignore. Tamber was right about the blood, but could it be a different beast? Maybe the people were slaughtered, and they were all hidden or dragged away. A staged absence.

But why? What would Grimrave gain from such a spectacle? What was the goal? What was the point? And if they were able to do that—what about

the other villages? Could the sovereign Zareth really be helping Grimrave? Do sovereigns even do this? Or is it possibly the white hair man?

Aurora turned the questions over in her head, but none of them fit. Her mind circled the silence, the missing pieces. Tamber's right, she told herself. It's probably something simple she just hasn't thought of yet.

She was overthinking.

But even as she said it, the doubt stayed.

Why was she reaching for something stranger? Something darker? Why was she leaning toward the unnatural when she had no proof?

She didn't know. But then her thoughts slid, inevitably, to the white-haired man again. The way her father had paled, not with anger, but with fear—when she asked. Why did every whispered conversation dip around that person like it was a pit too deep to peer into? Why did it feel like everyone knew more than she did?

Aurora rubbed her temple, unsettled. But then Tamber cleared his throat softly. "Princess…these are uncertain times. Your Solvaran studies might—"

"Stop," Aurora muttered, rubbing her forehead. "I know. I know, Tamber. I just…I can't think about prayer and scripture right now. My parents are gone with King Althren. There's a war coming, the kingdom is bankrupt, a village vanished, and—"

"And faith is for moments such as these," Tamber said softly.

Aurora looked away.

She didn't argue.

She simply stood.

Her boots echoed softly through the library as she walked away, cloak brushing the floor. She didn't want Tamber to see how shaken she actually was. Before she reached the sofa, the library doors opened.

Puruna stepped through, graceful as always, white hair tied back. Her eyes swept the room until she found Aurora. "There you are," Puruna sighed. "I've been searching everywhere. I came here earlier and you weren't here."

Aurora lifted her arms as if presenting herself. "Congratulations Puruna. You found the princess."

Puruna walked closer, stopping in front of her with a tired smile. "Rough day again?"

"Where do I even begin?" Aurora exhaled sharply.

Puruna chuckled softly. “Running a kingdom is not an easy task, my princess. Thankfully you’re not having to do it alone.”

Aurora’s expression soured. “Right. Soon I’ll be passed off to Prince John so Eldoria can recover its finances.”

Puruna’s face softened. “Not what I meant.”

Aurora shook her head, pacing away a few steps. “I do everything for this kingdom and my family. Yet the moment I have an opinion, Arcius rolls his eyes, Barnobus groans, and Carter just smirks.”

Puruna stepped closer. “You’re doing better than you think.”

“Am I Puruna? Am I truly?” Aurora snapped, then sighed deeply. “I don’t even know anymore.”

Puruna hesitated. “There is a reason why I came looking for you Aurora. Prince John was speaking with soldiers at the camp and…he plans to meet you in the ballroom soon.”

Aurora groaned loudly. “Because of course he does.”

“And…” Puruna whispered, “…what about Vince? Have you spoken to him?”

Aurora stopped moving. Her voice dropped to a whisper. Her chest tightened. “Puruna. Do not mention that here,” she whispered. “I told him,” she said quietly, “the night Belfour arrived. Before John could see us together.” She swallowed. “We haven’t spoken since. Whatever was there is over.”

Puruna exhaled slowly. “I see.”

Aurora didn’t answer. She didn’t trust her voice. Instead, she squared her shoulders. Tried to gather the pieces of herself. “Come,” she said stiffly. “Escort me to the ballroom before John sends a search party.” Puruna nodded, falling into step behind her.



The ballroom of Eldoria castle was a place of music, light, and warmth. Aurora stepped inside with her arms wrapped tightly around herself, Puruna lingering just behind her. Servants bustled about—stringing banners of deep emerald, polishing silver sconces, arranging tables draped in velvet cloth for the approaching winter ball. Their movements were purposeful but subdued, as though even they could sense the tension suffocating the kingdom.

The winter ball was supposed to be a celebration. A moment of joy before the final month of the year drowned Eldoria in snow. A holy day called Lumora. It was celebrated for the Heliorens. Done once a year on the twelfth month.

"Princess Aurora," Prince John's voice carried across the ballroom.

Aurora felt the air tighten around her spine. John strode toward her with calculated elegance, tall, black-haired, wrapped in sleek Belfourian navy-blue. He caught her hand before she could react and pressed a kiss to her knuckles.

It took all her strength not to yank her hand back.

"Prince John," Aurora said coolly. "What may I help you with?"

John didn't answer immediately. Instead, he guided her to walk beside him around the ballroom, gesturing proudly at the decorations."Your people are efficient," he said. "I took the liberty of advising them earlier today, this ball needed direction. Structure. Belfour's little touch," he said pinching his fingers.

Aurora blinked as they passed a pair of servants nervously adjusting a garland. "You…advised them?"

He smiled modestly. "Naturally. With our fathers gone, someone must ensure the kingdom does not fall behind."

Aurora bit her tongue so hard she tasted blood. But she forced a polite expression, the one she'd perfected since childhood. "I appreciate the concern Prince John," she said, "but the people of Eldoria are more than capable without you instructing them."

"Oh, I do not doubt their capability," John replied lightly, hands clasped behind him. "But even the most capable require leadership."

Aurora inhaled sharply. "And I am leading."

He glanced at her sideways, that faint smirk twitching across his mouth. "If that is what you'd call it."

Aurora stopped walking. Full stop. Dead in her tracks. “I beg your pardon?”

John waved a hand dismissively. “I only mean, running a nation demands more than passion. It demands…what’s the word. Composure.”

Aurora’s jaw clenched so tight her teeth ached.

Composure.

The word sliced through her. And this insufferable man thought she lacked composure? She forced a controlled breath through her nose. “Is this conversation going somewhere useful, Prince John? Or are you simply here to insult me?”

John blinked, taken aback, just for a second. Then he composed himself. “Not at all. I only seek to understand the woman I will soon be—”

“Finish that sentence and I swear I will shove you into the nearest decorative fountain,” Aurora said flatly.

John stared, stunned. Then grinned.

A few servants near the far wall slowed their work, pretending not to listen while very obviously listening.

John cleared his throat, cheeks stiff. “I simply meant to say…we are to be joined soon. It is natural for me to wish to know the kind of queen you intend to be. And honestly Aurora, this is a great opportunity to show our parents that we are capable of running a kingdom together in their absence.”

Aurora exhaled, slow and sharp. “The kind who keeps her kingdom safe. The kind who doesn’t need another man standing at her shoulder telling her how to breathe. I don’t need your help.”

John blinked again. “You misunderstand—”

“Do I?” Aurora shot back.

John straightened, voice lowering as they resumed walking. “Forgive my bluntness, Aurora. Truly. But we cannot pretend these are ordinary times. Grimrave gathers strength. You’ve lost Elandor’s Stonewatch. My kingdom has been patient, but we have our limits.”

Aurora narrowed her eyes. “Meaning?”

John’s tone turned matter-of-fact, as though discussing the weather. “Meaning your kingdom needs our support. And our alliance requires commitment.”

Commitment.

Marriage.

“You speak as though we’re already wed,” Aurora said quietly.

“A political union must be approached with confidence,” John replied. “And certainty,” he paused. “Surely you’ve wondered where our fathers are during all this turmoil? You know where they are, don’t you Aurora?” John smiled while looking away. “I mean…for Oryneth’s sake, why would a king leave his kingdom for two weeks? And then leave his daughter and the council to be in charge?”

Aurora shrugged stiffly. “I know where they are John. Mirk. That isolated island in the Luvarian Expanse. They go there multiple times during the year, they’ve done this before. But this time, I get to be involved with helping in the council in their absence.”

John smirked slightly. “Right…Mirk.”

Something in his tone made Aurora freeze. “What does that mean?” she demanded. “You said that like you know something.”

John held her gaze, unblinking. “So you really don’t know? Sad,” he said with a practiced smile. “Well, it is simply royal business.”

Aurora’s blood simmered hot. “John. I am running this kingdom. Do not tell me what is or isn’t my business.”

His smile faltered, but only for a heartbeat. “All of this will be clear—once our marriage is formalized, more doors will open to you. And if you still don’t know after our wedding, then I will tell you as my wife.”

Aurora stopped walking again. “This kingdom has doors now?”

John tilted his head, amused. “Every throne has secrets behind it Aurora, you should know this.”

Aurora glared. “And you think you’re worthy of knowing them?”

John stepped closer, lowering his voice. “I think we will rule better together than apart.”

Aurora stared at him, disbelief curling in her chest like smoke. “You don’t know me,” she said.

He smiled faintly. “That is why I ask.” He paused, letting the words settle. “Because soon, I will.”

She moved away from him, needing distance. “I’m tired of this conversation,” she said sharply.

John followed, hands folded behind him.

They walked in silence for a while, weaving between servants and decorations. Aurora felt trapped by the walls closing in around her. She looked out across the ballroom, the banners, the servants, the chandeliers, and for a fleeting moment she felt small.

Then the ballroom doors opened. General Vince stepped in with several of his men. John's smile vanished instantly, replaced by a faint curled sneer he tried to hide.

Vince's eyes found Aurora first. "My lady," Vince said, voice respectful and steady. "Forgive the interruption…but may I speak with you?"

John cut in immediately, stepping forward. "General Vince, do you not have somewhere else to be?"

Vince's jaw flexed as he met the prince's eyes. "I am here on the princess's command," he lied.

Puruna's hand drifted toward her skirt. Aurora stepped between them. "Enough. I'll speak with him."

John forced a smile, but it didn't reach his eyes. "Very well. We will continue our conversation later, my princess."

"Yes, John," Aurora muttered under her breath.

She motioned to Vince and walked away.

Puruna stayed, leaving Aurora to go alone with Vince. And when Aurora looked back, John was watching with Puruna. He had a look Aurora couldn't quite decipher.

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26

WHAT WE CHOOSE

AURORA'S MIND WAS STILL TANGLED IN THE POLITICAL NOISE, COUNCIL voices arguing, John's smug smiles, whispers about Scone, whispers about war. Every wall seemed to watch her.

And climbing the tower would give her one thing she needed.

A moment where no one was watching her.

Vince followed silently just behind her.

It had been two weeks since she'd last spoken to him. Two weeks since she'd told him, coldly, painfully—that what they had wouldn't work. Two weeks of avoiding him in corridors, ignoring his glances, and forcing herself to pretend she didn't care.

But she cared.

That was the problem.

Aurora took the left turn leading up the spiraling tower stairs. "Come," she said, not looking back. Her voice wasn't rude, but it held a formal edge. The stairwell was narrow and tall, lit only by two torches that flickered with the winter drafts slipping through unseen cracks in the stone.

Aurora climbed faster than Vince expected given her dress, the silk hem brushing the ground. Her heartbeat quickened with each turn of the stair. She expected him to say something, maybe even force the conversation she had avoided for days.

But Vince was silent. She pushed open the tall oak door at the top of the tower, letting in the sharp light of the afternoon sun. The upper hall was long, narrow, and quiet. A gallery of windows that faced opposite worlds.

On one side, Eldoria city glimmered in the distance, rooftops dusted white with early winter frost. On the other, the vast ocean stretched out in the south, the waves rolling beneath the pale sun. Aurora walked to the far end of the corridor and placed her hand on the window ledge, peering out.

“So what is this all about, General Vince?” she said, keeping her back to him. Her tone was dry and detached. She hated that she had to pretend.

Vince stopped a few paces behind her, his boots settling softly. “Aurora…” he hesitated. “You don’t have to avoid me.”

Aurora exhaled sharply through her nose, still refusing to turn. “Please, general. I’m busy. If you have business to discuss, say it.”

“Business,” he muttered. “Right.”

She heard the hurt in his voice, light, barely present, but unmistakable. She forced her gaze forward. It was safer this way.

Safer for him.

Then she heard the steps, the careful, heavy ones, of Vince moving closer. He stopped beside her, looking at her reflection in the glass. “What is this?” he asked quietly. “Really?”

Aurora swallowed. “I asked you a question,” she said coldly. “Why did you request to see me?”

He didn’t laugh, but she felt his breath shake with disbelief. “So this is a waste of your time now? Is that what I am?”

“Vince—”

“It’s me,” he said, stepping closer. “You know who I am. Why are you acting like you never met me?”

Aurora finally looked at him, and regretted it instantly. He was standing too close. Too warm. His black eyes held something stubborn and aching. He cared for her.

But she had to keep her distance. “You should call me your highness,” she whispered. “It’s better.”

He tried to stand tall, to keep his composure. “If you’re worried about why you kept me in Eldoria instead of sending me north—then yes, I’m confused. My men are going up there. I should be up there. Fighting against Grimrave. Helping to take back Elandor’s Stonewatch.”

Aurora crossed her arms defensively. “We need you here.”

“You mean, you need me here.”

Aurora flinched.

Vince’s voice softened. It was gentle. “I’m not a child, Aurora.”

“General,” she corrected sharply.

But he ignored it. “I know why you did it,” Vince said. “Because you care.”

“Enough!” She turned away from him again, heart pounding. “I did it because you are a valuable general and—”

“Aurora,” he said again, firm.

She hated how her defenses cracked every time he said her name. She exhaled and kept her tone neutral. “Yes. My marriage is official. John and I —” her voice trembled, and she steadied it, “—are to be wed.”

Vince nodded slowly, staring down at the floor. “I know,” he murmured.

She didn’t answer.

But then his voice softened to something that reached deeper than she expected. “You don’t have to do what your parents want you to do,” he said. “You don’t have to live a life that…that suffocates you Aurora.”

She clenched her jaw. “In this matter, I do.”

“No,” he said quietly. “You don’t.” He stepped into her space, close enough she felt his warmth even in the drafty tower hall. She took a shaky breath, but didn’t move back. “Sometimes,” Vince said softly, “we make choices. I didn’t have to reveal my aetheris. I didn’t have to join Eldoria’s army when it would have been easier to stay home. But I chose to join.”

Aurora stared at him, her heart pounding against her ribs. Her breath held. She opened her mouth, but Vince stepped closer, his hand brushing hers.

“Tell me you don’t feel the same?” His voice was gentle, but his eyes were unyielding.

Aurora closed her eyes, fighting tears. “This will ruin you,” she whispered. “My father will—”

“I don’t care,” Vince said, his voice rising in frustration. “I don’t care what the soldiers think. I don’t care about rumors or titles. By Oryneth’s name, I don’t care about my vows. I don’t live for them.”

Aurora hated when he cursed Oryneth. But she shook her head helplessly. “There are plenty of women who—”

“I don’t want them,” he interrupted, his grip tightening around her hand. “I want you.”

Her resolve shattered. Aurora didn’t know who leaned in first. One moment they were just staring at each other, breath mingling. The next—his lips were on hers, tentative but burning with the kind of longing she had

forced herself to swallow for years. Her hands shot up instinctively, one gripping the front of his tunic, the other wrapping behind his neck.

And Vince pulled her closer, as if afraid she might vanish again.

The kiss softened, then deepened, slow, hungry, filled with everything they had been denying themselves. Aurora felt herself melt into him, her heart racing so wildly that she almost forgot to breathe. She felt warm and alive and terrified all at once.

When they finally pulled apart, breathless, she stepped back abruptly.

She shouldn't have done that. She shouldn't—

"I should go," she whispered, trying to force her expression back into something distant and royal. "I—I have duties."

Vince laughed under his breath. "Aurora—"

But she lifted her chin, masking everything. "Good day, general."

She tried to walk away. She really did.

But as she passed him, Vince reached out and gently grabbed her wrist.

She stiffened.

"Aurora," he said softly. She turned slowly. Their eyes locked. "Don't let your parents decide your life for you," he said. "There's still time. We can start something new," he paused. "We…we could run away."

"I—I need time to think," she whispered to him. Aurora let him go and walked down the hall, leaving him standing in the light of the open window.

Aurora pressed a hand to her lips, breath trembling. Her body felt warm. She looked down at her wrist where he'd held her, then back behind her. "What am I doing?" she whispered to no one.

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THE INVITATION

4 Days Later
Morvath the 20th, Year 11,219 - Morning
(The eleventh month)

THE SKY WAS A PALE, WASHED-OUT BLUE, THIN SUNLIGHT STRUGGLING through the skeleton crowns of Hazelwood, where frost clung to every branch. Snow lay thick on the forest floor, softening the world into a muffled silence that Silvanus preferred. The cold didn't bother him. Not anymore.

His boots crunched across the half-frozen path, breath hissing through the slits of his helm like a tired beast. He had been traveling for weeks, quietly, deliberately, keeping off the main roads, skirting villages and outposts. Cree, scouts, border patrols—he avoided them all. Eldoria didn't take kindly to wandering armored giants in black steel. Eldoria may assume he belonged to Drakhar because of his armor. But especially not ones whose reputations smelled of blood.

He paused atop a broken ridge, a natural lookout that rose over the vast winter forest. From this height Hazelwood looked endless: a sea of white treetops stretching into the horizon, where the gray shape of the Noradic Mountains cut across the land. And to the west, nestled against the base of the Noradic Mountains, lay Khazadryn city, the Dwarven kingdom.

Silvanus didn't linger.

He rarely let himself admire anything. But the wind shifted. Cold air flowed past him, swirling around a single stone planted at the cliff's edge. A narrow spire of gray rock, a hollow circle carved straight through its center.

A breathstone.

Silvanus exhaled, placed his left gauntleted palm on the top of the stone, and closed his eyes. The forest's hush deepened around him.

A faint red flame flickered to life inside the hollow circle. Small at first—just an ember—then swelling as if oxygen rushed through it, though no wind moved. It pushed outward, expanding until the breathstone blazed with a ring of red fire. Silvanus clenched his jaw. The flame spilled out, crawling along his hand like liquid heat, then surged across his armor until he was completely engulfed.

Not burning, but consuming. Rushing back into him in a single violent pull, absorbed through his chest plate. It left him standing still, quiet. He felt stronger, sharper—he chose the Titan path, class Brawen, with the Crimson aetheris.

"Still alive, I see?"

Silvanus didn't turn. He didn't need to.

The voice slithered out from between the trees behind him—thin, nasal, and tinged with mockery.

Silvanus sighed. "You should go to Chaba'dum," he muttered. "I'm sure they'd welcome you with open arms."

A clatter of brittle bones.

"Oh, you wound me, Silvanus." The creature emerged into view. A skeletal figure draped in a long crimson cape embroidered with wilted flowers. It walked with a limp, leaning heavily on a long rose-like staff whose bloom blazed with tiny orange fire. Atop its bare skull was a painted mask of a sun, its carved mouth contorted in eternal horror.

Stellto was his name.

Stellto had once been a man. He wore the ruin of that truth openly. His soul had been given to the Nihilkins—the Sovereigns of Darkness—and in return they had hollowed him into something else. He gained great power like Silvanus, the abilities of an Oathracki. A gift that burned brighter than aetheris, but it came laced with a cost. The more one used the powers of the Oathracki, the more it consumed, years, breath, and soul. Each act of power shortened the span of life. Stellto was a mirror of what Silvanus would become. And when that life ended, there was no peace. No rest. Only

servitude. Now, Stellto was a Barn'beden—a bound spirit, stripped of flesh. A skeletal remnant forced to serve the Nihilkins. That was what he had become.

Stellto stepped beside Silvanus, skeletal toes crunching in the snow. "Beautiful view," Stellto rasped. "Hazelwood always has such charm in winter. So cold and lifeless."

Silvanus ignored him.

"So," Stellto continued, "I take it you're here for the festival, hm?"

Silvanus narrowed his eyes under the helm. "Festival?"

"You weren't invited?" Stellto made a dramatic gasp. "Oh dear. How embarrassing."

"Speak plainly, mouth."

"But where's the excitement in that?" Stellto's muffled voice said behind the mask. "Regardless, you're welcome to join me. I would be simply heart-broken if you missed it."

"If you were invited," Silvanus said as he stepped away from the cliff, "it must be disappointing." He began down the slope. Stellto scurried after him, cape dragging in the snow.

"I am merely trying to be hospitable! Honestly. One year away and you're already colder than usual."

Silvanus ignored him again.

"How long has it been?" Stellto mused aloud. "Since you left Eldoria? Since you left Ardester to hunt for criminals again? A year? More? I thought you intended to wander forever." He paused. "What brings you back so early?"

Silvanus didn't answer.

Stellto hummed. "Are you visiting old friends?"

"Is that a crime?"

"For you? Possibly."

Silvanus kept walking down the slope, through the ribs of an ancient beast lying half-buried beneath snow. The bones of Zambero the dragon, called the Watcher of Night, stretched in massive arches around him. Its skull alone could swallow many men whole. Stellto lingered at the ribcage, tracing a bone with his flaming flower staff. "How many years do you have left, I wonder?" he asked softly. "You live far longer than mere men, but you're no Elf." His mask tilted. "I look forward to the day you die. I really do Silvanus."

Silvanus growled.

“It’s only because you’d make a wonderful corpse like me! Tall, broad, eternally angry. I can already imagine you in the courts of the Nihilkins.” Stellto clapped his bony hands. “Delightful.”

Silvanus still said nothing.

“Honestly,” Stellto went on, “you really should cherish these last few mortal decades. A shame to waste them sulking about.”

“I’m hunting an Elf,” Silvanus finally said.

Stellto perked. “An Elf? Ooh. What did he do? Murder? Theft? Or rap—”

“Stop.”

“Fine, fine,” the creature sighed. “You’re no fun.”

“I don’t know what he did,” Silvanus admitted. “But he crossed the Nihilkins and they want him dead.”

Stellto clicked his tongue. “Very moral of you, standing up for the Nihilkins—and murdering someone without knowing why.” A pause.

“It’s a blighted Elf. Who cares.” Silvanus cursed.

They traveled deeper into Hazelwood. Silence hung between them, until a deep rumble vibrated the ground. Snow shook loose from branches overhead.

Silvanus’s hand went to the hilt of his greatsword.

Then the trees parted.

And they saw them.

A dozen goblins, small and hunch-backed, riding atop massive beasts. Behemoths, towering monsters with four black insect eyes and tusks curling upward like hooks. The creatures stomped through the snow dragging wagons behind them.

Metal cages lined the wagons.

And inside them—

Children screaming.

Stellto blinked. “Well…that’s new.”

Silvanus’s pulse hammered. A horn blared from behind the goblins.

“Ayaah! Hurry! Stop them!!” a voice shouted. Bursting into the clearing came a squadron of Dwarves riding kantapedes. Large white deer with sweeping antlers. More Dwarves followed on foot, axes raised, beards frosted white. They were trying to cut the goblins off before they reached the foothills of the Salfer Mountains.

Spears flew.

One behemoth fell.

Another surged forward, crushing two Dwarves beneath its fists. A third swung a club, sending a kantapede crashing down.

The Dwarven children screams pierced the air.

Silvanus froze. His hand clamped over his breastplate—not in pain, but in memory. A chair, mud, and screams. The cages of Hazelwood blurred with the cages of his past. He shook his head violently. “Not now…”

He heard children begging. Visions flickered behind his eyes. His daughter, small and pale—pressed into a chair, held down by rough palms. He felt the weight of that moment. He heard his wife’s voice, even though she had never said the words he imagined:

“Silvanus…save us…”

He paused.

Memory lanced through Silvanus’s mind. He remembered children like those in cages. His own past under Gornhelm’s rule, small faces pressed against bars, half-dead from waiting. He had wanted so desperately to act then. But he couldn’t. He had been frozen. That failure sat heavy in his chest now, turning into rage.

The children’s pleas rang again and his breath came fast, ragged. Silvanus closed his eyes. He let the guilt settle from decades ago in Gornhelm. The memory came with its weight.

And in that moment, his anger snapped like a chain.

He drew his greatsword. The Dwarves barely had time to react. He charged past them. The cape billowed behind him. In his hand, his greatsword Chelba glinted, a cleaver of death. Of judgement and rage.

Silvanus slammed into the nearest behemoth with shaking force. Chelba arced down, a single devastating movement—

The monster split in half. Snow and blood exploded outward. Scarlet steam rose in the frigid air. Limbs and sinew scattered across the white field.

Silvanus let out a roar. But there was no pause. More goblins rushed toward him, shrieking madness and scrap-metal blades raised high. Silvanus spun on his heel, greatsword swinging. The slash carved a bloody crescent through their bodies.

Arms flew. Torsos split. But a behemoth struck him from behind. His back buckled. The metal of his armor groaned as a dent folded inward with

a sharp crack that echoed.

Silvanus rose. From the edge of the fight, Stellto cackled. “Oooh! Use it, Silvanus! Now!”

Silvanus ignored him.

The battlefield was all-consuming, the clash, the smell of hot goblin blood in freezing air—the broken bodies falling. He didn’t want to use the power he received from the Nihilkins. Not unless it was for killing Arameth. The behemoth lunged again, but Silvanus met its punch with Chelba, catching the creature’s massive fist. Children wailed behind him, high-pitched, terrified sobs. And his mind broke again.

His daughter’s cry echoed, desperate. Kira…

Her small voice pushed through the chaos, splintering deeper. He saw her eyes. Calling to him. Then Erika—her scream cut short, her body falling, blood spreading in the mud.

And then, Sith.

Drowning.

Gasping.

Her tiny limbs disappearing beneath black water.

No.

The memories blazed in him, crawling up from the deep roots of his mind.

“STOP!” Silvanus roared at the forest, at the noise, at the vision that wouldn’t let go. As much to the past as to the creature charging him.

The behemoth lunged once more.

Silvanus stepped forward, dragging his sword low across the snow, and with a brutal upward thrust, drove the blade through the beast’s throat. Chelba tore up and out through its skull, splitting the bone and sinew. The monster let out a wet, choking howl, staggered once—

Then collapsed in a heap.

The snow drank its blood greedily, steaming in the cold. But there was no pause.

More goblins burst from the woods, screeching in fury. Dozens. Maybe more.

And Silvanus snapped. The black knight surged forward, his greatsword already mid-swing. He became a tornado of dark metal and fury. Steel roared through the air, goblin limbs flew. Heads rolled. Blood sprayed in every direction, painting bark and rock in fresh crimson. He looked like a

wild dog finally unchained. A monster of vengeance. The demon Silvanus was.

Even the goblins began to hesitate.

The children in cages watched in silence, too young to scream, their eyes wide with fear as this man. This thing, cut through the tide of attackers like wheat beneath a scythe. Dwarves lined up in the snow, frozen, unable to look away.

“Who is that?” one whispered.

“That sword, it’s massive. Two hundred pounds at least!”

“He must be an Aetherian. He’s clearly a Titan!”

“Yes, he must be! A mere mortal can’t hold a sword that heavy!”

Silvanus barely heard them.

More goblins charged. He slowed for only a moment, shoulders rising and falling. A low growl escaped beneath his helm. He clenched his gauntlet into a fist and said a word. “Nok’rith!”

A sudden heat burst from his left hand. Flame engulfed it, red, and alive. Lines of molten light crawled up his arm in spirals, lacing across his chest and back, wrapping around his black armor.

Then came the shimmer.

A translucent armor, red as blood and thin as glass, formed over him. An echo of his form, a shell of power. It flickered with aetheris, nearly invisible, but felt in every movement. His strength surged. His speed doubled. He stomped the ground, the stone under the snow cracked beneath his feet. He leapt forward with a bellowing roar, cutting through three goblins mid-air. Their bodies split open in wet bursts. One didn’t even have time to scream.

Still more came.

And still, Silvanus killed.

Stellto stood in the distance, watching from beneath his mask, giggling softly in amusement. Even the Dwarves tried to back away now, unsure if this knight was truly on their side.

But when it ended, Silvanus stood alone, covered in goblin gore, his armor slick with blood and entrails. A goblin corpse dragged behind him by one twisted leg.

He tossed the body forward, right at a cluster of goblins who had taken shelter near the caged Dwarven children.

Then he shouted, “VAH’NIR!” The word came like thunder, and with it, a gust of wind burst from his mouth, howling like a hurricane. The goblins staggered, their eyes wide with terror.

Then they turned. Panicked shrieks filled the forest as they bolted back into the woods, fleeing the battlefield, leaving the children behind. Silvanus stood still, red mist rising from his shoulders. He said nothing more. But someone else stood at the end of the path. Silvanus saw him as the goblins reached the figure. A tall skeletal being made entirely of wood, hair draped in roots—while it had a wooden face carved with popping glowing orange eyes and a spiral mouth. It raised its hand. Snapped its fingers. And the goblins, and itself, burst into green mist, swirling upward into the winter sky until not a trace remained.

Silvanus stared, stunned. Stellto’s mask tilted thoughtfully. “Well. That fellow…was odd.”

The Dwarves were shouting triumphantly as they freed the children, smashing open the cages and lifting the little ones into their arms. The kantapedes circled protectively, snorting steam.

Silvanus planted his sword in the snow and leaned on it.

Blood dripped from his armor, running in thick, slow rivulets. The snow at his feet was soaked red. He didn’t look at the children, he couldn’t. Their cries clawed at the edge of his mind, but he forced his gaze forward, jaw clenched so tight it ached.

Stellto stepped up beside him. “How noble,” the creature mused, voice light, needling. “You saved them. I’m so disappointed.”

Silvanus didn’t respond at first. The muscles in his neck flexed.

“You didn’t even use it,” Stellto went on, tilting his head. “Your Oathracki form…your little gift. I wonder why? That behemoth could have nearly crushed your spine and yet you still held back.”

Silvanus’s voice came low, hoarse. “Because I’m not wasting that power.”

“Wasting?” Stellto scoffed, stepping in front of him now, searching his face. “You call saving children a waste?”

“I call bleeding for anything other than killing Arameth a waste,” Silvanus growled. “You already know why I don’t use the powers of the Oathracki. You think I’d throw that away for just goblins? For Dwarves I don’t know?” He turned, stomping through the red snow, toward the Dwarves who were still opening some of the cages and pulling wounded

children free. One of the children reached toward Silvanus, but he turned before the hand could touch him. Then he stopped, towering over the Dwarven leader. His armor bloodied, his breath fuming like smoke from a forge. “What in the neth’rose happened?” Silvanus asked, towering over him.

The Dwarf choked back fear. “The goblins attacked our village at dawn,” the Dwarf said. “Came out of Hazelwood in numbers we’ve never seen. Took the children. Just the children.”

Silvanus frowned. “Why only the children?”

“We don’t know.” The Dwarf shook his head. “They were headed for the Salfer Mountains, or perhaps the deep woods. But that masked creature…” he shuddered. “I’ve never seen aetheris like that or a creature like him.”

Silvanus turned without a word, already heading down the path that curved southwest around the base of the Salfer Mountains.

“Sir!” the Dwarf called after him, the voice edged with urgency. “You’re leaving? Please, your name, so we may at least honor—”

Silvanus didn’t stop. His boots struck the frozen earth with steady purpose. He said nothing.

But behind him, the Dwarf moved forward, shifting uncertainly as the others exchanged glances. He jogged forward, calling out again, not for honor now, but from concern. “Wait! I should warn you that darkness stirs in the two countries here between Khazadryn and Eldoria.”

Silvanus paused, glancing back with narrowed eyes.

The Dwarf caught his breath, clutching the haft of his axe. “A village has vanished. Scone. Men, women, children, gone. Eldoria’s deployed scouts to find out why, but they found nothing. And now…Grimrave’s forces mass near Elandor’s Stonewatch. If you’re new to Khazadryn and Eldoria, tread carefully.”

A beat passed. Silvanus said nothing. The Dwarves watched him go, unease deepening in their eyes. Stellto jogged to catch up, nearly stumbling as he reached Silvanus’s side. His bony legs weren’t made for mountain trails. Silvanus pressed onward, boots crunching snow, eyes scanning the shadowed slope ahead. “A village vanishing,” Stellto mused. “Children stolen. Goblins turning to mist. Strange masked creature. Dwarves panicking. And you’re telling me none of this interests you?”

“It doesn’t concern me.”

“Hm, you are definitely a strange creature.”

Silvanus kept walking, past the edge of Hazelwood, where the trees thinned and the plains opened toward distant villages. The snow was falling harder now. Stellto’s flame flickered under the weight of it.

“What was the festival?” Silvanus finally asked. “You mentioned earlier.”

Stellto gasped theatrically. “Now you want me to tell you?”

“Just speak.”

“The Crimson Night,” Stellto whispered. “Also known as…the Arkilal.”

Silvanus felt something cold creep down his spine. “That doesn’t sound like a celebration.”

Stellto twirled his burning rose. “Oh, it is. For Oathrackis and Barn’bedens like us. For the servants of the kings. And now—” he extended his skeletal hand “—you are invited.”

Silvanus felt his stomach twist. “What happens at this…Arkilal?”

Stellto shrugged his bony shoulders. “I’m not allowed to say. Rules, you understand.” He leaned in. “But I can say this, it is old. Very old. Older than Eldoria.” He bowed dramatically. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I must return to the Mouth of Kolmarith. My little nest.”

With a swirl of crimson petals, and the faint crackle of small flames, Stellto turned and vanished into the trees, limping into the distance until he became one more shadow swallowed by Hazelwood.

Silvanus stood alone.

Snow drifted around him. Far ahead, small smoke trails rose from scattered Dwarven homes. And further still…the home of an old man named Eb, and a little girl named Tina.

Silvanus clenched his fists.

A village had gone missing.

Children were being taken.

And now a festival for demons was stirring.

Silvanus tightened the straps on his armor and walked down the snowy path. Toward Gjora forest, and then right into Listoff Mountain next. He would take the passage through Darlimir, and enter out the other side in Ardester. Toward the child and the old man that once helped him.

Toward the last sliver of softness he allowed in his life.

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VOICES IN THE WINTER

Morvath the 20th, Year 11,219 - Later morning
(The eleventh month)

WINTER SETTLED INTO ARDESTER. QUIET, HEAVY, AND IMPOSSIBLE TO ignore. Matthew had begun to know its rhythms. Mornings came gray, the breath in the house visible until Eb lit the hearth. The animals complained in soft, muffled grunts under their blankets of frost. And every day the silence grew thicker. He helped where he could. Feeding the cows. Breaking frozen water troughs with a wooden mallet. Carrying hay bales that iced over at the corners. Tasks he knew well, things he'd done back home in Liora with his father and mother, tending the garatens. Those simple mornings felt like a lifetime ago, belonging to someone else entirely. Someone who wasn't being hunted by a kingdom…or tormented by demons.

Because every night, every single night, the black dog waited.

Matthew could see it through his bedroom window when the candles were out. Sitting just inside the treeline.

Golden eyes glowing with that hungry, hateful stare. And behind it, half-seen and yet unmistakable, the vague silhouettes of other demons prowled along the edge of the farm like wolves circling a pen. Their shapes flickered between forms, sometimes Humanoid, sometimes monstrous, sometimes only shadows with teeth.

They couldn’t cross the boundary of Lu’s blessing, but they made sure Matthew knew they were there. Watching. Mocking.

And when he lay in bed, the mark on his arm burned, quiet but sharp, like a smoldering coal pressed into his skin.

Then came the soft laughter. It drifted across his mind like a whisper through a long hallway, distant, distorted. No one else heard it. Only Matthew.

He tried not to think about why.

He tried not to think about anything.

But the quiet made thinking impossible for him to avoid.

Florencia hadn’t helped either. She’d withdrawn these past few weeks after they first met, speaking little, offering only short, polite answers when Matthew tried to talk to her. She kept leaving the farmhouse in the mornings with a basket and returning at dusk with spices or herbs from the village, face unreadable. She seemed like a person who knew more than what she was saying. Matthew couldn’t tell if he’d offended her or if she simply preferred the cold silence of Ardester to his company.

Matthew threw another armful of hay into the trough, brushing dust off his Eldorian outfit. The cows shuffled closer. Their breath came in hot puffs. He forced a weak smile. At least animals never stared at him like a monster.

“Goodness me, lad. Are you still feedin’ the cows?”

Matthew startled hard enough to drop the hay. Eb stood at the barn entrance, leaning on his cane, beard frosted with the cold.

Matthew rubbed the back of his neck. “No, sir. I just finished.”

Eb chuckled brightly. “Oh, I’m only teasin’. But!” He raised a finger excitedly. “I do have something that requires your immediate assistance.”

Matthew gave him a curious look. “What now?”

“A great artifact!” Eb announced as if revealing treasure. “Been meanin’ to get to it, but all this blasted winter nonsense keeps slowin’ me down. Sechera has brought winter early.”

Matthew blinked. “Artifact?”

Eb didn’t answer—he simply waved Matthew to follow with an enthusiasm that felt too big for his small, frail frame. They walked across the snowy yard toward a squat stone shed half-buried under a slanted roof of white. Eb fumbled with his keys, muttering to himself, and finally pushed the door open with a triumphant grunt.

Inside, Matthew stopped.

The air was cold, almost colder than the outside. And in the center of the room stood a machine, massive, golden, and unmistakably ancient. It was Humanoid in shape: a tall, armored construct with boots, thick forearms, and a smooth, expressionless faceplate of shining gold. Chains hung around it like vines around a forgotten statue.

Matthew stepped forward in awe. “Is that…?”

Eb looked like a child showing off a prized toy. “I think you know exactly what it is, Mr. Peregryn.”

“A shal’kor,” Matthew whispered. “But…different. The ones back home never looked like this.” The shal’kors of Liora were stone husks—cracked, silent watchers, frozen. But this one? Whoever created them had to be intelligent. “How did you get this?” Matthew asked, circling the construct cautiously.

“Oh, this one?” Eb lifted his chin proudly. “Found the thing in Darlimir. The Mines of Roynar. Took some effort, mind you.”

“That’s an understatement…” Matthew muttered. “This thing must weigh—”

“Quite a bit, yes. Thankfully I had help!” Eb’s voice dipped. “Though he’s a moody lad. Strongest man I’ve ever known, but moody.”

Matthew frowned. “Who—”

Eb cleared his throat loudly, ignoring the question. “Now! Look here.” He tapped the golden plating. “Ancient symbols, but nothing we know.” The markings were squared and had twisted unfamiliar patterns within the square.

“I recognize the symbols from the shal’kor on Liora’s cliff, but I’ve never seen this shal’kor design,” Matthew murmured.

“Oh, there are many designs.” Eb hopped over to a desk cluttered with parchment maps. “Different shal’kors for different people, I believe. Dwarven. Elven. Humans. Maybe even Zanari-made. But lost to time. Forgotten to history. Whoever created them, had to be very smart, no race has done this.”

Matthew traced a marking with his fingertip. The metal was frigid, unnaturally frigid. “And you hauled it out of a mine,” he said. “Alone?”

Eb puffed out his cheeks indignantly. “I said I had help!”

“Who?”

“Never mind that, boy. Not important.” He quickly shuffled to a set of scrolls. “Look here!”

Matthew stepped back as Eb unfurled map after map, each one hand-drawn, meticulous, obsessive. Maps of Ardester. Maps of Morgar Forest. Maps of the entire northern region, broken into pieces. Each marked with symbols, ruins, caves, paths, notes about sightings or places unknown.

“You drew these?” Matthew asked.

“Well, someone had to.” Eb shrugged. “Fear of the dark, you know. No better way to conquer it than understand what hides inside it. Besides…” He looked up at the shal’kor, eyes softening. “I’ve chased mysteries all my life. Might as well finish what I started before the Sovereigns of Light call me home.”

Matthew snorted. “Aren’t there already maps?”

“Yes, but not like these!” Eb jabbed his quill at him. “These are my maps. Each one tells what the countries of Valdorin failed to.”

Matthew smiled weakly. Eb’s excitement was infectious, but Matthew’s heart wasn’t in it. Too much weight hung around his neck.

Elara and Finn.

Liora, his parents and Taren.

Greg, the crew, and the ship.

The mark on his arm.

Pete.

And every day that passed, every hour that Frey’kro didn’t return, felt like another grain of sand slipping away. He could feel time collapsing on him, the sense of helplessness building.

Eb didn’t seem to notice Matthew drifting. He kept scribbling notes and muttering theories. “Mr. Peregryn,” Eb said gently, “may I ask—do you know why the goblins took your siblings?”

Matthew’s jaw tightened. “No.”

“Do you have any trace, any hint?”

“I said no.” Matthew grumbled.

Eb paused, studying him softly. “I am sorry, lad. You’ve endured much. Truly.”

Matthew forced out a breath. “It’s fine.”

“It is not.” Eb shook his head. “But hear me, your family would be proud. You sailed across an ocean, survived a kingdom that hates your people, braved visions of death, and still you are here. That is something.”

Matthew stared at the machine in silence.

He felt anything but proud. Anything but strong. All he felt was trapped.

Like everything he was doing, every moment he waited here—was killing his siblings little by little. What if Lu was lying, that light wasn't in the darkest of places. What if there was no hope?

Then, a quiet voice echoed from the doorway, "Please don't tell me you're thinking of going into the mines with Eb."

Matthew turned sharply. Florencia stood framed in the cold, fur coat dusted with snow, a basket under her arm. Tina peeked out from behind her, smiling. And right then, right at that moment, Matthew felt something crack.

He didn't want to wait anymore. He couldn't. Florencia's voice still hung in the cold air when Matthew stepped past her. He didn't look at her. Didn't acknowledge Eb calling his name. Didn't stop even when Tina asked where he was going.

He just pushed through the doorway into the wind.

The air bit at his face with needle-like cold as he crossed the snow-crusted field. His boots sank deep into the drifts. His breath came out in angry puffs. And with every step away from the shed, from the maps, from the shal'kor, from all the waiting and all the unanswered questions, something inside him tightened, twisted, and clawed.

He gripped the hilt of his sword until his knuckles hurt.

"I shouldn't be here feeding cows. I shouldn't be sitting at a table waiting for a miracle. They're out there…alone…scared…dying," he said under his breath.

Matthew didn't know whether to scream or cry.

So he did the only thing he knew how to do.

He ran.



Snowflakes drifted softly between the trees, almost too gentle for how violent Matthew felt within. He slowed, breathing hard, and brushed his hand along the sword at his hip. The metal felt grounding. Familiar. A reminder that there were things he could do. Things he had control over. He needed to train. He needed to grow stronger. He couldn't wait for Frey'kro to just appear and fix everything.

He moved deeper until he felt the boundary shift, the one Lu had blessed.

He crossed it, but nothing happened.

No demons lurched out from the trees. No shadows lunged. The black dog didn't materialize with its golden eyes. But Matthew still felt the thinness of the air here. Like stepping onto a frozen lake whose surface might crack at any second. He inhaled sharply.

A twig snapped somewhere ahead. Matthew straightened, listening. Something shuffled between the pines. A group—heavy-bodied, rooting, snorting. Boars. Perfect.

He crouched low, slipping between trees, keeping his weight on the balls of his feet just as his father taught him back home in Liora. Their silhouettes appeared through the branches, stocky shapes moving in a cluster, noses buried in the snow.

"Alright…" he whispered. "Let's see what I can do." He reached inward, toward the strange, foreign energy humming beneath his skin.

Aetheris. That curse. That blessing. That thing he still didn't understand. The power responded like a faint pressure behind his ribs. He stepped forward, ready to use gale step—

A branch cracked and the boars froze. Snouts lifted. Ears twitched. All at once, the entire herd bolted.

"Crask!" Matthew hissed. He sprinted after them, darting through trees, snow blurring around him as his boots pounded the frozen earth. Then, he willed the aetheris forward.

Matthew vanished using gale step. He reappeared between two trunks, then again higher, on a low branch, then leapt tree to tree like a squirrel, moving faster than he ever could on foot. The forest blurred around him. Wind whipped against his face.

He spotted the largest boar lagging behind the others.

Matthew pushed off the branch, sword angled down.

He fell upon the animal like a hawk diving from the skies of Empre'ya.

The blade struck in clean through the boar's spine. It let out a short grunt and collapsed beneath him in the snow. Matthew rolled off, panting, breath fogging the air. "That's…more like it." He smiled weakly. Not joy, just relief that he could do something. Then a low, heavy snort rumbled behind him. Matthew turned slowly.

Another boar. Twice as large. Muscles like knotted rope. Tusks stained from tearing bark and bone. It charged.

"No!" Matthew tried his ability again but he wasn't fast enough. The boar clipped his legs mid-teleportation, sending him spinning across the snow. He hit the ground hard, rolled, and scrambled to his feet.

The boar wheeled around, snorting steam into the air.

Matthew tightened his grip. "Come here—"

The beast thundered toward him.

He shifted his weight, intending to blink away, but another boar burst out from the trees directly behind him.

Matthew didn't have time to curse.

But a sharp hiss cut the air—

Purple crystalline shards burst through the air from the side, tearing into the second boar's ribs with a sound like glass through meat. The beast let out a wet, gurgling squeal and collapsed, its legs folding.

Matthew spun at the motion, eyes narrowing.

The last boar in front.

In a blink, Matthew vanished. Wind cracked in his place, and he reappeared mid-air behind the charging beast, sword raised. The edge of his blade sang as it cleaved clean through the boar's neck, severing spine and tendon in a single smooth motion. The blood sprayed. The head thudded once, then rolled to a stop against a tree root. The rest of the body staggered a few feet before collapsing in a heap. Matthew landed in a crouch, breath misting in the cool air. His blade dripped red. The forest was silent again.

A horse's hooves crunched softly over snow nearby. Matthew didn't look up, he was already listening for the next threat. And atop the horse, cloak sweeping behind her, dark hair falling over her shoulders, was Florencia.

She clicked her tongue, almost annoyed. "What in Valdorin are you doing?"

Matthew groaned, brushing snow off his cloak.

"A simple thank you would be polite," she added, dismounting.

He shot her an irritated look, but still muttered, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” she eyed the dead boars that nearly gored him. “But honestly. Out here? Alone? During winter? Are you trying to freeze or get trampled?”

“I just needed training.”

“Training?” she folded her arms, unimpressed. “You were about to be killed, Elf.”

He exhaled sharply. “Don’t call me Elf.”

“Are you not one?” Florencia said with an eyebrow raised.

“That’s not the point.”

“Then what?”

He clenched his jaw. “Just…call me Matthew.”

A small smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. “Alright then… Matthew.”

He blinked, startled by the warmth in her voice. She rarely used it.

“Now,” she continued, turning toward the boar carcasses, “are we really leaving these here? Eb could use the meat.”

Matthew groaned but walked over and helped her tie ropes around the animals’ hind legs. “I’m sorry,” his voice wavered. “I just…feel stuck. Like everything I do here is pointless. Like I’m wasting time while my siblings —” his throat closed. “I don’t feel like I’m getting stronger. Or closer. Or anything.”

Florencia paused. Her expression softened.

“I can’t just wait,” he murmured. “I can’t sit inside a warm house while they’re out there, terrified, wondering why I haven’t come.”

“I’m sorry.” Florencia said.

Matthew swallowed hard, gripping the rope until his knuckles turned white.

“So you have aetheris,” Florencia said after a moment.

He gave a humorless laugh. “I’m cursed with it.”

She blinked. “Cursed?”

“The Oblivion,” Matthew said. “It…it kills those who have it. I didn’t ask for it. I didn’t want it. But it’s mine now.”

Florencia shifted uneasily, like she understood more than she let on. “I’m blessed with aetheris as well,” she said quietly. “Though where I come from and for what I am…it’s not always seen as a blessing.”

Matthew studied her but didn’t pry. “And where is that?”

Florencia stiffened. Her hands tightened on the rope. “Not here.”

He raised a brow. “Obviously, I mean you look—.”

She shot him a glare, but not an angry one. More like she was debating something inside herself. Then she simply changed the subject. “So…once you get this relic the apostle mentioned, what will you do then?”

Matthew stared at the snow for a long while. “I—I don’t know. I’d need a boat. I’d sail to Drearth. I was thinking of crossing into Serakos, maybe find a port.”

“Don’t.” Florencia’s voice turned sharp.

He blinked. “Don’t?”

“That country is dangerous. Beyond dangerous,” her eyes darkened. “Their laws are strict. Their borders even stricter. If you’re trying to escape Eldoria’s eye…Serakos is not where you want to be. Trust me. You would not believe the stories people say.”

Matthew frowned. “Then where?”

“Anywhere else,” she said quickly. “Keensin maybe. Or Rohland. But not Serakos Kingdom.”

She sounded almost…afraid. Matthew tucked that away for later.



They walked the rest of the way in relative silence, Matthew trailing beside her horse as the boars dragged in the snow behind them.

Florencia spoke softly after a while. “You never answered the real question.”

He glanced up. “What question?”

“So when you do save your siblings…do you have an idea what you’ll do next?” Florencia asked. Her voice was gentle, but Matthew heard the subtle shift. She was steering the conversation away from herself. She hadn’t said where she was from, and he hadn’t pressed. Whatever it was, she wasn’t ready to share clearly.

“I’ll take them home,” Matthew answered simply.

“Well, of course,” Florencia said with a small smile. “But after that? What then? What will you do once it’s all over?”

Matthew hesitated.

He hadn’t thought that far ahead, not really. There were flickers, yes. He had imagined it once, standing on the cliffs of Liora again, watching the waves crash below. He’d dreamt of it then.

Freedom.

Sailing the world like Greg and his crew on his own ship, chasing whatever horizons called to him. But that dream had been soft-edged. Romantic. A novelty. It hadn’t included goblins and the sounds of his siblings screaming in the dark.

He trudged in silence for a while, his boots crunching lightly in the snow beside Florencia. The cold bit at his pointy ears. “To see the world,” he said at last, but his voice was low and uncertain.

Florencia didn’t answer right away. She let the quiet sit with them for a few steps, respectful of it. “So,” she finally said, “the world’s not what you expected then?”

Matthew let out a dry, bitter laugh. “No. Nothing like what I thought as a child.” He didn’t meet her eyes. His thoughts had drifted again, to Pete. The young Aetherian soldier from Eldoria. The boy Matthew had murdered. A son. Someone’s friend. Maybe someone’s brother, just like Finn. Pete hadn’t needed to die. And yet, Matthew had cut him down. That stain didn’t wash off, no matter how many snowflakes tried. He wondered what Zeen thought of him now. What the Eldorian soldiers said back in Eldoria. How many of them used his face as proof of what they already believed about Elves.

He didn’t even realize he’d stopped speaking until Florencia asked quietly, “Are you alright?”

Matthew blinked. His eyes had fixed on the snow, and he hadn’t noticed. “Yeah,” he said quickly, forcing a breath. “Just…thinking. About home,” he lied.

She nodded gently, not pushing further.

Trying to shift the mood, he glanced at her. “So…why are you staying with Eb, anyway? How do you know them?”

Florencia’s posture stiffened, though she masked it well. Her voice stayed light, but he caught the edge. “I won’t be here long,” she said. “Just

passing through on my way to somewhere else. But I'll admit…I didn't expect to meet an apostle at Eb's home before you came. Not among mortals like us."

"You're Lumanian?" Matthew asked.

Florencia gave him a sideways glance and nodded. "And I assume you are too." She said giving a small nod, and Matthew allowed himself a small smile in return.

Trying to steer them back to safer ground, he asked, "So where exactly are you trying to get to?"

But before she could answer, the farmhouse came into view. Eb stood outside, waiting with Tina, who was busy sculpting snow into messy little shapes at his feet. They reached the farmhouse just as Eb waved from the porch, Tina jumping excitedly around him. "There you are, Mr. Peregryn!" Eb called. "Had me worried, boy!"

Matthew helped steady the old man when he stumbled through a rough coughing fit. "Sir, are you alright?"

"Ah, yes, yes—old age!" Eb wheezed. "Still got plenty of life left in me!"

Florencia handed the reins over, and Eb immediately brightened. "My my—boars! Fine work, both of you!"

Matthew allowed himself a small smile. It felt…nice. Helping. Doing something useful. Even if it wasn't enough. Even if it could never be enough. He followed Eb toward the barn, Florencia walking behind him, quiet but near.



The days slipped by quietly, too quietly.

By Morvath the 28th, two days before the last month of the year, the snow had thickened into a soft, constant blanket over everything: the barn roof sagged beneath it, the fence posts poked up like worn teeth, and Eb's

house sat glowing warmly against the dreary white like a lantern half-buried in a drift. Matthew had begun to memorize the sound of this land. The way the wind groaned across the low hills. The way Eb's old wooden steps creaked every time he trudged to the barn. Tina's laughter echoing faintly through the cold, muffled world as she tried to catch snowflakes on her tongue. Florencia's voice, carrying softly across the yard before she retreated back into whatever private world she lived in.

The farm had become familiar in the strangest way, comfortable in structure yet unbearably heavy in silence. Each day passed with him feeding the animals, chopping wood, training outside, assisting Eb with little tasks, watching Tina hurry after her grandfather like a little duckling. And every night, without fail, Matthew would glance out the window and find that black dog sitting beneath the trees, its breath fogging in the cold, panting silently while dozens of other shadowed shapes pressed behind it… watching. Always watching. Never approaching.

He would lie awake in Eb's spare room, listening to those faint, distant laughter-voices only he could hear, thin as whispers, stretched over miles of dark sky. They were patient. They were confident. They were certain he would slip, break, step beyond the threshold of Lu's blessing at night, and then they'd tear into him with such hunger that even thinking about it made Matthew's stomach twist.

But worse than the demons was the waiting.

Waiting for Frey'kro, for the apostle's return—who had said it may take weeks.

Waiting for any sign that he wasn't wasting time while Elara and Finn were out there, terrified, possibly hurt, counting on him.

The pressure was becoming unbearable.

And still, nothing.

Not a shimmer. Not a vision. Not even the faintest nudge from Lu. But surprisingly, he wasn't even having nightmares anymore, thanks to the blessing Lu placed on this home.

But the days had not been unkind, not entirely. Tina had adopted him as if he were her older brother, dragging him to look at snowdrifts, showing him the drawings she'd made of goats wearing scarves, and asking endless questions about Liora. She especially loved hearing about the treetop bridges and the garatens. Matthew told her stories of childhood to ease the ache in his own chest, stories of pretending to be a pirate with his friend

Taren. And playing with Finn, and Elara collecting flowers and bossing both brothers around as if she ruled the island.

And each time, Tina's smile reminded him so keenly of them that it almost hurt. Florencia, on the other hand…she had become impossible to read. Almost as if she were trying to keep him at a distance. Not out of dislike, Matthew wasn't naive enough to mistake her tone as cruelty, but out of caution. Some private wound she wasn't ready to reveal. Their talks were brief now, polite, shallow. She answered his questions carefully. Never volunteered information. Never lingered. And always looked like she was weighing what she could say without giving something away.

Matthew respected that. But it made him wonder what kind of past she carried, and why it seemed to tighten around her every time he asked where she was traveling.

Eb, amusingly, was the only one who seemed completely at peace. He cooked with cheer, talked with delight, and told stories with the dramatic flair of someone who forgot he was seventy and not a young lad courting a crowd. But every now and then, when he thought nobody was watching, Matthew caught him rubbing his chest, muttering under his breath, or staring off into the distance as if counting the time he had left.

Matthew didn't ask. It wasn't his place.

Yet with all these gentle moments…the tension still grew.

Each passing day without Frey'kro felt like a rope pulling tighter around Matthew's ribs.

Every hour in between he questioned why the sovereigns—why Lu—would snatch him from the path to save his siblings, and then leave him stranded here with no answers. Lu had saved him, but Matthew could not shake the thought that he had also been placed.

Matthew tossed and turned every night thinking about these questions. And the only answer he could come to, was that there was a war coming possibly, something horrible, something beyond him.

The mark on his arm pulsed more often now. Sometimes warm, sometimes cold, sometimes burning hard enough that he dropped whatever he held. And while the demons never crossed the threshold, he felt them circling the borders in his mind, gnawing at his fear, whispering doubts, feeding on his guilt over Pete, over running, over not being able to save his siblings sooner.

Sometimes, while doing chores, the weight pressed so hard he had to stop entirely. His hands would tremble. And he'd stand there gripping a bucket or a hayfork, fighting the urge to collapse into the snow and scream.

But screaming wouldn't fix anything.

Tina might hear.

And Eb would worry.

And he refused to let Florencia see him like this.

He tried talking about the waiting, subtly, indirectly—hoping someone would offer a faster path, hoping someone would say the apostle had sent word, hoping someone would ease the rising panic that he was losing time. But Eb only said, "Patience is a virtue, lad. Take it from an old man, good things take time."

Tina said, "Frey'kro will come back! He wouldn't lie to you. He's an apostle of the Light. He is good."

Florencia said nothing, just studied him with an expression he couldn't decipher. Time was slipping. And with it…hope.

But every night he sat before the fireplace, cross-legged, staring at the flames until the heat blurred his vision and tears blurred it more. He thought of how far away he'd been torn from everything familiar.

He tried not to think of it.

But guilt echoed no matter how far he ran.

He wondered if this was truly fate. If he was meant to be here. If this suffering, isolation, and fear were the beginning of a path he couldn't yet see.

He wondered what was at Drearth. What Lu feared and why he thought Matthew needed a relic. What secrets lay buried beneath that cursed land? He wondered if he would live long enough to learn any of it.

He wondered if his siblings still believed he was coming.

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A WOLF AMONG RABBITS

NIGHT LAY OVER BERKS, A SOFT, BRITTLE STILLNESS THAT ONLY CAME IN the dead of winter when Sechera's breath froze the world. Snow glazed roofs, wells, and carts—clung to fence posts—and bowed the trees. Even the cattle slept without a sound.

And atop one of those snow-crowned roofs sat Torm. His long white hair fell over his shoulders. He perched casually at the peak of the roof, boots crunching lightly whenever he shifted, the village sprawled beneath him.

Berks, the little farm-town preparing for Lumora, the Festival of Light.

How charming.

Torm rested his bag beside him and let the wind sweep over his face. He closed his eyes as the gust hit him, sharp, biting, almost painful. But he smiled through it. "Innocent little souls," he murmured, eyes drifting to the moon's white glow above him. He tilted his head back. "I will burn Eldoria to its wretched core. And I will finally get what is owed," he giggled.

The wind gusted again—colder, harsher. Torm shivered and let out a soft laugh. "Oh…now that's much better."

He hopped off the roof effortlessly with his bag, landing lightly in a thin alley between two homes. The snow cushioned his boots as if welcoming him.

Berks was alive even at this hour, families finishing preparations for Lumora, children carrying bundles of candles, old men repairing wooden arches decorated with evergreen branches and shimmering ornaments. They

chatted warmly, unaware that a storm had entered among them wearing a handsome smile. Torm walked into the central square, where the great stone tree stood, twenty feet tall, with massive stone branches outstretched. Lanterns hung from the lowest limbs, unlit for now, swaying slightly in the chilled breeze.

He approached the statue with a crooked grin. “What an interesting village,” he drawled softly, brushing his fingers along the stone. He stepped back and scoffed. “What has the Sovereigns of Light ever done for you?” he whispered to the carving, to the townsfolk bustling around, to the empty sky. “This world only offers suffering. Only ambition can bring change. Where were the Heliorens when my mother died or when my sister was dissected?”

His voice was barely more than breath. Footsteps crunched behind him. Torm rolled his eyes gently before turning with a smirk already forming. A maiden walked toward him. She held a woven basket full of flowers, bundled in a fur coat and scarf. Her cheeks were red from the cold, but her smile was warm—too warm for a stranger like him.

“Are you cold, sir?” she asked sweetly. Her eyes widened when she saw his white hair, the golden diamond in his forehead, and his sharp black eyes. Shock flickered there, but not fear. She found him stunning.

Torm dropped his gaze modestly. “I’m fine, darling,” he replied with a gentle smile.

She giggled, visibly charmed. “I wish I were as strong. I can hardly stand the weather Sechera brings,” she said shyly, pulling her coat tighter.

Torm’s eyes drifted over the square again, casually, thoughtfully, as if lost in his own world.

She followed his gaze, then looked back to him, cheeks still blushing. Slowly, she plucked a flower from her basket, white petals with a blush-red center.

An Emberkiss Lily.

“For you,” she said softly. “It’s a flower you give to someone you…care about. Or…like.”

Torm raised a brow, smirking as he took it delicately. “So you like me?”

The maiden flustered hard, waving her hands. “N—no—I mean—well—”

Torm chuckled, leaning slightly closer. “What is your name, beautiful?”

“Anna,” she whispered.

“Anna,” he smiled warmly. “A lovely name my dear.”

She nearly melted.

They walked together through the village, Anna pointing out everything with cheerful delight, Berks’ wooden dwellings, the distant farms, the subtle glow of lanterns lining each home as people prepared for Lumora. Torm played the role of a curious traveler. “Anything of interest in this little place?” he asked lightly.

Anna nodded eagerly. “Well—yes! We have an antique shop, and so many farms around Berks. The Listoff Mountains are east of here across the Stoawyk River, but nobody goes there. The Mines of Roynar are forbidden. Too dangerous.”

“And west?” Torm prompted.

“The Chelmsford Mountains. Where the hippogriffs roost. You can see them sometimes in the morning!”

“How fascinating,” Torm said, amused.

Anna continued rambling about local tales until her friends appeared on the road. A group of young women bundled in warm coats, carrying baskets of ornaments for the festival. They froze like startled deer upon seeing Torm.

“Anna!” one of them squeaked. “Who is…that?”

Torm gave a charming half-bow.

Just as Anna opened her mouth to introduce him, Torm cut in smoothly. “Forgive us, ladies—we’re in the middle of a wonderful tour.”

Anna looked as if her knees had briefly forgotten their purpose.

Her friends stared, blushing harder than the emberkiss lily she had given him.

Torm gently took Anna’s hand. “Excuse us.”

And he walked away with her, Anna smiling so brightly her cheeks glowed red under the winter moon.



Two hours later, they had wandered nearly every path in Berks. They shared a late meal at the local pub. Laughed at decorations being hung, admired the intricate wooden carvings of Lu and the sun that children placed along the village fences. It was late, very late, when they ended up in front of Berks' chapel. Lanterns around the entrance had been snuffed for the night. The doors were locked. The villagers had all gone home.

Torm tilted his head. "Can we go inside?"

Anna's eyes widened. "Oh—no, we can't. Not at this hour."

"Why not?" he teased. "Where's the fun in following every rule?"

"Well, rules are there for a reason," she whispered nervously. "Someone could find us."

"They won't," he said softly, stepping closer. "We'll be quick. I've never seen an Eldorian chapel."

Anna hesitated. His smile, sweet, innocent, curious—wore her down quickly. "…just a look," she whispered.

He grinned, slipped around to the back door, inspected the lock, and picked it within seconds.

Anna gasped softly. "How did you—?"

"A useful talent," he said with a wink.

Inside the church, moonlight filtered faintly through stained glass. The air smelled of old wood and winter. "Do you have a lighter?" he whispered. She nodded and reached into her bag, handing him a small flint and steel. He lit a candle, pews lined in neat rows, a carved altar, banners of green and gold hanging from rafters.

Behind the curtains at the back was a staircase leading to the balcony. Torm motioned for her to follow. "Come on."

"Torm…" she whispered anxiously. "We shouldn't—"

"It's only a bit of fun." He sat on the wooden stage at the front of the chapel, brushing his hair aside. He placed his heavy bag near the wall. Anna sat near him, still timid.

"What's in the bag?" she'd asked.

"Just something precious," Torm replied, stroking it.

"So," she said shyly, "what do you…do? What craft do you practice?"

"I look after my people," he replied simply.

"Your people?" her eyes brightened. "Are you…from Eldoria? You don't look Eldorian—"

“No,” he said. “Highmoor, but…my family—my real people—come from Caelithar.”

“Caelithar?” she repeated. “I’ve never heard of that town.”

“It’s not a town,” he snapped, too sharply.

She flinched.

His face softened instantly. “It’s a kingdom. Far away. My people built many things. Including the shal’kors.”

Anna’s eyes glowed with awe.

He nodded, his fingers brushing the golden diamond in his forehead. “I am a…Aeralyn.”

“But shal’kors? I’ve never heard of such things. And your hair?” she asked quietly. “And your skin—your eyes—only your people have those?”

“Only us,” he said softly.

Her voice gentled. “What happened to your family?”

Silence lingered a moment. Torm’s expression shifted—perfectly, beautifully, into sorrow. “When I was eight, we were taken. My sister Sylith, wasn’t too lucky. She was…studied…used.” Torm paused, “I escaped many years later, but my people were still enslaved. Betrayed by Prince Kordas.”

Anna covered her mouth. “That’s terrible…”

“It was,” Torm murmured. “We were taken to Noctenheim—a place of darkness. I escaped about eighty years ago. But my sister…my sister Sylith…I never saw her again after escaping.”

Anna reached out, placing a trembling hand on his shoulder. “I’m so sorry…wait,” she blinked. “Did you say eighty years ago?”

Torm didn’t answer at first. He exhaled sharply, eyes lifting to the stained-glass moon above them, its cold light catching the edge of his white hair. His voice turned soft, almost regretful. “Yes. Eighty.”

Anna blinked again, “That would make you, what, over a hundred?” She gave him a playful nudge. “You’re bluffing.”

He turned, face suddenly too still. “Do I look like I’m bluffing?”

The coldness in his voice stopped her short. She flinched, pulling her hand away, stepping back slightly. “I didn’t mean—”

Torm caught himself and softened, sighing. “No…I’m sorry. It’s just a sensitive topic. I don’t talk about my people often with others.”

Anna hesitated. “Shal’kors, right? I’ve never heard of them. Or…Aeralyn, was it?”

“Yes, we Aeralynians were never meant to be forgotten,” he said quietly. Then, after a beat, he added, “I am five hundred thirty-eight years old.”

Her eyes widened in disbelief. “That’s…impossible. You don’t look like an Elf, so how are you—”

Torm smirked, then chuckled dryly. “It does sound ridiculous, doesn’t it?” He leaned closer, lowering his voice with a smile. “But don’t worry. It’s just a story. Something to keep the fires warm.” But even as he said it, something in his tone betrayed the lie. The way his jaw set. The way he glanced back at the moonlight filtering through ancient glass.

They sat quietly for a minute, just the stillness of the chapel, the moon, the candle flickering. Then Torm turned to her. He brushed her cheek gently, his fingers icy and soft. Anna’s cheeks burned red. She looked down, fiddling with her dress. Torm leaned closer, eyes half-lidded. “I’d like to stay…meet your parents,” he whispered. “Marry me.”

Anna froze. “Marry?”

He smiled softly.

She nodded too fast. “Yes, I mean—if you want—I—”

He kissed her gently, soft, slow, under the wash of moonlight through the stained glass. Anna’s lips trembled. She pulled back breathlessly. “I…I don’t think we should…not before marriage.”

“Nobody has to know,” Torm murmured, brushing another stroke across her cheek. “We’re getting married anyway.”

“Torm…” she whispered, breath unsteady.

He leaned in again, warm, careful, intoxicating.

And she let him fall into her completely.



Hours later, the chapel was silent again. Anna slept soundly, wrapped in a blanket they’d found among the pews. Torm sat upright beside her, watching her with an unreadable smile. He brushed a strand of hair behind

her ear. Gently laid her head onto a pillow, stood up, and collected his heavy bag. He slipped silently through the church's back door and into the cold night.

Outside, the village was dark. Snow crunched beneath his boots as he walked toward the Stoawyk River east of Berks.

At the riverbank, he knelt and opened his bag.

Out came the black grail. A depthless black tinged with faint red veins pulsing. Torm placed it in the snow, pressed the small trigger hidden beneath its rim, and stepped back.

A sharp metallic thud sounded as a spike shot downward into the frozen earth. Then—

Ba-bum.

The ground shivered lightly beneath him.

Ba-bum.

The grail began to glow red, its pulse matching a heartbeat too large to belong to anything mortal.

Torm smirked. "What a wonderful time of year."



Anna awoke sometime later with a sleepy smile, reaching out for Torm before opening her eyes. "Torm…?"

Her hand touched only the cold floor.

She sat up quickly.

"Torm?"

The church felt strange. Too cold. Too quiet.

A soft red mist curled across the floorboards like thin, drifting smoke.

Anna blinked, confused.

"W—what is…?"

She stood and hurriedly straightened her dress, brushing her hair as panic began creeping into her chest. Shame moved through her slowly,

confusing and cold. But a red mist seeped between pews, swirling around her boots. She backed up, breathing hard. “Torm?” she whispered again. She hurried to clean up the blankets and pillows, her mind racing with embarrassment, fear, longing, confusion. Maybe he just stepped outside. Maybe he was coming back.

Then—

thump.

The moon vanished behind a mass of churning black clouds.

The church collapsed into darkness.

Anna went still, heart pounding against her ribs.

“Hello…?” she whispered. Her hands shook as she struck her flint and steel. A small spark flashed, died, then flickered again—barely enough light to see her own breath fog the air.

Creeeak…

The back door eased open, slow and deliberate.

Anna froze.

“T—Torm?” she called, her voice thin, fragile. Maybe he had come back—maybe he’d forgotten something, maybe—

Something stepped inside. Sludge-soft footsteps. Wet, heavy, and dragging.

The sound made her stomach twist. “T—Torm?” she tried again. Fear hollowed the name into something trembling and weak. The footsteps drew closer. Something warm and wet breathed across the back of her neck, thick, humid, suffocating. She felt movement behind her, slow and serpentine, like dozens of slick limbs gliding through the dark.

Anna spun—

—and slammed into a leg thick as a tree trunk, formed entirely of rippling red flesh. It barely moved under her weight.

She stumbled back, frantic, striking the flint again.

A spark leapt out, just enough to light the air in a weak, trembling pulse. Red mist clung to everything in a living haze. And then the creature emerged fully into view.

Twelve feet tall. Broad. Humanoid only in the vaguest outline. Its body was sculpted of dripping red flesh, tentacles unfurling from its back and arms like wet vines. Each tendril writhed independently, tasting the air.

Three eyes blinked open down the center of its face, vertical, lidless, glowing.

Its jaw cracked apart.

The mouth split wider. Rows of jagged, needle-like teeth spiraled inward like a terrible blooming flower. Anna screamed, scrambling across the mist-coated floorboards, palms slipping in the wet haze. A tentacle lashed out, wrapping around her ankle and jerking her backward as she cried for help. She clawed at the wood, nails splintering.

“HELP—PLEASE—SOMEBODY! TORM!” she shrieked, voice shredded with terror.

The creature leaned over her, its shadow swallowing her whole. Its tongue slid out, long, thick, dripping with drool and streaks of dark blood. The tongue coiled around her throat, tightening until her breath snapped into choking gasps. Anna sobbed, kicking, tearing at the slick flesh tightening around her neck.

Red drool rained onto her face.

The creature’s jaws widened further, unhinging. Her scream shattered into a final, ragged cry as the maw descended.

Her skull vanished past its teeth in a single wet bite.

Blood burst upward, splattering across the chapel window in a red arc. Her body dropped to the floor, twitching once, then falling still as the creature’s tentacles slowly wrapped around her limp form.

Only the red mist drifted, curling lazily around the pews, and muffled screams outside the church.

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THE JESTER AND SOLITUDE

Morvath the 29th, Year 11,219 - Late night
(The eleventh month)

THE FIRE SNAPPED AND POPPED BENEATH THE JAGGED OVERHANG OF EMLYN Peaks. The mountains rose behind the little camp, black silhouettes gnawed into the winter sky. Yet the jester in the red-and-black motley hopped and strutted as if spring had just arrived.

"ALL OF YOU TODAY HAVE BEEN CHOSEN!" he declared, raising both arms.

A long pause followed.

One of the hulking men staring at him scratched his jaw. "Uh…Wick. There's only three of us yer talkin' to."

The jester froze mid-pose, then slapped his palms together. "Yes, Daruke, three of you! But tonight you ascend. Tonight you become…"—he wiggled his fingers like a Vaylin Aetherian casting some sort of aetheris spell—"honest thieves!"

The three brutes stared dumbly.

Wick sighed so hard his white mask almost slid off. "This is the part where you clap, gentlemen." They clapped obediently. Wick bowed with flourish. "Excellent. Now! We, the four of us—humble pioneers of criminal nobility—shall henceforth be known as…" He struck a heroic pose, one foot atop a log as though on the bow of a ship. "The Honest Thieves."

The men erupted in claps again, bobbing their heads enthusiastically.

“That’s a great name, Wick,” mumbled one.

“Yes, yes, I know, it’s quite clever,” Wick said, waving a hand modestly. “Now! Rule number one of stealing. Daruke, enlighten us.”

Daruke puffed out his chest proudly. “Uh…we kill them?”

“NO!” Wick rubbed the mask where his eyes would’ve been. “First, you ask them politely. Then, if they refuse, then you kill them. This is why we are honest thieves.”

“Ohhh,” the men chorused, nodding as if this revelation had reshaped their worldview. Wick paced before them. “Let’s practice. Polite intimidation, followed by gentle coercion, followed by violent cranial rearrangement. Daruke—again!”

Daruke straightened. “May I have your crowns please, sir?”

Wick clapped. “Brilliant! Truly, you are a natural thief.”

Wick demonstrated poses, how to tilt the head during a threat, how to keep the knees loose so a robbery looked more theatrical, until Wick suddenly went rigid.

His masked head snapped toward the edge of the cliff. Down below, trudging through the snow, was a figure in black armor, heavy, and imposing. The greatsword strapped to his back. Each step left a cratered footprint in the snow. Wick leaned forward, awestruck. “Gentlemen,” he whispered. “A gift from the sovereigns themselves…”

“Uh oh,” one man murmured. “That’s a knight, Wick.”

“A knight!” Wick scoffed, slapping the man’s shoulder. “Nonsense. Real knights are a part of kingdoms. That—” he pointed dramatically “—is a poser in fancy metal. Probably compensating. Look at that sword! Trying so hard to look scary.”

Daruke’s eyes brightened. “Maybe he’s a thief too!”

“Yes!” Wick snapped his fingers. “But a lonesome one, susceptible to ambush.” The jester threw his arms in the air. “Put the fire out! Quickly! Quickly!” Daruke stomped the flames until the ground sizzled and smoked. Wick fixed his mask, stood tall, and spread both arms grandly. “Tonight, men…we hunt our first quarry! The Honest Thieves march!” He skipped ahead down the narrow, icy switchback with his three lumbering goons clattering behind him like a herd of drunk yak-beasts.



Silvanus trudged alone through the wilderness, boots sinking deep into snow that reflected the pale winter moon. The crunch of his armor seemed too loud, too heavy, like it didn’t belong in the peaceful dark. He found a small alcove, a natural crook carved beneath a stone shelf. A rare shelter from the wind. He gathered branches, broke them underfoot, and soon a fire burned low and steady, its glow reflecting in the grooves of his obsidian helm.

He removed the helmet.

Under it, his expression was emotionless, hollowed. He pulled his sapphire necklace from around his neck and stared at it. His fingers curled around the gem with reverence and pain. The fire popped, but Silvanus didn’t flinch. His eyes drifted upward toward the cold stars, and his breath shivered in the air.

Erika. Kira. Sith.

Their names tasted like ash on his tongue.

Arameth’s shadow slithered through his thoughts uninvited, the way it always did when his guard slipped. Silvanus’s jaw tightened, that old hatred flaring. It wasn’t simple hate. Vengeance is what he wanted. It was a chain, binding their fates together in some sick sovereign-made knot.

Fifty years. Fifty years of chasing someone he couldn’t catch. Fifty years of hearing echoes of laughter that weren’t really there. He dragged a hand down his face, asking himself why was he still alive. Why hasn’t age taken him? Why wasn’t he killed decades ago, becoming a Barn’beden?

He clenched the sapphire until his knuckles went pale.

Or maybe the sovereigns keep him alive to toy with him.

He set the necklace back inside his shirt with a sharp, almost angry motion.

Snow shuffled. A wolf limped between the trunks, alone, wounded, its outline a smear of gray against the dark. Silvanus watched silently, almost sympathetically. A lone beast with wounds deep enough to slow it, but not

kill it. Eventually, the beast vanished into the trees, whimpering. Silvanus turned back to the fire again, its glow flickering across his scars.

But then he heard voices.

Male voices—low, stupid, bickering—crunching through the underbrush. Silvanus didn't move. He simply breathed out through his nose.

Of course. Peace never lasted for him.



Four figures stepped into the firelight.

Wick sprang forward dramatically, arms wide. "Hello, good sir of the night! I, Wick the Magnificent, and my men, known throughout the mountains as The Honest Thieves, cordially invite you to surrender your valuables!"

The man didn't respond. Didn't even blink.

Wick muttered to his men, "See? Classic stoic intimidator. But fear not. I have trained for this exact scenario."

He stepped closer.

"What a marvelous sword you have," Wick gasped theatrically. "Truly, a blade of greatness. Now! Since you didn't answer, three seconds! And then we take it from you."

The knight adjusted a gauntlet. Nothing else.

Wick took that as arrogance.

"Very well," Wick announced. He looked to the greatsword leaning against the rock. "We will take it ourselves!"

No reaction. The knight stared into the fire.

"Daruke," Wick stage-whispered, "he's doing the stoic thing to intimidate us."

Daruke nodded sagely. "Yeah. He's real scary when he's quiet."

"Exactly!" Wick whispered. "Now watch and learn."

Wick crept forward first. He moved on tiptoes, boots muffled in fresh snow, hands clenched at his sides. Behind him shuffled the three burly men, none spoke. Wick's eyes flicked upward every few seconds, checking the knight's unmoving form, reading the dark silhouette by the fire. No motion. No warning. He reached the sword first. The blade gleamed faintly in the moonlight, running the length of the log beneath it. The hilt was wide, the pommel a weighty knot of metal and leather.

Wick swallowed, his voice trembling, "Alright, gentlemen, gently lift —" He stepped back and nodded at the burly men. They bent down, hands beneath the greatsword's flat side. A grunt here. A muttered curse there.

Then—

The sword shifted.

And then it crashed down with thunder in the quiet forest. The smallest of the thieves screamed. Legs folded beneath him like brittle branches snapping. The others leapt back as blood spattered the snow. The man writhed, his screams echoing off the trees. He clawed at the ground, his legs twisted beneath the impossible weight.

"Get it off! SOVEREIGNS—GET IT OFF!" he howled.

Wick flailed. "It's just a femur! You have another one!" But he was already backing away.

One of the brutes grimaced. "Leave him. We will come back for him boss."

"What?! You can't just—HELP ME!" the man screamed again.

Wick was already moving. "We'll come back for you!" he lied. "We get the blade over there, and then we come back for you and the rest, alright? Just hold on!"

The two brutes grabbed the hilt and began to drag as Wick watched. The sword groaned as it tore through the snow, leaving behind a trail of scarlet and slush. Each pull was a full-body effort, their boots slipping, muscles straining, breath heaving into the cold.

The wounded thief still crying—rolled in the snow, sobbing, blood pooling beneath him. But before Wick could regain his composure, he noticed the knight was gone.

"Where—where—?"

Daruke pointed behind Wick. "Uh…boss?"

The knight stood at the tree line, entirely unbothered, finishing his business in the snow.

Wick inhaled sharply. “OH COME NOW—”

One man crept back to where the knight’s belongings were.

Wick slapped his hand. “Honest thieves! We ANNOUNCE before we steal!” He cleared his throat dramatically. “Sir knight! If you refuse to hand us your belongings, we shall be forced to take your satchel!”

The knight fastened his trousers. Then the fire dimmed as he walked toward them, the sheer bulk of him blotting out the flames. Wick barely opened his mouth and reached for his blade, but it was too late.

The knight grabbed him by the front of his jester outfit and flung him clear across the clearing. He crashed into a snowdrift, limbs flailing.

The remaining thieves froze.

“Uh—boss? W—what now?”

“Negotiate!” Wick screamed from the snow. “Apologize! Ask him to compromise! Offer to split the loot—”

The knight backhanded the nearest man. His skull caved on impact into the snow. The second thief panicked and drew a sword with a high-pitched yelp. The black knight seized him by the neck. Bones snapped beneath his gauntlet. “DIE.” The black knight said coldly. Blood splattered across the snow and the small thief below, as he flung the corpse aside.

The small thief screamed and begged for mercy. But the knight picked up his greatsword, walking back and brought it down. Snow and red mist exploded in all directions.

Wick screamed, scrambling backward. The knight’s white hair blew in the ice wind, his expression dead, eyes hollow.

“You—you’re—very good at this!” Wick whimpered. “Quite talented, sir! Wonderful posture, terrifying execution, really—”

The knight took a single step toward him.

Wick jumped up and bolted into the woods shrieking.



Silvanus didn’t chase.

He didn’t care. He spat beside the bodies and sat back at the fire, wiping blood from his gauntlet. His breath steamed in the air. His heartbeat slowed.

Until he heard it.

A crow call.

He tensed, hand hovering near his crossbow. A single crow sat perched above him, its beady eyes fixed on him. Silvanus raised the weapon and fired. The crow burst into black tar, splattering over the snow. Silvanus sneered.

Then another crow landed.

Then another.

Then ten.

Twenty.

Fifty.

All perched on branches and snow-laden rocks, staring. The hairs on Silvanus’s neck rose. A laugh, his laugh, cracked out of him. “You miss me, Arameth?” Silvanus shouted to the trees. “Is this your idea of torment? Watching me? Mocking me?! Come out you rauking coward!!!!”

The crows didn’t move.

“Come out! Face me!” Silvanus roared. “I’ll rip your tongue out! I’ll crush your spine with my bare hands! Where are you, coward!?” The crows exploded into flight all at once, a swarm of black silhouettes lifting into the sky, their caws cutting through the night. Silvanus fired bolt after bolt, hitting several, each erupting into black sludge that hissed into the snow.

Then the forest fell silent.

Silvanus stood breathing heavily, rage draining into an exhausted emptiness. He walked back beneath the rock overhang. He pulled out his sapphire necklace and pressed it to his forehead. The memory of Arameth’s blade, the screams, the blood. Silvanus sank to his knees.

And he wept.

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31

AETHERIANS & NEXT STEPS

6 ***Days Later***
Tharndusk the 5th, Year 11,219 - Morning
(The twelfth month)

AURORA STOOD ATOP THE TERRACED BALCONY OVERLOOKING THE TRAINING grounds. Eldorian soldiers moved in disciplined ranks beneath her, their armor glinting in the winter sun as their battle cries echoed across the yard. The clang of steel drifted up with sharp consistency, steady, rhythmic, almost comforting in its familiarity.

Prince John stood beside her with his hands clasped behind his back, rocking on his heels. “They’re quite impressive,” John said.

Aurora didn’t bother looking at him, her eyes instead following the drill formation below. “Naturally. You should only expect the best from Eldoria.” Her tone was smooth, poised, polite, the practiced cadence of a princess.

Vince.

She found him immediately among the Aetherian soldiers—snow dusting his dark hair, posture confident, guiding the Aetherians through a sparring sequence. She watched him speak with Ludwig, saw his breath fog in the crisp air, the roll of his shoulders, the familiar way he held his blade.

“Zeen! Push yourself—now! Get out of the defense position!” Ludwig barked as Nere launched another flurry of sweeping strikes.

No surprise, Nere was dominating; Aurora’s brother excelled at everything. Zeen stumbled, falling hard onto the packed snow. Nere planted

his sword to his throat.

John chuckled. “Your brother is quite the fighter. I’m surprised we aren’t seeing more Aetherian displays—I’d like to see something…flashy. A tournament of some sort would be good.”

Aurora kept her face perfectly composed. “My brother is the best. He always has been.” She respected Nere, truly, but sometimes…sometimes she wondered where that left her. She was the one running Eldoria with the council in her parents’ absence, yet Nere remained the effortless prodigy—the chosen one, the gifted one, the blessed one. She had no aetheris, no special talents but her mind. And in a world of aetheris and looming war, a sharp mind often felt inadequate.

The world was growing darker day by day. Scone had vanished. Now Berks, another village of people gone. Aurora felt her chest tighten. Two entire villages in a matter of weeks.

John finally broke her silent spiral. “So what is your plan for this situation?”

She blinked, snapped back to the present. “I beg your pardon?”

“This crisis,” John repeated, gesturing toward nothing in particular. “Surely you have a strategy.”

“I don’t know yet,” Aurora admitted.

John lifted a brow. “Two villages gone, and you have no idea? Princess, this is quite the predicament. If you don’t act soon, things will only get worse.”

Aurora’s patience broke. “Maybe instead of lecturing me,” she said coolly, “you could offer a suggestion, since you seem to enjoy criticizing without contributing.” And with that, she turned and walked down the steps without waiting for him.

“Aurora, where are we going now?” John called after her.

“I am helping to lead my people,” she said without looking back.

Down the steps and into the snow, Aurora walked straight toward Vince, Ludwig, Nere, and the gathered Aetherians. The soldiers bowed as she approached. “My lady,” Ludwig said, “how may we serve you?”

Before she could respond, her cousin Eero stepped forward, already annoyed. “Why are we doing mundane drills? Why not use more aetheris? What is the point of this training if we’re not using our gifts?”

Ludwig’s jaw visibly tightened. He always had to remind himself Eero was royalty. “Because if your aetheris runs dry,” Ludwig answered with

restraint, “You die. Your sword is what saves you when aetheris fails.”

But before Eero could retort, Aurora stepped in. “Cousin, your odd questions can wait. There are more important matters at hand.”

Eero, insulted, raised a brow. “Odd questions? I simply—”

“It is not the moment,” Aurora said firmly, silencing him. She turned back to Ludwig. “I need to speak with you, Kael, Nere, and Vince. All of you. In your office.”

Ludwig bowed stiffly. “Of course, my lady.”



Inside Ludwig’s office, the heat from the hearth thawed the cold from their cloaks. Maps sprawled across the walls and table.“We have two villages gone,” Aurora began, gaze sweeping the room. “Scone. And now Berks. Entire communities erased. We need soldiers in Ardester. Now. Before it becomes the next empty place on a map,” Aurora continued. “It is small, isolated, and vulnerable. If the pattern continues, it is likely next.”

Ludwig nodded, arms crossed. “Agreed.”

“And Mire,” Kael said. “It may be the poorest of the villages in Eldoria. But it sits nearer to Berks, and their population is high. They could be next.”

“Right,” Aurora answered. “But doesn’t Mire have protection already? Ardester does not. I would like to have Aetherians scouting both.”

Kael frowned. “But what of Keensin and Rohland? And the war with Grimrave?”

“Well that is what is strange. Grimrave has been waiting,” Aurora said. “Unmoving. They have not left Elandor’s Stonewatch since they took it weeks ago. They are not a problem right now. We need to focus on protecting our people.”

“It could be spies,” John murmured from behind.

“Spies?” Aurora questioned.

“Grimrave knows what is coming. They’re waiting for whatever this is to weaken Eldoria first. I would argue we should do a full assault on Elandor’s Stonewatch. Clearly that is why they haven’t pressed into your lands.”

“A full assault? We don’t even know how they are attacking us. By the time we strike Grimrave, we’ll have no villages left to defend. That’s the war they want.” Aurora straightened, “And if we have spies, who? It will be impossible to figure that out, unless you have evidence,” she sighed.

John crossed his arms. “No princess, I do not have evidence.”

Aurora turned away and continued, “Ludwig, why don’t you take three Aetherians and twenty men to Ardester. Investigate, fortify, observe everything unusual. Kael, you’ll send troops to Mire, Rohland, and Keensin —and you will have them evacuate to Eldoria city. You and Vince will remain here to protect the kingdom.”

Vince bowed respectfully, although Aurora felt his eyes lingering just a heartbeat too long.

“I’ll go as well,” Nere said suddenly.

Aurora’s pulse skipped. “What? No, you are the heir.”

“Ludwig is going, I should join him. Besides, if Eldoria falls, what use is an heir?” Nere argued. “We need every capable hand. I’m not sitting here while our people disappear.”

Aurora opened her mouth, but the room clearly sided with Nere. Even John nodded. Arguing would do nothing now. Her brother was being foolish. Aurora inhaled through her nose, steadying herself. “Fine,” she said quietly. “Then we move forward.”



They all exited the office.

John excused himself with a sigh.

Vince lingered.

Aurora stepped closer to him. “I need more time,” she whispered.

“That’s a start.”

They walked a few paces away from the others, snow crunching under their feet.

“Right now,” Aurora said, “I can’t abandon my kingdom. I can’t abandon my people. Not while they’re afraid, not while my parents are gone, not while two villages blink off the map. I need time.”

“I know, but is sending soldiers to Ardester wise?” Vince said quietly.

“Yes. We have no choice.” Aurora said firmly.

“Okay.” Vince paused. “And Aurora. I wasn’t asking you to run. Only to not give up on the possibility.”

“I know,” Aurora exhaled shakily. “The winter ball is about ready. Preparations are almost finished for all of the royals.”

Vince smiled. “I’ll be there.”

She met his eyes. “Yes…well…you are a general, I would expect you to be there. All the generals should be, including the council. But with everything happening, it may be ended when my father returns.” But then her worry returned. “Vince…I need your help.”

“With what?”

“My brother,” her voice dropped. “If he leaves Eldoria and something happens to him, if he dies—we’ll have no future king. I can’t leave with you if he puts himself at risk. I can’t even consider it.”

Vince swallowed. “Aurora, I don’t think—”

“I know it’s not your place,” she interrupted, “but I’m commanding you. If I can’t convince him today…I’ll need your help restraining him.”

“Restraining—”

“I don’t want to,” Aurora said quickly. “But if he marches toward this unknown danger, Eldoria becomes leaderless. My father will kill me. And then no matter what I want, no matter what future we discussed…I can’t leave.” It made her voice tremble.

Vince bowed his head. “I understand. But—“ he paused for a moment questioning his beliefs. “Aurora, I don’t think…never mind. I’ll do what you ask.”

“Thank you,” she whispered.

He nodded once, then stepped away, boots crunching over the frost as he returned to the training grounds. Aurora wanted nothing more than to

pull him back. But she stood still, chin lifted, watching him disappear into duty.

Then she turned toward the castle, her breath visible in the cold air, her pulse heavy with fear, love, and responsibility.

And Eldoria needed her now more than ever.

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DUTY DEVOURS LOVE

EVENING HAD FALLEN OVER ELDORIA. THE BANQUET HAD ENDED ONLY moments ago. But the warmth of roasted pheasant and mulled wine couldn't settle the trembling beneath her ribs.

Tonight had been her brother's last meal in Eldoria before he left for Ardester. His last meal, and if Aurora did nothing, possibly the last she would ever share with him. She could still hear the clinking of goblets in her head, the pointless chatter of distant cousins, John's easy laughter at her side. All that mattered was that Nere was packing to leave within the hour with Ludwig and the aetherians. He was going to walk straight into danger, she thought, pushing her way through the castle corridor. Into the mouth of something they still don't understand.

Aurora marched faster, her skirt swishing, boots tapping sharply on the stone floors. Braziers lining the walls hissed as the cold drafts slipped past. The castle was buzzing tonight, servants putting out candles, guards rotating their posts, and Puruna…somewhere behind her, likely searching the halls and asking every white-robed attendant if they'd seen the princess. Aurora had deliberately slipped away from the festivities. Puruna had been enjoying herself far too brightly, and Aurora couldn't bear the hovering.

Not tonight.

She'd left her there with nothing but a vague excuse, something about checking her clothes. She shouldn't have lied to her, but this was important. Thankfully Puruna didn't question her.

Aurora turned sharply down the main stairwell leading toward the upper residential wing. Her hands trembled, not from fear, but from the boiling frustration that had been rising inside her for weeks. Nere could be a brilliant warrior and a gifted Aetherian. But he was also reckless. Too reckless to see that Ardester could be a death trap waiting to swallow him. The villages that vanished, Scone, Berks, something was consuming them whole. Something without tracks or bodies.

And now her brother wanted to walk directly toward it. He was too young, Ludwig could handle himself, but her brother. He is the heir, it was too risky. Aurora muttered under her breath, “If I don’t stop this madness, he will get himself killed.” Aurora caught the soft echo of footsteps trailing down another hall…too measured to be servants.

Too patient.

But she didn’t stop.

If she turned now, she’d lose her nerve. Let them watch, she thought, and pushed on.

She rounded the final turn and collided directly into a chest. Startled she looked up—

“Vince.” She exhaled in relief without thinking, her hand instinctively grasping his arm. He smiled, just a small curve of the lips.

“Just on time,” he said in a low voice.

“Follow me,” Aurora whispered sharply. “And do not come in unless I call for you. Understood?”

Vince nodded once. “Understood, princess.” She hated when he called her that in public now. It was his way of staying disciplined and safe of course, keeping the boundary between them sharp when in public. But now wasn’t the time to correct him. Aurora approached Nere’s chamber. Two guards posted at the door stiffened immediately.

“My lady,” they greeted.

“Leave us,” Aurora said, her voice steady and commanding. “I need to speak with my brother alone.” The guards exchanged quick glances, uncertain, but obedient. They stepped aside and marched away down the dim hallway. The guards hadn’t gone far, only down the stair bend. Aurora inhaled deeply, opened the door, and slipped inside. Vince stayed behind the curve of the wall, out of sight, exactly as told. Nere’s chambers were warm, the fire roaring in the hearth, casting golden light over the room. Her brother stood near his dresser, pulling on his Eldorian soldier’s attire, dark

green, gold trim, the fitted leather chestpiece of a war-bound prince. The new Khazadryn sword lay across the bed, polished until it gleamed like a star.

Aurora's heart twisted.

He looked every bit the heir to Eldoria. Every bit the prince their father wanted him to be. "Brother," Aurora said.

Nere turned, his expression calm, unbothered, almost annoyingly composed. "Sister," he answered. He went right back to folding his cloak, sliding it into his bag.

Aurora stepped closer, crossing her arms tightly. "You're truly certain about this? Marching to Ardester? Investigating the disappearances with Ludwig? You know Ludwig can handle himself?"

"Yes," he said simply.

"No hesitation?" she pressed.

He sighed. "Aurora, we've discussed this already in Ludwig's office. I'm going."

"There is still time to reconsider," she said sharply. "This isn't a negotiation. This is your life. Nere, you could walk into a situation we don't understand, things could go wrong," her voice rose. "You could die."

Nere set his jaw, turning toward her. "Aurora, enough. You need to stop treating me as if I'm a child hiding behind your skirts. I am the prince, in fact…I am your older brother. I am doing my duty!"

"And what would father say to that?" she demanded.

"That doesn't matter."

"Yes, it does!" she snapped, losing her patience. "Father trusted you to remain safe, to guide Eldoria when he and mother step down! He didn't send you off to play hero!"

Nere dropped the cloak in irritation and pivoted toward her fully. "I am not 'playing hero.' I am protecting our people. You're the one who's forgotten her place."

Aurora's breath caught. "My…place?"

"Yes, your place," his tone chilled. "Just because father granted you temporary authority in the council does not give you the right to order me around. I am above you in every way!"

Aurora stood stunned for a heartbeat. Slowly, her fists clenched at her sides.

Nere grabbed his travel satchel and strode toward the door.

But Aurora stepped forward, reaching out. “Nere, stop,” she said, catching his wrist. “Brother, please. I’m begging you, listen to reason.”

He ripped his arm free. Aurora shut her eyes, bracing herself. He’s not listening. “Brother,” she whispered, “you leave me no choice.” She took one step back and called, quiet, but sharp. “Vince.”

The doors flew open. Vince entered swiftly, sword at his side, eyes locked on Nere with disciplined calm. Nere spun around, startled. “Vince? What in Lu’s name are you doing?”

Vince planted himself between the prince and the exit. “Prince Nere,” he said firmly, “You cannot leave tonight. I’m sorry, but I can’t let you go.”

“Move,” Nere ordered.

“I can’t,” Vince repeated.

The air tightened. Nere’s expression slowly…very slowly…twisted into something sharp. “Oh,” he murmured, a humorless smile pulling at his lips. “I see now.”

He looked between Vince and Aurora, and Aurora’s stomach dropped. “You have been manipulating my sister, general,” Nere declared, voice rising with outrage. “Trying to seduce her into becoming your wife, so you could become royal. By breaking your vows. Your oaths.”

“What? Manipulate?” Vince snapped. “I’ve done no such thing!”

“Do you deny it?” Nere demanded. “Do you swear it on Lu and Elmira’s name?”

Aurora’s heart pounded. Vince looked at her, lost, uncertain, cornered in a way she’d never seen before. She mouthed one word to him.

Lie.

But Vince…Vince wasn’t built for lying. He stared at her, then at Nere…and finally, quietly, said, “I care for her. But I have never forced her, and I have not betrayed Eldoria.”

Aurora dropped her face into her hands. “Oh, Lu have mercy,” she groaned.

Nere laughed once—sharp, triumphant. “There it is.”

“This is NOT true—” Aurora began, but Nere raised a hand at her dismissively. His focus was on Vince now. “Let me pass,” Nere commanded.

But Vince stood his ground. “I am sorry, Prince Nere. But I cannot.”

Nere’s expression hardened. Steel flashed and Nere drew his sword. “Move, general. Now.”

Vince drew his sword in the same heartbeat.

Aurora froze. “NERE, STOP!” she shouted, rushing forward. Nere shoved her back, not hard enough to injure her, but with enough force that she stumbled onto the floor.

Vince’s eyes snapped with fury. “Nere!” Vince snarled. “You do NOT lay hands on her!”

He charged. Steel clashed like lightning. Sparks snapped across the air as Vince struck Nere in a flurry of precise, trained movements. Nere tried to block, but Vince was faster—far faster. He knocked Nere’s sword aside, spun in a low arc, and clipped Nere’s hand. The prince dropped his weapon with a sharp cry.

“This stops now!” Vince said, panting lightly but controlled. Aurora pushed herself to her hands, breath shaking. But then—

“GUARDS! GUARDS!!!!” Nere shouted toward the hallway.

Aurora’s heart plunged. Vince pressed forward, voice low and urgent. “Back down, Nere. We need to talk, now.”

But Nere only stood straighter, his anger sharpening into determination. Vince reached for the handcuffs at his belt, but Nere backed away, hands raised, shouting for help.

Carter appeared pushing the doors open to the room, flanked by the two soldiers who were guarding Nere’s room before, each one armed, alert, expression tight with confusion. Aurora’s stomach turned. Those footsteps, earlier. They had been Carter’s in the other hall.

“Carter? What are you doing here?” Vince asked.

Carter’s gaze flicked between Vince and Nere. “I could ask you the same thing, general.”

Before Vince could answer, Aurora stepped forward, her voice steady. “Carter—what are you doing up here?”

Carter shifted. “I was passing through the hall after the meeting with Arcius. Then I heard a cry for help.”

Aurora exchanged a quick, worried glance with Vince. Nere’s eyes glowed with a wild, unresolved flame behind them. Carter’s eyes widened. “What is happening here?”

Nere broke the hush first, voice too loud, too sharp. “General Vince attacked me,” he declared, stepping into the flickering torchlight. “He tried to prevent me from leaving for Ardester. He’s been seducing my sister.”

Aurora shot upright, eyes blazing. “That is a lie!” she shouted, voice cracking with shock and fury.

Carter turned from the shadows where he stood, his face unreadable but his eyes sharp. Fixed on Nere, then shifting to Aurora. “Is this true, my prince?” he asked, the promise of law in his tone.

“Yes,” Nere said, cold and sure. “And he does not deny it.”

Carter’s posture changed in that moment. He straightened, chin lifted, authority shimmering in his command. “In that case,” he said, voice echoing down the stone walls, “General Vince Ortega, under the laws of Eldoria, you are arrested for breaking your vows, attacking the heir, and endangering the royal line. These crimes are punishable by death.”

A flash of sword in the torchlight. Vince spun. “You shut your mouth, Carter—!”

Aurora stepped between them, voice rising, desperate. “Carter—stop! I command you—”

He turned on her with a hard smile. “You hold no authority over judiciary matters in treason, princess.”

Two soldiers moved forward, armor clinking, expressions blank and unreadable. Vince backed up, hand gripping the sword hilt tighter. For a moment the room was quiet. Vince could cut through them. Every one of them. Before the second breath. But his grip relaxed just enough. His honor, his code, his control held. One soldier produced an aetheris lock brace. The collar glowed faintly.

Aurora’s voice broke. “Vince…” she hissed. He didn’t look at her. He let the soldiers clasp the stone around his neck. The metallic thud echoed, sharp. “This is madness!” she screamed, voice raw. “Nere, Carter—stop this!” But Vince was already turning away, escorted by guards into the hallway. His shoulders squared. His face set as if he already knew where this led.

Nere grabbed Aurora’s arm, pulling her back. “This is for your own good,” he said calmly.

She wrenched out of his grip, nails digging into her palm. “How dare you!”

Carter paused at the hallway entrance, glancing back at her with that thin triumphant smirk. “He will be held in the dungeons. Trial pending.”

“No!” she cried, but the guards closed the door behind Vince, swallowing the sound of his armor.

The silence came again, heavy. Aurora stared at the doors, body shaking. Torches flickered on stone walls, shadows dancing over her bowed head.

Nere sheathed his sword with a soft shing. He turned to her, eyes cold. “I should have seen this sooner,” he said quietly. “Your judgment has been compromised. Puruna will hear of this. Mother and father will know everything.”

Aurora lifted her face. Tears slid between her fingers. “He wasn’t trying to seduce me, Nere…I love him.”

Nere’s face froze, then hardened. “Exactly why he must be separated from you.” His tone cut sharp. “You would have destroyed our family name. Our reputation. You’ve behaved foolishly, Aurora.”

She straightened. Her hand rose almost of its own accord, and her hand slapped him across the face.

Hard.

Sharp.

For a heartbeat, Nere didn’t move. He just stared at her, calm, still, as though her strike was little more than a breeze. But then his breath stilled, just once. And in the silence that followed, Aurora realized too late what she had done.

“I—Nere—I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—” her voice failed her halfway through as she stepped back, eyes wide and pleading. Trembling under the weight of her own guilt. “I was just, upset. I didn’t mean to hit you—”

He didn’t let her finish.

In a single motion, Nere pivoted. His hand shot out like a thunderbolt. His palm drove into her cheek that sent her flying backward. She hit the stone floor with a thud that seemed small in the face of it but heavy in her chest.

“How dare you,” he growled, voice low, furious, controlled with the kind of cold rage that didn’t need to shout to cut. “How dare you hit me! How dare you strike the heir of this throne, your older brother!”

Aurora wept openly, breath coming in broken bursts. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it, I wasn’t thinking, I just—” Her voice cracked as she tried to sit up, her body trembling, blood blooming at the edge of her lip.

He stepped closer, boots scraping in a slow, sharp rhythm.

“You have no right to be a part of the council, Aurora. You were never meant for this. You were never supposed to be here in father’s absence.

Your presence in the council was mercy, because father felt sorry for you. Because he wanted to give you…something."

This wasn't anger. This wasn't grief. This was something colder. Something that had been waiting for permission.

She sat on the floor, breath trembling, her cheek burning, tears tracking fresh lines down her cheeks. Sobs shook her body—raw, uncontained, as shame and heartbreak welled up in her throat. She tried to speak, her voice barely a whisper through shaking breath.

"I—I'm sorry. I am sorry, Nere. I care about you. I wasn't trying to—"

Before she could finish, Nere's hand closed around her throat, firm, unyielding, the pressure cold and terrifying. She choked for air as he leaned down close, his voice low and dangerous."Never…lay…a finger on me again."

He released her then. Just as abruptly as he had seized her, leaving her gasping on the floor, fingers clawing at her throat, tears and spit mingling on her lips. Sobbing, shaking, she curled in on herself as Nere stood over her, chest rising with tight breathing.

"And sister, don't think about telling anyone about this. No one will believe you. And if they do, they will choose not to," he said quietly. "Carter will back me, including the soldiers, we will be placing this blame on Vince if it is brought up."

Nere didn't look back. He simply grabbed his things and walked out of the room, out of her sight, his boots echoing through the corridor.

Behind him, the door shut. Aurora remained where she had fallen, palms scraping as she tried to push herself upright. Her fingers trembled violently.

She crawled backward until her spine struck the leg of the table. She pulled her knees to her chest, one hand still clutched at her throat, the other pressed to her mouth to quiet her crying.

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33

LONG REIGN OF FIRE

4 Days Later
Tharndusk the 9th, Year 11,219 - Evening
(The twelfth month)

GENERAL RUTHFORD WAS LOSING HIS PATIENCE. "WHAT IN THE BLOODY seven kingdoms is happening?" he growled, slamming both fists onto the table. The wooden surface shook beneath the blow. Across from him, Vortax leaned over a stack of reports, his voice muffled beneath his metal mask and the dark hood that hung over it.

"According to Carter," Vortax said, tapping a letter sealed in deep crimson wax, "it is unwise for our men to move anywhere near Eldoria city still. Two villages of people have vanished without a trace. Scone and now Berks, and Carter claims Mire and Ardester may be next."

Ruthford's brow twitched beneath his eyepatch. "Vanished? The people just vanished?" he grunted. "Is Carter suggesting this is aetheris? Because there is no path or class that can do such things. Or is it some Eldorian trick?"

Vortax shook his head. "He claims they're unsure. But he wrote here—" he tapped the parchment again "—that perhaps Gordu has blessed us for trying to reclaim our holy lands."

Ruthford leaned back in his large wooden chair, armor creaking under the strain. "Blessings," he scoffed. "Gordu's blessings don't look like this. This is…strange." The general rubbed his chin. A map of Valdorin sprawled

across it. He paused, tapping the map where Eldoria stood in the south, a symbol of an eagle clutching two swords by the blades inked above it. “What else?” he demanded.

Vortax scanned the letter again. “Carter also writes that…oddly… Eldoria is still being ruled by the king’s daughter. Princess Aurora.”

Ruthford froze. “The princess?” he barked. “Running a kingdom?”

“Yes,” Vortax said simply.

Ruthford sneered. “Princesses do not lead. Not kingdoms. Not armies. The fact Eldoria allows such nonsense only proves how much they need Gordu. They need correction.”

Vortax added quietly, “Carter agrees. He says that he is confused on the decision, but also adds that the king and queen of Eldoria, including King Althren of Belfour have been absent for much longer than they’ve ever been before.”

“Where?” Ruthford snapped.

Vortax flipped another parchment. “The Island of Mirk, he says. East of Eldoria. In the Luvarian Expanse.”

Ruthford stared at him. “Why in the neth’rose would they be there? What do they gain by abandoning their throne during war? And their people going missing?”

Vortax shrugged. “Carter asked the same question.”

Ruthford stood up, pacing along the table, muttering under his breath. “Could they have died? Shipwrecked? Betrayed? Kidnapped?” his mind ran in circles. Eldoria’s leadership disappearing suddenly made no sense, unless something larger was happening behind the scenes.

“And another thing,” Vortax continued, “Eldoria refuses to attack right now. They’re suspicious. They assume we caused the disappearance of those villages.”

Ruthford stopped pacing. “Good. Let the fools be shaken.” Another thought struck him. “Olric and his men should be pulled from Eldoria City. His men have been beneath their walls too long.”

Vortax nodded. “Should I send the order?”

“Yes, soon.” Ruthford moved to the map again, his finger tracing north, to the towering white peaks near Stoawyk River. “I wonder how Adam fares in the Valley of the Giants. If he can convince the Kolmariths to join us…”

Vortax’s mask turned slightly, metal catching the firelight. “Do you truly think they will?”

Ruthford smirked. “If they do, the tides of war will shift. With the giants of the Kolmarith tribes at our side, we will reclaim Gordu’s lands. And then —” he jabbed a finger toward the central expanse of Valdorin “—we take everything else. All kingdoms will kneel before King Ragnar and will worship Gordu.”

The torchlight flickered across the map, drawing long shadows over the seven kingdoms of men—Eldoria, Belfour, Serakos, Grimrave, Highmoor, Gornhelm, and Drakhar. Ruthford’s one good eye gleamed with ambition.

Vortax leaned back, observing Ruthford. “You still look, troubled.”

Ruthford exhaled through his nose, gaze fixed on the map.“Why would a king, especially a strong one, abandon his daughter and kingdom right now? Why leave a child to manage their council and armies? And why,” he pressed harder, “Would Eldoria travel to this Island called Mirk?”

Vortax rifled the letter. “Carter wrote that they are expanding—establishing new land. Perhaps they seek resources?”

“No.” Ruthford shook his head. “Why would they want a single island out in that varn ocean?” he cursed. “Expansion comes with armies, settlers, caravans, structure. Carter stated in previous letters he’s never seen this new land. No one has. Eldoria hasn’t even sent troops to establish it.” He turned slowly toward Vortax. “That means they aren’t expanding at all.”

“Then what are they doing?” Vortax asked, genuinely puzzled.

“I don’t know,” Ruthford said. “But whatever it is…it is not what they claim. They may not even be going to that island at all. Maybe they travel somewhere else entirely.” Ruthford said turning to Vortax. “Maybe they lie about where they go. Did Carter even see them get on boats?”

A heavy silence filled the room.

Finally Ruthford grabbed a scroll and shoved it into Vortax’s hands.

“Send word to Carter. Tell him to watch carefully. If the king and queen return with King Althren, I want to know immediately. If they don’t return…then something has gone very wrong in Mirk. Or wherever they are.”

Vortax dipped the quill. “And if Carter asks why?”

“Tell him I don’t care about his drekking feelings,” Ruthford cursed.

Vortax finished the message, sealed it with the symbol of a bear in brown wax, and tied it to the raven waiting in the corner. The bird shrieked and launched into the freezing night, wings cutting across the pale moon.

Vortax watched it vanish over the snowy ridge. “I can feel it. Something is happening in Valdorin…something big.”

Ruthford placed both hands on the table and leaned forward. “It’s more than that, Vortax. The second War for Valdorin is rising again. The same one our Great King Vladmin started centuries ago.”

Vortax nodded.

Ruthford placed his fist over the mark on the map where Eldoria sat, pressing down hard enough for the wood beneath to crack. “We will take advantage of this chaos,” Ruthford continued. “These disappearances, whatever they are, weaken Eldoria more than battle ever could. We should be grateful actually.”

“And once Eldoria loses more villages…” Vortax said, finishing the thought. “We strike, once we understand what has been destroying them.”

Ruthford leaned back. “Precisely. We press in, crush what remains, and reclaim our birthright.”

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PART

FOUR

Until All Light Fades

Matthew · Aurora

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34

SHADOWS IN THE SNOW

A Day Later
Tharndusk the 10th, Year 11,219
(The twelfth month)

WINTER SUNLIGHT BLED SOFTLY ACROSS ARDESTER AS MATTHEW WALKED beside Eb, Tina, and Florencia, keeping his hood low. The village streets were alive with preparations, colorful clothes strung between buildings, children carrying lanterns shaped like suns, elders humming old hymns from the Solvaran. Lumora, the Festival of Light, had begun here too.

He didn't expect that.

He also hadn't expected how much it would hurt.

It wasn't the cold; the fur coat Eb bought him kept him warm enough. It was the sound of the hymns drifting through the air—songs praising Lu, Elmira, or Oryneth that reminded him of Liora's own Festival of Light, of Elara and Finn running in circles with lanterns, of his mother humming as she cooked, or his father carving tiny wooden suns to hang in the trees.

Almost two months. In six more days, it would be two months since he had been away from home. Matthew tightened his jaw and forced himself to keep walking. Hunted, cursed, and marked.

And yet children here were laughing, tossing snow at each other, families greeting one another as if nothing in the world could possibly go wrong. It was almost jarring, this normalcy—knowing what lurked beyond

the trees at night, knowing the black dog waited in the woods every time he tried to sleep, knowing the demons laughed outside his window.

Florencia walked ahead with Tina, hood back, her difference from the villagers was obvious but strangely unnoticed. Or not unnoticed—Matthew caught the way men stole glances at Florencia, the way women stiffened in envy or unease.

But she didn't seem bothered. She only leaned down to whisper something to Tina, making the child giggle.

Eb, meanwhile, scanned storefronts like an excited old scholar, muttering something about antique tables. "Ah, this one! Follow me, all of you," Eb chirped, pushing open the shop door. Inside, the smell of old wood and parchment filled the air. Shelves were stacked with carved toys, clocks, chairs, delicate pieces of furniture from decades past. Tina marveled at a wooden whale of Lu that rocked back and forth. But Matthew's chest felt tight, too crowded, too watched, too close to the center of town.

He leaned toward Eb. "I'm…going outside for a bit. Just need a walk."

Eb nodded cheerfully and turned his attention back to the shop.

Outside, the air hit him again. He walked toward the Saraveen River, just a short distance south of the village, where the stone bridge arched elegantly over the rushing water. From here the forest stretched endlessly toward Gladlen Forest and, beyond that, toward Rohland. Matthew leaned on the stone railing.

The sky was brilliantly blue, clouds drifting lazily, the scent of frost clinging to every breath. The day wasn't as bone-chilling as usual, Sechera, the Dragon of Winter, had blessed them with that much at least. Still, his coat and green hooded tunic felt like thin walls against memories that clawed through anyway.

Suddenly a pair of villagers crossed the bridge tugging a horse by its reins. "…disappearance of Scone and now Berks—the people vanished like smoke—"

"…and those rumors about goblins taking children. Terrible. Just terrible. What has happened to this beautiful country?"

Matthew paused. His fingers curling into fists. Children. Goblins?

A tremor of rage crawled slowly up the back of his neck. He sprinted until he was standing directly in front of the men, startling them. "What did you just say?" Matthew demanded.

The men blinked at him, confused by his urgency. “Well, aye—it’s odd, that’s for sure,” one said. “Strange talk going ‘round.”

“Oh very strange. Goblins are animals that flee at the sight of a man. So this, this business of kidnappings, probably just tall tales,” the other added.

“Tell me everything you know.” Matthew’s voice was sharper than he intended, trembling with buried fury.

The men exchanged a look, one lifting a brow. “Easy there, lad. We’ve urgent business—”

Matthew stepped in front of them. “Tell me.”

But the first man finally sighed. “All we know, just gossip really, is goblins taking children near different towns. The Eldorian government says to keep the little ones close.”

“And that’s all?” Matthew pressed.

“That’s all,” the second man said. “Now move aside.”

They tugged the horse and continued on. Matthew didn’t move for a long moment. He just stared after them, breathing shallowly.

It’s happening here. Not just in Liora.

Elara. Finn.

But suddenly a shout broke through the woods. A young voice, panicked, breaking—

“GET OFF ME!”

Matthew spun toward the forest and bolted.

Branches whipped against his arms as he smashed through bushes into a snowy clearing. Two boys wrestled in the snow, just siblings playing, not in danger at all. The older boy declared himself victorious; the younger whined. Matthew’s heart finally slowed.

“Hey!” he said breathlessly. “You two shouldn’t be out here.”

They looked up, wide-eyed at the hooded stranger.

“We’re just playing…”

“I get that. But you need to head back. Have you heard about the kidnappings?”

Both nodded quickly. Matthew crouched to their level. “Then listen to me. Go home. Stick with your parents. Understand?”

“Yes, sir,” the elder said, and they scampered off. Matthew let out a breath. He rubbed his palm, an old nervous habit, then pulled his hood even lower.

Then—

The sky thundered.

Not storm thunder.

Wings.

He looked up and saw them. Hippogriffs, dozens of them, swooping over the treetops. Their talons gleamed like metal, riders gripping reins tightly, weather-cloaks snapping behind them in the cold wind. He recognized the riders.

Ludwig. Baron. Iris. Zeen. And at the center, Prince Nere.

Matthew ducked immediately behind a tree. “Crask…” he whispered. Why are they here? How did they find him? Who told them? His breath came uneven. The memory of Pete, the blood, the panic, all rushed through him at once.

He wasn’t ready. He couldn’t face them. Not like this.

He watched the soldiers land in the village, greeted by townsfolk, escorted toward the main hall and the tavern. Matthew swallowed hard.

He needed to leave.

Now.

Matthew ran back toward the antique shop, where Eb, Florencia, and Tina stepped out looking for him. “I’m going back,” Matthew said urgently. “They’re here. The Eldorian soldiers, they can’t see me.”

Florencia’s brows pinched. Eb’s face fell with concern. “We’ll all leave,” Eb said gently. “Together now, no worries.” They started up the snowy path toward the forest.

Florencia whispered, “What happened? Why are you afraid?”

Matthew didn’t answer. His thoughts spun wildly, had Eb told someone? No…Eb wouldn’t. Florencia didn’t seem the type to betray him either—nor would she know what he’d done, unless she saw his wanted poster in the tavern.

He cursed under his breath, walking faster, heart pounding with paranoia. As soon as they reached deeper forest, the safety of Eb’s land now in sight—

Matthew spun, drawing his sword and pointing it at Eb.

Florencia gasped, pulling Tina behind her.

“Mr. Peregryn!” Eb barked. “What are you—”

“Did you tell them!?” Matthew shouted. “Did you tell the Eldorian soldiers I was here?”

Eb didn’t flinch. He stepped forward calmly. “No,” he said firmly. “If I wanted you arrested, I could have done so the day I saw your wanted poster in Ruse’s Tavern. But Apostle Frey’kro commanded me to care for you in my home. And I gave my word.”

Matthew’s breathing slowed. He lowered the sword, shame heating his face. “I’m so sorry Eb…I’m just…”

“Paranoid,” Eb finished gently. “Understandably so.”

Matthew nodded.

But there was a sudden wet clicking sound. Too many feet in the snow.

Florencia suddenly stiffened.

Matthew and Eb turned and four goblins grinned back at them, drooling, blades in hand.

Something inside Matthew snapped.

Rage.

Flashes tore through his mind, Elara screaming, Finn pulled away, goblin claws gripping their small wrists. His own helplessness. The shame. The failure.

His grip tightened on his sword.

“All of you—GET OUT OF HERE!!!!” Matthew roared.

Eb didn’t hesitate.

Florencia grabbed Tina’s hand, pulled Eb with the other, and they ran. Matthew stepped forward, sword raised, breath fogging through his teeth as the four goblins hissed and leapt at him. Their yellowed eyes glistened with cruel delight, their fat tongues lolling out like dogs ready to feast.

The first lunged—

But Matthew vanished—they looked the wrong way. Matthew reappeared behind them, blade already angling downward. He wouldn’t fail to kill these goblins, like he failed when his siblings were taken.

The Khazadryn steel slid through the first goblin. It shrieked once, then went limp, dead before it even hit the snow. The other three froze, eyes crawling toward Matthew. Then one screeched and lunged. Matthew sidestepped, pivoted, and cut upward, but a third tackled him from behind before the blade connected.

He crashed into the snow, its breath hot and rotten in his face, claws slashing wildly at his coat.

He slammed his forehead into the goblin’s nose, sending it tumbling back with a squeal. Rolling, he sprang up just in time to catch another swipe

with his blade.

“Come on then,” Matthew spat through his teeth. “COME ON!”

They did.

One hurled itself at him, Matthew swung and sliced through its belly. It fell clutching its guts, shrieking and writhing. The other two exchanged a look and bolted.

“No. No you don’t,” Matthew muttered. They were headed toward Eb’s house. Matthew tore after them, weaving through trees and skidding across icy roots. The cold stung his lungs. His aetheris burned through his stamina. Ludwig’s warning echoed in his head—

"If you overuse aetheris without proper conditioning, you’ll collapse.”

But Matthew didn’t care.

Not when he could still hear the memory of his siblings screaming. He burst through the forest clearing and froze.

Dozens.

At least two dozen goblins swarmed Eb’s house, clawing at windows, screeching as they tried to pry open the door. Eb was inside with Tina—Florencia stood on the porch, firing purple flame-shards from her hand, each one slicing into goblin flesh with razor-sharp precision.

“STAY BACK!” she yelled, drawing her short sword as three goblins clambered onto the steps.

Matthew sprinted into the fray. The nearest goblin turned just in time for Matthew’s blade to plunge through its spine. He kicked it off the sword, dodged another lunge, parried a stab, then slammed the creature into the porch railing where it cracked its skull open on the wood. He was getting better at this.

Florencia fired more shards shouting a word, “Veyclast!”—three violet bolts fired at once from her hand—skewering goblins through the chest. They fell thrashing into the snow with sickening gurgles.

Inside, Tina screamed.

“They’re IN the house!” Eb shouted.

Florencia flung open the front door just long enough for Eb and Tina to burst out, then ran out into the front yard with Matthew standing there. Matthew and Florencia were both panting, and the two stood back-to-back while Eb held Tina close. Dozens of tiny clawed feet pattering through snow. Matthew cut one down. Florencia blasted three more. Goblin bodies

dropped left and right until the screaming grew quiet and then the goblins withdrew as the ground trembled.

“Matthew…” Florencia whispered, voice breaking. Matthew turned—

A creature loomed over them. Nine feet tall. Hunched like a reptile, with light blue skin, and built like a bull. Four black insect eyes blinked out of sync. Its mouth was a maw of teeth, curved and dripping. Two massive tusks jutted upward like daggers.

A behemoth.

The beast swung its arm. Florencia didn’t even scream—

It hit her like a tree trunk, sending her crashing into the snow twenty feet away, rolling across ice until she fell still, coughing blood.

“FLORENCIA!” Matthew roared. Tina wailed. Eb stumbled back in terror. The behemoth gurgled a low growl and leaned down toward the group. Matthew’s mind shut off into pure instinct.

He charged. Using gale step mid-stride, he teleported upward—appearing above the creature’s shoulders. He dropped from the air with all of his weight behind his sword. His sword punched through the thick skull and down the neck. The behemoth shrieked, wobbling, then collapsed like a felled tree. Tina and Eb dove aside as its body thundered into the snow. In the chaos, Tina’s mittened hand slipped from Eb’s grasp.

Matthew hit the ground with the behemoth, rolled, ripped his sword free. The other goblins seemed to vanish. But the silence didn’t last. Matthew ran to Florencia immediately.

She coughed again, holding her ribs. “I’m…fine,” she lied.

“You’re not,” he looked over his shoulder. “Eb, we need a doctor—”

But Eb wasn’t looking at Florencia.

“Tina! Tina!” he yelled.

Matthew turned in time to see them—

A line of goblins rushing out of the trees, dragging a large iron-barred wagon behind them. Inside the cage, children sobbed, half a dozen of them. Others were slung over goblin shoulders, bound and crying, including Tina.

How? When was she taken?

A behemoth pulled the wagon, stomping through the snow toward the depths of Morgar Forest.

“No…this can’t be happening, not again!” Matthew roared. “No…not again.” He sprinted toward them.

“MR. PEREGRYN! WAIT!” Eb called.

But Matthew didn’t, he sprinted into the woods and he slammed through the nearest goblin, cutting it down. Another leapt at him and he parried, twisting his blade through its torso. The wagon rolled farther. The children screamed louder.

He could reach them, he could still reach them, but then—

A massive shape barreled from the woods. A goblin twice the size of a normal one, wearing scavenged armor, wielding a chipped sword larger than Matthew’s arm.

It smashed into Matthew like a sledgehammer. He flew into the snow. The goblin roared and charged, swinging its jagged blade down in brutal, heavy blows. Matthew rolled.

The creature was strong, far stronger than any goblin had a right to be. Its swings rattled Matthew’s bones. He parried one blow and his arm went numb. Another swing, a heavy downward strike, caught his sword wrong. Matthew dropped to a knee as the blade sliced across his palm, drawing blood.

The goblin raised its sword to finish him. Then—

CRACK.

A wooden spike burst from the ground like a spear, impaling the goblin clean through the chest. The monster gargled, lifted several feet into the air, and then flung aside like a broken doll. Matthew stared, confused, breathing hard. A shadow stepped between him and the goblin horde. A tall figure. Bone-thin. Its body carved entirely of twisting wood, like a living tree stripped to its core. Its wooden face mask was painted with bright colors, reds, yellows, greens, yet its expression moved like real flesh, shifting into a stunned frown. Golden, glowing eyes stared down at Matthew with recognition. Then the creature spoke, and its voice was deep, almost mournful. “M—Matthew? You’re…alive?”

Matthew blinked. His mouth opened but no words came. He had never seen this thing in his life. A command in goblin tongue echoed from the trees. The remaining goblins shrieked, clutching their stolen children tighter. The thing sighed softly through its wooden nose. But before Matthew could react, the creature’s arm twisted, literally twisted, into a long branch. It lashed out, curling around Matthew’s waist in a split-second. “No—!”

The creature threw him. Matthew crashed deep into the trees, smashing through snow and branches, tumbling until he rolled to a stop. He groaned,

pushing to his knees. In the clearing ahead, he saw the masked figure snap its long wooden fingers. A burst of green mist swallowed it, the goblins, and the caged children. And then, they were gone.

Vanished. Tina with them. He stumbled forward. “No. No. NO—” he reached the empty clearing, fell to his knees in the snow.

“I failed…” he whispered.

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MIST OF DEATH

MATTHEW RAN ANYWAY, BRANCHES SLAPPING HIM, BREATH BURNING HIS lungs, the snow rising higher with every frantic step. The world felt too quiet. Too open.

Every echo of his boots on the frozen ground reminded him that Tina's small hands had slipped away from his reach.

He should've been faster. He should've been stronger. He should've been—

"Eb! Florencia!" His voice cracked as he broke through the thinning trees and stumbled into the small clearing where Eb's house stood. He saw Eb crouched over Florencia, wrapping what looked like makeshift bandages around her arm. Blood stained the snow beneath her elbow and along part of her ribs. Matthew slowed to a walk. Shame bent his shoulders. He couldn't bring himself to lift his head at first.

Florencia looked barely conscious, her head tipped back against the tree, dark curls spilling across her face. Her breaths were shallow, her eyes glassy. Even bruised and bloodied, she looked strangely composed.

Matthew swallowed hard.

Eb finally turned, the snow crunching under Matthew's slow steps. The old man's eyes softened immediately, as if he knew the truth simply from the way Matthew carried himself.

"Mr. Peregryn," Eb said gently.

Matthew forced himself to speak anyway. "I—I'm sorry, Eb." He lifted his eyes at last. "They…they got away."

Eb rose, walked straight to him, and did the last thing Matthew expected. He hugged him. Tight. No judgment. No rage. No disappointment. Just a firm, steady embrace from a man who knew loss. When he pulled back, he kept his hands on Matthew's shoulders. "This is not your burden alone, Mr. Peregryn. We all lost her."

Matthew's throat tightened. His grip tightened on his sword hilt. Florencia let out a thin groan of pain that snapped both of them back to reality. Eb rushed to her side with his staff, lifting her gently to try and adjust the wrapping. "She's hurt badly," Eb muttered. "Her left side looks broken. Arm took most of the blow, but…she needs a doctor."

"I'll help carry her," Matthew said quickly, already stepping forward. But the second he tried to lift her, she hissed sharply through clenched teeth and curled forward.

"I can't," she gasped. "I can't move."

Eb exhaled slowly. "Then I'll go alone. I can reach Ardester faster than dragging her there. You stay, with her. Do not let her move. And do not leave her alone."

Matthew shook his head. "Eb, there might be more goblins. You can't—"

"They weren't here to attack us. They wanted the children Mr. Peregryn. They succeeded."

Matthew clenched his jaw but nodded. The old man gave one last look at Florencia, gentle, fatherly, fearful, and then moved down the snowy path toward the village.

Matthew stepped closer to Florencia, sword drawn, eyes scanning the dark lines of the forest. The wind rattled the branches above them like bones knocking together. Florencia let out a rough little laugh. "You don't have to stand like a statue," she rasped.

Matthew ignored her.

"You can put the sword down. Nothing's out there."

"You don't know that."

She gave a pained smile. "Fair. But you look ridiculous."

He kept staring into the trees. "You're hurt. Be quiet."

But she didn't. "I didn't think this was how I'd die," she mumbled, letting out a low, bloody chuckle. "Varn."

"You're not going to die," Matthew said firmly.

“You shouldn’t lie, Matthew. You can’t say that,” she coughed with more blood. “I thought a dramatic forest death was at least a step up from the life I had before.”

He shot her a confused look. She shifted a little, wincing but continuing anyway. “I honestly should just tell you…why I’m here…” she whispered.

“You don’t need to.”

She ignored him completely. “I ran away from my home. Fled Serakos to be free.”

Matthew hesitated. “Free…free from what?”

She laughed softly, though a thread of pain ran through it. “You really don’t know anything, Elf. Look at me. What am I?”

“A woman.”

She rolled her eyes, even now. “I’m a nantherwin. A nantherwin with aetheris.”

Matthew froze at the word. He remembered Eero hissing it at Zeen.

“I’m from Serakos,” she said, staring at the snow. “There are only two classes: the norwiches, pale-born, and the nantherwin…the rest of us,” her lip curled. “All separated by color and class. Justicar Malbronne rules there. People like me aren’t meant to exist.”

“Sounds miserable,” Matthew muttered.

“They say we’re cursed. Dangerous. That we are demons.” Her eyes flickered to him. “I thought you’d understand.”

“Just stop talking,” he said quickly. “You’ll make it worse.”

Florencia was quiet for a moment. “I came here…in search of something.” Then she stopped there. The words lingered between them for a moment before Florencia looked away—shutting whatever door she had almost opened.

Matthew looked away, tightening his grip on his blade, but noticed her gripping something in her satchel. Then Florencia asked the one question he feared most. “Why are you afraid of the Eldorian soldiers? Enough to draw your blade on Eb?”

Matthew stiffened. He was surprised she hadn’t figured it out yet. “That’s none of your concern.”

“I think it is. If the Eldorians find out we’re helping a criminal—”

“DON’T CALL ME THAT!” Matthew roared, startling even himself.

Florencia blinked. Then she snorted. “Oh, I see.”

“You don’t know anything about me,” Matthew said, voice cracking. “You don’t know what happened before I came here. You don’t know any of it.”

The forest quieted again.

Florencia chuckled, but didn’t push further.

For a while, all they heard was the shifting snow and the wind brushing through the pine needles. Then softly, “Did they hurt her?” Florencia whispered.

Matthew blinked. “What?”

“Tina.” Her voice wavered. “The goblins. Did they hurt her?”

Matthew’s heart twisted violently. He stared at the ground.

Florencia swallowed. “Matthew…did they take her there…to the same place as your siblings?”

“Yes, I presume so.”

Her head dropped. The sky dimmed, thick black clouds sliding fast over the sun, smothering the light. A cold ripple passed through the forest. She whispered, almost to herself, “You will have to get her back.”

Matthew wanted to scream that he had tried. That he couldn’t. That he failed. But then—

Footsteps.

Voices.

Matthew whipped around, sword raised. Eb emerged through the curtain of snow, panting, stumbling with his cane—and beside him was a man in armor.

A young man. Bald, dark-skinned, black eyes.

Zeen.

Matthew hesitated.

So did Zeen.

“STEP AWAY FROM THEM!” Zeen bellowed.

Florencia gasped, her body lurching in pain as she gripped her satchel.

Eb stumbled forward, panic in every motion, nearly knocking into Zeen as he waved his arms frantically. His glasses slid down his nose. “No, no, you’ve got it all wrong! She was wounded by a behemoth, during the goblin assault, like I told you! He saved her—he protected—!”

But Zeen wasn’t listening. His hand hovered near the hilt of his blade, eyes fixed on Matthew with a cold, narrowing stare. “This Elf,” he said, voice low and clenched, “Is a murderer. A wanted killer.”

Florencia turned to Matthew. She saw it now. She knew. And Matthew felt himself unravel. His legs weakened, a subtle stagger backward. Of all the people Eb could've brought for healing…it had to be Zeen. Of course.

"Please," Eb said quickly, trying to wedge himself between the two. "Heal her first. Whatever past there is between you, we can speak of it after."

Zeen didn't blink. But after a beat, he nodded once. "Step away," he said to Matthew. "Far."

Matthew hesitated, eyes darting between Florencia and Zeen, but he obeyed, stepping back, retreating into the perimeter of the trees. Zeen knelt beside her, calm now. Professional. His hand hovered just short of her ribs. "Where does it hurt?"

Florencia, still dazed, clutched her left side with a bloodied hand. Her skin was pallid, breaths shallow. "There," she whispered. "My ribs…and my arm."

Zeen examined the wound in silence, then gently pressed his hand near the broken edge of her side. "What's your name?"

"Florencia."

"Well, Florencia, this won't feel good."

He closed his eyes and muttered a word. "Sero'chome." From his palm, pale gold mist swirled outward. The light shimmered with a strange elegance, soft but unnatural. It was the flame of aetheris, his specific path: Aegisoul. Florencia shrieked in pain as the healing began. She seized Zeen by the sleeve, trying to shove him off. Her body convulsed.

"Hold her," Zeen barked.

Eb dropped to his knees, wrapping his arms around her shoulders as gently as he could manage. A crack split through the forest air, sharp, quick. Florencia screamed once more, then fell limp against the tree.

Zeen exhaled.

It was done.

"What…what did you do?" Eb whispered, voice weak but laced with awe.

"I'm an Aegisoul," he replied. "A healer class of the Vaylin path. I didn't mend you. I reversed the damage. Pulled your body back a few hours into its unbroken self. That's what my aetheris does."

Florencia blinked slowly, absorbing the words. Eb tried to lighten the air, letting out a strained laugh. "That's quite the gift, lad. Can it make me

young again?”

Zeen smiled faintly. “Only works on fresh wounds, I’m afraid.” He stood in one swift motion. His hand dropped to the hilt of his blade, and in a single draw, the sword was free. He turned, leveling it toward Matthew. “I’m glad I could help,” Zeen said. “But now I have to arrest this Elf.” Zeen stepped forward cautiously. “Matthew of Liora. By decree of Eldoria, you are under—”

Matthew vanished. Zeen spun instinctively, finding the blade of Matthew’s Khazadryn sword resting coldly near his throat.

“Don’t do this, Zeen.” Matthew’s voice shook, not with fear, but with exhaustion. “Put the sword down.”

“Oh?” Zeen hissed. “Like Pete put his sword down when you stabbed him?” Zeen’s jaw twitched.

Matthew recoiled as though struck.

Zeen took another step, fury shaking his voice. “We took you in. We trained you. I defended you when the others called you slurs behind your back, do you know that? I honored you. I thought you were like me, misunderstood. And you…you killed one of ours. No. Murdered!”

“It’s not what you think,” Matthew whispered desperately. “I didn’t mean—”

“We all have a choice,” Zeen snarled. “But you Elves? Blood runs dark in your kind. Violence is in you. I shouldn’t have been so naive. Baron and them were right about you. I was the fool.”

Matthew’s mind snapped. “It runs in our blood, huh—” He didn’t get to finish. Because the sky darkened. And the wound on Matthew’s left arm, where the black dog bit him in the Chambers of Maelor, erupted in white-hot agony. Matthew dropped to his knees with a strangled cry.

Florencia shouted something. Eb reached for him. Zeen hesitated, uncertain. Matthew heard none of the voices around him. Because there, standing between the trees, at the edge of the fading light, stood the hound.

That black dog.

It emerged almost silently, drenched in shadow, but its eyes glowed. Its breath steamed out in ghost-tendrils of smoke, each exhalation trembling in the cold air. And its jaws opened into a manic grin, the shape of wrongness made flesh and fang.

Matthew’s heart stuttered. Why now? he thought. Why in the day? How? It had shown itself in daylight only twice before. So now why?

Matthew's mind spun, unsteady. It couldn't be a coincidence—three daylight appearances now. And the dog's familiarity with where he walked, when he walked. He took a step back, blade half-raised, breath shallow in his chest. The creature's grin widened. It didn't bark. It didn't charge. It simply watched.

Matthew let his sword drop. His arm felt heavy, remote.

"Why do you come?" he whispered, voice thin. The forest suddenly started to echo. The crunch of snow under his boots sounded far too loud. Behind him the world rumbled with possibility and dread.

The dog spoke, "The Aeralynian has arrived and you will die with this wretched village. Your death is nearly here!"

Matthew choked on air.

"Soon, you will be ours, Matthew Peregryn."

"No—no—NO—!" The world folded.

Matthew found himself in a black, endless room with no walls, no floor. Then a red, swirling vortex tore into existence, glowing brighter and brighter until six black silhouettes started swirling. Six towering shapes. "WE SEE YOU…" the shadows hissed, layered and immense in the air.

Matthew stumbled backward.

They stood in a half-circle, six figures cut from shadow, faceless yet unmistakably watching. No breath, no motion, only their silence. The words did not echo. They crawled beneath his skin. Then their chorus peeled away, leaving only the one in the center. It stepped forward, or perhaps the world stepped back. Its voice was ancient, deliberate, too measured to be Human.

"I see you, chosen of Lu. You cannot hide from me. Not from what you are. You cannot stop this Crimson Night. I have bought you, and you…ARE MINE!"

Matthew couldn't breathe. Something shattered in his chest. He turned and fled, or tried to. The ground beneath his feet bled into smoke. The red mist spiraled into a tornado, swallowing walls that never existed. There was no direction, only away. But the voice followed, now all of them again, speaking in overlapping coils.

"You cannot run from us."

"We know what you are, Elf."

"You are ours."

"You will join the others."

Their words wrapped around him, each syllable slicing clean. He couldn't tell if it was truth, or madness, or something older than both. Who were they? What did they know?

He couldn't scream. He could only run. And then—

White light erupted, soundless and absolute. The shadows burned away.

The forest returned.

Matthew fell forward into the snow, lungs heaving, shaking hard. His fingers clawed at the frozen ground, as if he were still falling, as if he could still feel the grip of their gaze. "Mr. Peregryn!" Eb cried, rushing forward. "Thank the sovereigns!" He helped lift Matthew upright.

"What happened?" Matthew rasped.

Florencia wrapped her arms around herself. "You were…talking. To no one. Saying things. Scary things."

"You collapsed," Eb added. His hands trembled. "Then your eyes turned gold. And you bled from your mouth. Lad, I thought you…" He swallowed. "I prayed to the Sovereigns of Light that you'd return. And they answered."

Zeen, though still clutching his sword, looked shaken. Pale.

But before anyone could say more—

A low rumble rolled across the sky.

Matthew looked up.

A red mist was forming above Ardester. Lightning cracked through it, illuminating monstrous shapes shifting in the vapor. "What in the neth'rose…?" Zeen whispered.

Screams erupted beyond the forest from the village. People sprinted through the snow, crashing past the trees in blind terror. "RUN!" a man shouted. "TO THE MOUNTAINS! MOVE!" The four of them turned as one. Zeen cursed under his breath. Eb's eyes filled with horror.

The mist spread. Fast. Too fast. "What the—" Matthew whispered.

Zeen looked upward, trembling.

"All of you, stop gawking!" Florencia yelled. "Just run!"

Eb spoke, "To Darlimir! Now!"

Zeen protested. "We can't abandon the village! We should—"

"Your soldiers already did," Eb said, pointing. Zeen turned and saw Ludwig riding with the other soldiers on hippogriffs, fleeing toward the mountain, guiding survivors. That killed any argument.

"Fine! But once we're inside the caves, the Elf is under arrest!"

Matthew rolled his eyes.

They ran. Through trees now stripped of needles. Through snow that melted into slush beneath the creeping red cloud. Behind them came wet tearing sounds, like flesh ripping. Something screamed high and shrill. Behind them, in the mist, came the crunch of flesh and the roars of beasts. Voices broke inside it, then vanished. The red mist advanced, slow, crawling, hungry—

They reached the cliff. “There!” Eb pointed. “It’s narrow, but it’s a path upward.” Florencia climbed first. Eb pushed her from below. Zeen followed and Matthew remained at the bottom, sword drawn.

“Hurry up!” Zeen shouted down.

“Go!” Matthew yelled. “I’ll make it.”

Only when all three reached the top did Matthew teleport upward with gale step, landing beside them. They squeezed into the small tunnel just as the red mist slid into the clearing behind them.

Inside the mountain, the world opened. They stepped into Darlimir. The air was dry and thin, heavy with the dust of centuries. Light filtered through hairline cracks in the vaulted ceiling far above, casting thin beams. Enormous stone pillars stretched into the darkness, ribbing the massive hollow like the spine of some fossilized sovereign.

Beneath them, golden inlays marked the floor, dulled by time, but still radiant. At the far end of the abyss, across a gaping chasm, the silhouettes of survivors could barely be seen, villagers, Eldorian soldiers, and Ludwig gathering near the grand staircase that led to the surface. Zeen’s breath came sharp and uneven. “We need to reach them.” But the bridge that once joined their ledge to the central pillar had collapsed long ago. What remained were jagged fragments.

“There’s no crossing,” Florencia said, her voice low and hollow.

Matthew turned slowly. “The mist?” It had followed them inside, drifting like smoke soaked in blood, curling down the cliffside where they’d descended. But here, surrounded by Dwarven stone and silence, it had slowed, its motion uncertain.

“It’s thinking,” Eb muttered.

“That’s worse,” Florencia said quickly. “Move. Before it decides.”

They began their descent, carved steps spiraling along the cavern wall. Below, the Dwarven mines spread into layers of ruin: fallen balconies, shattered bridges, crumbled stone halls. Statues of long-dead Dwarven kings and warriors loomed over them, cloaked in shadow and lichen,

bearing axes large enough to hew giants. As they reached the lower level, Matthew spotted the remains of ancient machinery scattered along the edge, shal'kors, he assumed.

Crab-like, gold-bodied constructs lay broken, their legs twisted, their eyes dim. One, larger than the others, leaned dead against the wall. Its body was caked in moss and cracked stone, veins of rust splitting through its joints.

"Shal'kors," Matthew whispered.

Behind them, the red mist resumed its crawl. "There," Eb pointed, to a tunnel carved into the mountain wall, nestled beside the collapsed shal'kor. Its entrance was flanked with faded runes and the remnants of gold-plated stone.

Zeen hesitated. "What if this tunnel leads nowhere? What if this is a trap? What if you're leading me to be silenced, old man?"

Eb turned, unconcerned. "Then stay here, boy. Let the mist decide your end. I'm moving."

Zeen cursed under his breath but followed. Florencia remained at the cliff's edge, eyes fixed downward into the canyon. There was no bottom, only shadow upon shadow, depths that seemed to breathe with many bridges below.

But then a stone cracked beneath her heel. She stumbled forward. Matthew lunged, catching her wrist before she vanished into the dark. He pulled her back.

She clung to his coat, her face inches from his.

His voice was quiet. "Watch your step."

She pushed off him. "…Thanks."

Their eyes locked. A little too long.

Behind them, Zeen's voice sliced the moment. "Let's go! We're going." Zeen raised his left hand, fingers curling slightly. "Ignis minor." Golden flame erupted, engulfing his left hand, casting shadows. The corridor ahead blinked into form, narrow, ancient, with markings even time had failed to erase. Eb walked forward without hesitation.

And the four of them entered the tunnel, one by one—into the deeper chambers of Darlimir.

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36

CHAINS OF A PRINCESS

AURORA HAD NEVER FELT THE CASTLE HALLWAYS SO EMPTY. THE STONES themselves seemed to echo her name in accusation as she moved through them, the chill of the marble rising through her boots, creeping into the thin silks she'd flung over her shoulders.

Five days since Vince had been dragged beneath the castle, bound in the aetheris locks, humiliated before the men he commanded. Five days since everything spiraled out of control. Five days since she realized the kingdom she had been raised to love could turn on her without hesitation.

She still heard the clank of the chamber closing that night. She still saw his face, confused, ashamed, hurt, but determined. Always determined. It was infuriating how noble he managed to look even in chains.

And now?

Now the entire castle whispered that Aurora Darkmore, Princess of Eldoria, had been manipulated by the wicked general. That she, poor, foolish Aurora, had fallen for the tricks of a man too ambitious for his own vows.

What a convenient story for them, she thought bitterly as her boots clicked across the stone floor. No one blamed Nere, even after what he did to her. They thought Vince hurt her, that he was some sort of monster general. No one questioned Nere for drawing his sword first, for pushing her to the ground. They didn't even question the absurdity that Vince, quiet, dutiful Vince, had somehow been weaving seductive schemes behind every tapestry of the palace. And her brother, she had never hated him more.

Aurora was a naive, emotional girl who needed to be protected from men like Vince and should have never been left to rule. Aurora swallowed the rising burn in her throat and quickened her pace toward the council chamber. She didn't have time for self-pity. Her brother was gone, gone to Ardester, as foolish as she feared he would be—and the kingdom was unraveling day by day. She had spent five days fighting whispers, letters, rumors, Carter's accusations, and her father's absence. But today, her father had returned.

She needed clarity.

Answers.



Around her, the council murmured quietly among themselves. Even their whispers felt like accusations. Barnobus adjusted himself and cleared his throat. "My lady, before the king arrives, perhaps you might—"

Aurora didn't hear him. Her gaze drifted to the high, arched windows where thin winter light filtered in. She imagined herself outside instead. Out in the cold courtyard, free from all these stares, free from their judgment. Free from her own spiraling guilt.

Vince's face would not leave her. He didn't even look at her as they dragged him away. Barnobus's voice broke into her thoughts again. "The prince's departure to Ardester has created many concerns, and…."

"I know," she whispered, but not loud enough for anyone to hear.

Nere leaving.

Vince arrested.

The council doubting her. The nobles snickering in corners. Her father gone, unreachable, while everything spiraled.

She had tried her best. She had. She tried to lead with confidence, to fill the space her father left behind, to manage Grimrave's movements, the missing villages, the growing panic among the people. But everything

happened at once, and she was drowning. She did everything she could. She did everything she learned from her father…wasn't it enough?

The large council doors suddenly creaked. The council members in the room shot to their feet. Aurora's breath froze in her chest.

Her Father, King Ronan, entered.

Her father's presence had always carried weight, a commanding tension that made people straighten, adjust their clothing, lower their voices. But today, that weight felt heavier. More dangerous. His expression was thunderous. Aurora stepped forward, attempting to speak, "Father, we are so glad you're back—"

"Silence, girl." He didn't even look at her as he brushed past, storming toward the head chair of the council room. The king lowered himself into it, jaw tightening with every breath. "Sit," he ordered curtly. Everyone obeyed instantly. Aurora sat last, sinking into her chair, hands trembling despite her effort to hide it. Ronan steepled his fingers. "General Kael. Grimrave's position."

Kael rose. His armor clinked sharply. "They remain at Elandor's Stonewatch, my king. They have not advanced. It appears they wait for instruction."

Ronan's eyes narrowed.

Kael bowed his head and sat back down. Ronan then turned his sharp gaze toward the table. "I return to find villages missing. Entire populations vanished. Chaos spreading across my kingdom." His tone sharpened to a blade. "And my heir, my only son, playing soldier in Ardester. Who allowed this?"

Aurora felt all eyes drift toward her again. Her stomach twisted. She slowly stood. "Father, I told Nere not to leave. He refused to listen—"

"And you allowed it," Ronan snapped. "You let my one and only son walk straight into danger, at a time when evil consumes our lands? And you expect me to simply accept your failures?"

Her lips parted, then closed again. Her father wasn't speaking to her like a king to an advisor. He was speaking to her like a parent scolding a child. "Father, I tried…."

"Not hard enough. You have failed this kingdom."

The table shifted uncomfortably. No one spoke up for her.

Not one.

Ronan slammed his hand onto the table, the sound echoing through the chamber. “Send two riders on hippogriffs. Bring my son back by force if necessary. Immediately!”

Kael bowed instantly and scribbled orders.

Ronan’s voice rose louder, angrier. “My nation is bleeding, and instead of unity between us and Belfour, instead of competence, I find disorder. Fear. Goblins kidnapping children? Grimrave biding their time? Entire people from villages gone?” He stood abruptly. “And scandal. Rumors that my daughter has tarnished her name in some foolish alliance with a general.”

Aurora’s cheeks flamed.

She had never felt smaller. “It isn’t like that,” she whispered, barely audible. Her father didn’t even acknowledge it.



For what felt like hours, he tore through reports, demanded explanations. Aurora contributed where she could, though every time she spoke, he dismissed her suggestion, cut her off, or overrode her with something colder.

Every comment chipped away at her dignity. By the time the meeting ended, her throat felt raw from holding back emotion. The council members filed out, bowing and murmuring to one another. Aurora stood, hoping, praying, she could slip out unnoticed, escape to her chambers, cry into her pillow where no one would hear. But her father’s deep voice halted her. “Aurora. Stay.”

Her heart dropped. She turned slowly. “Yes, father.”

He motioned toward the door. “Close it.”

She obeyed. When the door clicked shut, the silence became heavy. Ronan stood near the window, hands behind his back, his profile stark against the snowy cityscape below. He did not ask about her bruised face.

For a long moment, he said nothing. Then—

"You disappoint me."

Her breath shook. "Father, I did everything I—" she said.

"Everything?" He turned, eyes sharp. "Everything would have prevented this disaster."

She pressed her lips together hard, trying to hold the tears back with everything she had. Ronan looked livid. He, her mother, and King Althren had been gone for weeks, absent while the kingdom struggled to solve this mystery, and now here he was, returning only to scold her and seize control.

Aurora's hands curled into fists at her sides. "Father, none of this was my fault! It all happened without warning, it blindsided all of us!"

He moved around the table slowly, each step measured, heavy with judgment.

"You pulled me into the council for the first time," she continued, "And then expected me to lead alongside you as your co-regent? I was learning, adjusting. And then you vanished, and I was left to respond to things with the council that no one could have foreseen."

"As king, do you believe I'm prepared for every disaster that comes through my gates?" he snapped. "No. But I know when to rely on strength, and when to say no. Leadership demands more than panic and sentiment. It requires resolve."

He came to a halt beside her. "And you sent my heir, your brother, into the outer provinces. Do you even understand what you've done? The people out there are vanishing. And you placed him right in the path of it!"

His voice rose now, louder, unrestrained. "There is a cursed Aeralynian freak on the run, murdering royals! And you send my son out there for him to be next!? Rauk." Ronan cursed.

Aurora blinked. The word echoed in her mind. Aeralynian. He said it like it was known. Like it was real. That word…she had never heard it spoken before. But it seemed to mean something. She remembered. That man, the one with white hair and that golden diamond on his brow—he wasn't just pretending. That wasn't a trick, or paint, or vanity. He was Aeralynian. And her father knew what that meant. Her voice dropped. "You said…Aeralynian? W—what is that?"

His expression hardened. "It doesn't matter what he is!"

But she could see the lie forming.

“You need to be sharper. Present. Aware. You’re distracted. Your focus is compromised. And I am removing you from the council. It was my fault for bringing you into this, especially since you are just a girl. I should have known better.”

She took a step back. “Removed? Compromised?”

“Yes,” he said flatly. “I was informed of your…affection. I was told that you were in love with the general. Tell me this is a misunderstanding?”

Aurora’s mind reeled. What did she say? What did Nere tell him?

Lie. That was safest. Even if it was wrong. “No, father. I was never in love with him. I only worked alongside him, nothing more. I needed his help keeping Nere here, but it was Nere who fought him. That’s all.”

He studied her, eyes weighing truth against intention. “Is that so?” he said. “Odd. Because according to Nere and Carter, the general claimed and admitted his love for you in the dungeon. And Nere left me a letter…he said you confessed it openly to him.”

Aurora’s throat dried. “No, father. I wasn’t thinking clearly. My emotions were…unstable. I misspoke. That’s all it was.”

Silence. Long enough for her to hear her own heartbeat.

Finally, he nodded. “A lapse in judgment. That’s all, then.” He exhaled sharply, like some burden had been temporarily lifted. “Good. I feared it might be true. But I’m relieved to hear otherwise. Your love, your future, belongs to Prince John. Althren and I agreed. The kingdoms must be united immediately. There is change coming to Valdorin…and we must achieve it.” Ronan turned from her and began massaging his temples, breath long and slow.

Aurora stood still. And beneath it all, the word pulsed in her thoughts and she froze.

Aeralynian.

Choice felt like something other people were allowed to have.

Ronan paced again, tone hardening further. “Furthermore, your involvement with General Vince has created enough turmoil. You will cease all contact with him once he is released.”

Her breath hitched. “Released?”

“Yes. As soon as the matter is settled.”

“How soon?”

“That is none of your concern!” he roared.

But it was. It was everything she cared about. She steadied her voice. “Father…he is innocent. He was protecting Nere—”

“And he attacked the crown prince,” Ronan snapped. “That alone is punishable by death. The only reason he will not face execution is because I require every Aetherian under Eldoria’s banner for the battles ahead. I already lost one Aetherian when that varn Elf murdered the young soldier. So do not twist this into mercy. It is practicality.”

Aurora’s stomach flipped.

“In the meantime, we will wait to hear back from Ludwig in Ardester about this vanishing. And the marriage,” he continued, “Will proceed as planned. The winter ball will serve as your formal introduction to Belfour as their future princess.”

Her heart pounded painfully. “Father, please—”

“That is the end of it.” A final decree. He turned to leave, but Aurora stepped forward.

“What happened on your journey?” she asked quickly, desperate for anything that might soften him.

He snapped. “Irrelevant to you…for now.”

But it wasn’t irrelevant. Her father knew something. Something he would not tell her.

Her father stopped at the doorway. “Prepare yourself, Aurora. The wedding will take place two days after the winter ball. You will be ready. You will obey. You will uphold our family’s honor.”

He opened the door. “And you will stay away from that varn general.”

The door shut behind him. Aurora stood alone in the council room. Slowly, she sat back into a chair, her vision growing blurry. She pressed a trembling hand to her forehead.



Aurora did not remember walking from the council wing to the great dining hall. Her feet must have carried her there. But her mind felt severed from reality, floating behind her like a ghost. She only snapped back into herself when she reached the tall double doors of the brunch hall, where the guards bowed and pulled them open.

Warmth and chatter crashed into her all at once.

The hall was full, unnecessarily full, long tables crowded with nobles and guests, laughter echoing too loudly under the golden chandeliers. The smell of roasted venison, honeyed bread, and spiced wine filled the air.

And at the center of it all sat Prince John. Her future prison.

He smiled when he saw her. A wide, polished smile. Aurora forced her expression neutral, straightened her back, and stepped in.

Immediately, Ellarie's voice rang through the hall.

"Aurora! Good to see you."

Of course. That woman could make an insult sound like a compliment dipped in honey.

Aurora crossed the room slowly, trying to ignore the dozens of watching eyes. She knew what they whispered, she'd heard bits of their mutterings over the last few days.

She disgraced herself. Imagine letting a general court her. How foolish. Poor thing, she was clearly manipulated. They should never have put her in the council. Not one whisper placed any blame on Nere. All of it landed squarely on her shoulders.

She kept her chin lifted. She had dignity. Even if no one in this room cared.

She reached the far end of the table, where Prince John rose slightly from his seat in a gesture that resembled politeness only in structure, not sincerity. "Princess," he said, reaching to touch her arm as if it already belonged to him. "Do sit."

She resisted the urge to recoil but avoided his hand gracefully, lowering herself into the chair beside him. She folded her hands in her lap, willing her breath to stay steady.

Ellarie and her circle, Sera, Serette, Maelyn, Rhiadel, all watched her like crows perched on a fence. John leaned in slightly. "I trust your morning was not too taxing?"

Aurora smiled tightly. "I survived it."

John chuckled. "Spirited as always."

She forced herself to look away from him and toward the other end of the table, where her father sat speaking with Althren and two nobles. His expression carried that same tight, simmering frustration.

Removed from the council.

Ordered to marry John.

Cut away from Vince.

Blamed for Nere leaving, even though she tried to stop him. She pressed her fingertips together under the table, grounding herself.

She would not cry. Not here. Not in front of them.

A servant refilled John's goblet with mead. He lifted it to his lips, smiling again. "As I was saying earlier," John said, settling back casually, "Our wedding will be the highlight of the winter season. A proper union between Eldoria and Belfour. The kingdom will celebrate for weeks as we take on Grimrave after this nightmare mystery is solved."

Aurora took a slow sip of water to steady herself. "We still have time, John. There is no need to rush such an announcement."

"Rush?" He gave a soft laugh. "My princess, this arrangement has been written for months. Our fathers have confirmed the date. Why cling to hesitation? You should be happy."

"I am merely saying that the kingdom is unstable," Aurora answered calmly. "Perhaps this is not the moment to bind two nations in festivities."

John waved a dismissive hand. "All the more reason to proceed. People need joy in times of hardship, Lumora itself was born from hardship. Besides, the marriage is political. Not emotional."

Aurora stiffened. "Marriage is emotional."

"Not for rulers." He sipped again. "Emotion is a liability."

The words sliced her deeper than he realized.

John touched her hair lightly, brushing a strand behind her ear. She tensed instantly. "As your husband," he murmured, "I would never expect you to trouble yourself with political burdens. You will have a comfortable life. Lavish, even."

Aurora flinched internally. He spoke to her like she was delicate glass. Like her mind was a small, pretty thing unfit for real use.

"Respect," she said quietly, "is the foundation of any partnership."

John chuckled. "Of course. As long as you respect my decisions, all will be harmonious."

Her eyes narrowed. "What about respecting mine?"

He smirked, barely, but undeniably. “We each play our roles, my princess.”

My princess. Possession. She lifted her chin. “In marriage, both voices matter.”

“And they will,” John assured her lightly. “Though naturally, mine will carry final say. That is not oppression, Aurora, it is tradition.”

“Tradition,” she repeated flatly.

“Yes. The way of kingdoms. The way of men and women.”

Aurora inhaled through her nose, refusing to let him see how deeply that comment stung. “Your worldview is limited, John.”

“My worldview is realistic.”

“It is arrogant.”

“It is practical.”

“Is it practical?” Aurora murmured. “To dismiss the beliefs of an entire people?”

John raised a brow. “You mean the myths of a whale? The Heliorens? Aurora, please. You’re far too intelligent to cling to children’s tales.”

Her jaw tightened. Oryneth. Lu. Elmira. The sacred lore she was raised on, the stories that shaped her, her kingdom, her morality. He dismissed them like dust. “What do you believe in, then?” she asked.

“Power,” he answered simply. “Power decides right and wrong. Whoever rules determines truth.”

“And when rulers are corrupt?” Aurora pressed quietly. “When their truth becomes cruelty? When they justify evil because it benefits them?”

John shrugged. “Then the world adapts. Right and wrong shift. That is the nature of politics, Aurora. It has been this way since the dawn of creation.”

Her stomach twisted. “How convenient,” Aurora whispered.

He didn’t hear, or didn’t care. Across the table, Ellarie watched them with an infuriatingly gleeful expression. When Aurora inadvertently caught her eye, Ellarie lifted her goblet in a mocking little toast.

Aurora looked away before her expression betrayed her.

The chatter around the hall softened as servants placed steaming dishes along the table. Plates of fermented berries, roasted pheasant, cheese wheels, spiced potatoes, and sweet breads filled every plate.

But Aurora tasted nothing.

Halfway through the meal, Ellarie leaned forward. “Aurora, I do hope your wedding preparations are going smoothly. You must be thrilled.”

Aurora kept her expression smooth. “Ecstatic.”

One of Ellarie’s friends giggled softly behind her napkin. Another whispered into her ear.

“Oh, and do not worry,” Ellarie continued, “General Vince must be very pleased for you as well.”

Aurora’s blood ran cold. She forced a smile. “I imagine he wants what is best for Eldoria.”

“Well said,” Ellarie replied with a slow smirk. “Such loyalty. I only hope the rumors about him…pursuing you…have not tarnished your view of him.”

Aurora turned her head slightly, trying to ignore her.

The conversation moved on, but Aurora’s thoughts didn’t. Her thoughts remained tangled around Vince, his arrest, his shame, his silence when they dragged him away. And her own silence when her brother accused him.

She reached for her water again, taking a slow breath. She would have chains around her the rest of her life. She lifted her gaze toward the hall’s tall windows. Snow drifted gently outside, pale flakes catching the morning light. For a moment she imagined herself running, truly running, barefoot through the snowy courtyard, past the gates, past the walls. Into the wilderness. Into freedom.

With Vince.

The thought settled into her chest like a stubborn seed. A dangerous one. But a seed nonetheless.

By the time dessert arrived, sugared figs and warm cinnamon pastries, Aurora had barely touched her plate. She looked across the hall again. Ellarie laughed loudly at something one of the young lords said. Her friends fluttered around her. Everyone else ate contently, drank happily, lived comfortably. As if nothing in the world was wrong.

As if Aurora was not drowning. As if she was not about to be forced into a loveless marriage, silenced, sidelined, and bound to a future she never asked for.

Her nails dug into her palm again beneath the table.

She inhaled slowly. She could not marry John. She could not lose Vince. And she could not let her father dictate the rest of her life. But she also couldn’t leave yet. Not until Nere returned safely. Not while her family

stood on the edge of crisis. After that…when her brother was home…when Vince was free…

She would run. With or without permission. Her fate would be hers again. She lifted her gaze slowly, meeting Prince John's confident smile as he lifted his goblet in a toast. She returned the smile.

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37

MINES OF ROYNAR

THE STAIRCASE FELT ENDLESS.

Matthew's boots scraped as the four of them descended. The steps were narrow and worn smooth by centuries of Dwarven feet and shal'kor treads, and every scuff of leather echoed down into the black.

Zeen walked at the front, his left hand engulfed in a controlled golden flame, ignis minor, casting a warm circle of light ahead of them. Eb shuffled just behind him, one hand braced on Zeen's shoulder to steady himself, the other pressed against the rough wall. The old man's wheezing breath bounced back from the stone. Matthew came next, watching the steps carefully as they wound downward, Florencia behind, her presence a quiet shadow behind him. Water dripped from the ceiling in slow, steady intervals, pattering against the rock. The air grew colder the farther down they went, but it wasn't the biting cold of winter outside. This cold felt… contained. It seemed stored inside the mountain.

At one point, Matthew let his fingers brush the stone. Some patches were icy, others faintly warm. The contrast made his skin twitch.

"How much farther?" Florencia whispered from behind him.

"I haven't the slightest idea," Eb muttered. "I never dared this deep before. We should be grateful the red mist hasn't followed us in here. Yet."

Yet.

Matthew's stomach knotted at that word. Every time he pictured the red mist rolling across the snow back in the woods, turning it wet and red, swallowing trees and screams, his chest tightened.

Was this what Lu feared?

No. He couldn’t think about that now.

But finally, after what felt like an hour of downward marching, the stairs leveled out.

“Ah,” Eb breathed. “Floor at last.”

The narrow stairwell opened into a wide stone chamber. Zeen stepped out first, and his golden light spilled into the room, revealing what lay ahead. Three colossal stone doors, each towering nearly to the ceiling. The one on the left hung broken on its hinges, cracked open by some ancient force. The door directly in front of them was slightly ajar, a long, thin gap in the stone suggesting someone, or something, had slipped through. The third door, to the right, stood closed, carved with worn ancient runes that glimmered dully in the light.

The floor beneath their boots was made of stacked stone blocks, many cracked and chipped by time. Scattered across the chamber lay the dead. Many Dwarves. And shal’kors.

They were smaller than the one Matthew had seen at Eb’s farm. A third of the size, each shaped like a crab with long, curved legs of gold and a squat central body. Most were broken, limbs bent at unnatural angles or crushed beneath fallen rocks. Their faces, smooth golden plates with narrow eye-slits, were empty, dark, silent. Here and there, Dwarven skeletons rested against walls or slumped in corners, still clad in ornate gold armor.

Matthew swallowed hard. This place didn’t just feel abandoned. It felt forsaken.

Zeen stepped closer to one of the dead shal’kors, nudging it carefully with his boot. The machine clinked faintly but didn’t move. “What are these?” he asked, glancing back.

“Shal’kors,” Eb said, his voice hushed but filled with a scholar’s excitement. He shuffled forward, peering over Zeen’s shoulder. “Machines from long ago. They mined these tunnels, worked the deepest shafts, hauled metal and ore for the Dwarves I presume. They were here long before most men alive today were even thought of. Ah, to see one in its prime…”

“Let’s hope we don’t meet a live one then,” Zeen muttered. He straightened and looked around the chamber, then pointed.“Right. We don’t know how far the red mist will spread inside the mountain, and we still need to reach the others. We should split up, briefly. Search for other exits or paths. Old man, come with me.” He nodded toward the cracked door on

their left. Eb adjusted his glasses and nodded, though Matthew could see the nervous twitch in his mouth.

“Very well, very well.”

“The Elf and Florencia,” Zeen said, “take the right door. If you find anything dangerous, call out.”

“Comforting,” Florencia muttered.

“Briefly,” Zeen repeated, as if saying it twice made the decision less foolish. He led Eb toward the broken left door and slipped through. Their light disappeared behind the stone, leaving Matthew and Florencia in the dimmer edge of his fading glow.

Florencia lifted her left hand slightly and whispered, “Ignis minor.” A soft purple flame gathered around her hand, casting a violet glow over the carvings on the right-hand door. “After you, Elf,” she said.

Matthew rolled his shoulders, stepped forward, and pushed. The heavy stone door resisted for a heartbeat, then grudgingly slid aside enough for them to slip through. The room beyond was not a room. It opened into a vast mine hollow. Matthew stepped out and sucked in a breath. They stood on a wide stone platform jutting out over a vast chasm. Bridges and walkways of stone zig-zagged across the canyon in dizzying lines. Metal cables stretched from wall to wall, bearing hanging mining buckets that swayed slightly as if remembering motion.

The faintest suggestion of daylight dripped in from a distant crack high in the rock, just enough to outline the scale of it all. The rest was shadow.

“I…” Florencia whispered, her voice small. “I’ve never seen anything like this.”

Matthew stepped closer to the edge, careful not to go too near, and peered down. The canyon dropped into an endless black gorge. He could not see the bottom. For all he knew, it never ended.

Florencia stayed a pace back from the ledge, the purple light of her flame reflecting off her dark eyes. After a moment, she glanced at Matthew. “So,” she said quietly. “Earlier, when that soldier said it…was it true?”

He knew what was coming before she said it.

“Are you a murderer?”

The word rang around the cavern in his head. Matthew’s fingers tightened around the hilt of his blade. For a moment, he considered lying. But there was no point. Zeen had practically shouted the accusation into the

sky. And Eb had already known, and still kept him. “Yes,” Matthew said softly. “I am.”

Florencia flinched, taking a step back. She watched him, waiting.

“But it wasn’t…” Matthew exhaled slowly. “It wasn’t what I wanted. I didn’t mean to kill him. I never wanted blood on my hands. But that doesn’t change what I did.”

“Then why,” she asked, “is an apostle protecting you? Why did Frey’kro tell Eb to hide you? I would assume that apostles don’t usually travel with criminals.” There was no malice in her voice, only confusion and wariness. She took another small step away from him, keeping her distance without fully turning away.

Matthew looked out into the chasm, unable to meet her eyes for a moment. “Because,” he said, “apparently I’ve been…chosen. For something. I don’t really understand it myself.”

“Chosen?” she repeated, skeptical.

“For a relic,” Matthew said. “Ek’sheera. Lu told me. The Sovereign Lu.” His throat tightened with the memory of the chamber and wall of water, the impossible whale, the taste of salt, awe, and fear. “He pulled me out of somewhere I was supposed to die. Said I’d need a relic to save my siblings. That Frey’kro would guide me once he found it.”

“And the murder?” Florencia asked. “He just…ignored it?”

Matthew gave a strained laugh. “I don’t think the sovereigns ignore anything. He knew exactly what I had done. He knew exactly what I am. And still sent me anyway.”

She watched him closely now, expression guarded. “So,” she said slowly, “how does that happen by accident? The…murder.”

Matthew took a deep breath. He hated dragging the memory up. The docks. The rain. Pete’s eyes. “I was trying to get a boat,” he said. “To sail to Drearth. My brother and sister were taken by goblins like I told you before. Nobody in Eldoria believed me. And I was sentenced to serve in the army, to be studied by the general. So I thought, I’ll just find a boat myself, steal it if I have to. Sail across the Sea of Aethira and find them.”

He exhaled, hands shaking slightly. “There was a young soldier who tried to stop me. He thought I was deserting. He pulled his blade, I pulled mine, and I panicked. We fought. And I thought if he arrested me, I’d never see my siblings again. It happened fast, he was in my way.”

Matthew saw Pete’s body again in his mind, collapsing to the dock, blood spreading under him. “I didn’t mean to kill him,” Matthew whispered. “But I did. And that kind of mistake doesn’t un-happen.”

Florencia’s face was hard to read in the dim light, but she said nothing.

They stood together in silence for a few heartbeats, the cavern stretching out in front of them, ancient and heavy.

“This red mist. Do you think it has something to do with you? With this, Ek’sheera?”

Matthew’s jaw clenched. “I don’t know,” he said. “Lu said nothing about mist. He said nothing about villages vanishing. Just that I’d need the relic, and that Frey’kro would know how to find it. But maybe there is more at play here.”

“Did he at least tell you what Ek’sheera is?” she asked.

“No,” Matthew said, bitter. “Only that I’d need it to face whatever is waiting in Drearth. Whatever pulled my siblings there.”

“So,” she said, changing the subject. “What is it like seeing one of the siblings of creation?”

Matthew let his eyes drift to the distant crack of light above the canyon. “It’s…” he struggled for words. “You grow up hearing stories. Hymns. Legends. Reading about it in the Solvaran. But when you actually stand in front of one, it feels like…standing on the edge of a storm. Beautiful. Blinding. Terrifying. You feel seen in ways you don’t want to be seen. Like everything in you, every dirty thing, every fearful thing, every secret, is laid bare.”

Florencia was very quiet. “Terrifying,” she muttered. “Yes. That sounds about right.”

He glanced at her, then down at the purple flame still hovering around her hand. “That spell you used,” he said. “You said it like Zeen earlier. Ignis minor. Is that something only your kind of path can do? Or can any Aetherian try it?”

Her face softened just a little.

“Any Aetherian can,” she said. “It’s basic, really. A simple call for light. You just focus on your hand and will the flame there. Its color and feel depends on your aetheris.”

Matthew huffed. “Well, mine’s cursed,” he muttered. He flexed his fingers, feeling the faint ache where the black dog had bitten him back in the chambers.

Florencia stared at him like she couldn’t decide whether to believe him. “Mine is the Vowed,” she said. “Hold your hand out.”

He held out his hand, feeling stupid and strangely nervous.

“Well,” Florencia said. “Focus. Imagine your hand catching fire without burning. Say the words under your breath. Ignis minor.”

Matthew swallowed. “Ignis minor,” he whispered.

For a heartbeat, nothing happened.

Then black fire exploded around his hand.

It wasn’t like Zeen’s or Florencia’s. Their flames were controlled, elegant. Zeen’s a steady warm gold, Florencia’s a sharp violet light. Matthew’s was raw and jagged. It didn’t feel hot in the normal way. Pain sank deep into his forearm. It flared beneath the skin. Matthew doubled over with a grunt, clutching his left arm with his free hand.

Florencia stepped forward instinctively, reaching out. Then stopped herself mid-step, pulling back a fraction, as if remembering who he was. But the concern in her voice was real.

“How do I—” he gasped. “How do I put it out?”

“Just wave it and imagine it going,” Florencia said quickly. “Like snuffing a candle.”

He forced himself to concentrate through the pain, snapped his wrist, and willed the flame away.

It died.

The black fire sank back into his skin and vanished. The burning in his arm faded to a dull ache. Matthew straightened slowly, breathing hard. “See,” he said hoarsely. “Cursed.”

Florencia looked curious. “Well, now we know you tell the truth,” she murmured.

Matthew glanced back through the doorway into the first chamber, where Zeen’s golden flame flickered faintly. “Speaking of,” he muttered. “I can’t stay here too long. We’re trapped in these cursed mines—while Zeen waits to drag me back.”

Florencia looked at him sharply. “What are you saying?”

“I can’t let him take me back to Eldoria Florencia,” Matthew said. “If he does, I’m dead. I’ll never see Elara or Finn again. And that means I can’t save Tina either. I’ll have to break away from all of you eventually. Lose him in these tunnels.”

“That’s insane,” Florencia said. “You’ll get lost. Or killed.”

“Better lost than executed,” Matthew said. “And if Frey’kro finds me, he can point me back to Ek’sheera’s trail.”

Her eyes narrowed. “And you’re just assuming I want to help you do that?”

“No,” Matthew shook his head. “I’m just telling you what I’ll have to do. At some point.”

She didn’t answer. But she didn’t tell him he was wrong either.

Florencia shook her purple flame out, and together they slipped back through the door into the room of shal’kors and skeletons. Zeen stood just inside the broken left-hand doorway, his golden flame stretched out into a room beyond. Eb hovered near his elbow, peering in with obvious unease. Matthew and Florencia joined them, and as soon as Matthew saw what lay inside, his skin shivered.

Webs.

Thick, ropy strands of webbing stretched across the far chamber in thick curtains. It clung to broken pillars, corpses, shattered shal’kors. Some strands hung from the ceiling in ragged curtains, twisted around Dwarven skeletons suspended like dead offerings.

“Elmira help us,” Florencia whispered. “Arachnids. Drekk.”

“Yes, arachnids,” Zeen said tightly. “It’s probably why these mines are off limits.”

“Are there any…alive?” Florencia asked, her voice a notch higher than normal.

“None in there,” Zeen answered after a moment’s inspection. “Just old webs and skeletons. Nothing moving.”

“Good,” Florencia muttered.

Zeen turned away from the webbed chamber. Matthew cast one more glance at the web-choked room, imagining massive pale spider legs crawling over stone in the dark.

Florencia exhaled softly and hugged her arms to herself. Matthew could tell she was cold, but it wasn’t only that, the atmosphere of the place sat on all of them since they arrived.

But Matthew wasn’t listening.

His attention was now fixed on the dark tunnel behind them, the spiraling passage they’d descended from earlier. He took several steps toward it and squinted up into the shadows to see if the red mist was there, possibly still following. But there was nothing. “What is this red mist?” he

muttered under his breath. Could this truly be what Lu was worried about? What did he mean by the darkness moving quickly? And where is Frey'kro?

His heart pounded as he searched the gloom. No movement. No light. No sound except the faint dripping of mineral water from stalactites. "Frey'kro, where are you?" He didn't realize he'd whispered aloud until a sharp voice cut through the chamber.

"What are you doing?!"

Matthew snapped around.

Zeen stood several feet away on a slanted slab of stone, sword out, gold flame brightening instinctively around his hand.

"What?" Matthew blinked.

"Who are you speaking to?" Zeen demanded, nerves tightening every syllable.

Matthew raised his voice, exasperated. "I wasn't speaking to anyone. You're hearing things."

Zeen narrowed his eyes at him, muttering under his breath. "Varn Elf…" he cursed.

The insult annoyed him, but Matthew swallowed it. He couldn't lose focus. If he let Zeen's hatred get into his head again, he'd spiral like before. He couldn't afford that here. Not with the red mist behind them. Zeen straightened and moved to the far door—the one left cracked ajar. "Let's move. Now. We need to keep going and meet with the others. This place… it's wrong."

Despite hating the order, everyone silently agreed. The creaked-open door moaned when Zeen pushed it wider, revealing a curling set of stone stairs, descending once more. They wound downward in a tight, uneven spiral. The group followed Zeen in single file.

They descended in silence. Downward. And downward.

The steps were slick and a chill seeped up through their boots. Their breathing echoed off the walls. Even Matthew, tense and alert, felt himself wishing there were more sound, anything would have been better than the dense quiet.

The staircase gave way to an opening.

Zeen lifted his flame higher.

They stepped out onto a narrow stone walkway built on thin Dwarven pillars. A freezing wind pushed through the enormous cavern, carrying a faint metallic tang, like old blood and rust.

Far, far, above them, high on the opposite side of the chamber, they could see tiny flickers of torchlight. Voices. Footsteps. Children crying. Soldiers barking orders.

The Eldorian survivors.

Matthew felt a small spark of relief; at least they weren't completely alone in this unsettling place. But they were separated by an impossible expanse, sheer drops, broken bridges, and the endless abyss of the mines.

Florencia stepped close to the ledge, peering downward. "It just…goes forever."

The cavern below was nothing but black. No bottom, no sound. Just void. Zeen steadied his arm, his own face pale. "We keep close to the wall. Walk single file."

Above them, a soldier's voice echoed faintly: "Keep moving! Move your families! Do not stop, move, move! The mist is advancing!" Matthew looked up sharply. Red fog wasn't visible, but the fear in the soldier's tone was unmistakable. They walked along the walkway, hugging the cavern wall. Matthew kept glancing behind them, toward the tunnel they'd just emerged from. And then—

Something breathed down his neck.

Not warm.

Cold.

Glacial.

The hairs on his skin pricked up, and he spun around so quickly his boots screeched. Nothing. But something in the darkness far behind them… shifted. Matthew forced himself to turn forward and keep walking, but the question grated in his mind. What happened here?

They entered a narrow corridor branching from the great chamber, its ceiling low, stone cracked, dust falling like old snow.

Florencia slid her hand along the wall.

"Just keep moving," Zeen shouted.

They pressed deeper.

The hallway opened again. This time into a wide platform with mine carts and layers of stone stairs zig-zagging into darkness. Metal contraptions hung like skeletal ribs from the ceiling. Rusted gears jutted out of the walls. Zeen turned, face uneasy. "How are we supposed to reach the others from here?"

Eb stroked his beard. “We just keep going. These mines connect like roots beneath a forest most likely. There will be a path.”

Zeen took a cautious step, then yelped. His foot clipped a loose shal’kor machine. The golden crab-like frame toppled, scraped against the stairs, tumbled down, down, down—

THUD.

THUD.

CLANG.

The sound echoed through the mines in hard, repeating strikes all throughout the mines. The entire group froze. Zeen laughed nervously, clutching his chest. “By Lu, my heart nearly leapt out…”

“Watch your step, sir,” Eb scolded, voice trembling more than he liked. “We do not know what creatures stir at such noise.”

They continued moving, more slowly now, boots silent as possible.

They crossed another short bridge. Then the ceiling opened. Daylight poured in through a jagged crack high above, bathing the chamber in a soft, eerie glow. The sudden brightness was almost painful after so much darkness. But far across the cavern, a waterfall spilled from the gap, crashing into some unseen lower pool. A massive stone clockwork tower stood beside it, gears unmoving but intact. A water-wheel creaked slowly, moved by the falling water.

And scattered all around, shal’kors hauling small wagons of gold ore. Eb clapped his hands together, nearly giddy. “Look at them, Mr. Peregryn! Still at work, still performing their ancient duty!”

Matthew watched quietly.

The scene should have been beautiful. Instead, it felt tragic. Machines still working long after every Dwarf had died. Tools without their makers.

Florencia shivered.

The cold wind from above was biting, but they had no choice but to push even deeper.

As they continued, two enormous Dwarven statues guarded a massive staircase. Each statue wielded a hammer twice the size of a man.

“Heat,” Florencia breathed, already climbing ahead. “It’s warm up there!”

“Wait!” Zeen called after her.

The temperature indeed rose with every step. They all entered a colossal forge room glowing orange from rivers of lava flowing through stone

channels. A towering Dwarven statue poured molten rock from its raised hammer like a waterfall of fire.

Florencia sighed and stepped closer to the heat, letting the warmth melt the stiffness from her limbs. “Can we…rest? Just a moment?” she asked.

Zeen hesitated, fear still thick in his posture. But he nodded. “Just a little. No more.”

Matthew, restless, drifted away from the lava-heat and noticed a tall stone door set into the wall. A chamber beyond it. He pushed it open. Inside was a forgotten study, stone tables covered in old ledgers, leather-bound books, and scattered Dwarven tools. Golden chandeliers hung overhead, dusty but intact. The air was still, sealed away from time. Matthew descended the steps.

Then Zeen followed immediately. “Where do you think you’re going? Don’t even try to run, do not forget you’re coming with me once we’re out of here.”

Matthew rolled his eyes. “I’m not running. I’m just looking.” He crossed to a stone table, brushing dust from the cover of a massive book. “Mining Ledger—Barru Chore.” He opened it. Pages crinkled from age. Rows of entries filled the book in neat Dwarven script.

Behind him, Zeen hovered nervously, eyes darting around the chamber. Florencia joined them next, purple flame glowing, giving them more light. Eb soon wandered in too, wheezing in excitement. “Oh my…the records of the Dwarves of Darlimir! How extraordinary!”

Matthew turned a page.

Florencia’s purple flame danced softly across the carved stone walls, lighting up ancient Dwarven script and murals half-eaten by time. Eb’s giddy breaths echoed faintly, bouncing across the room like the gasps of a scholar witnessing a forbidden archive. Matthew, however, was locked onto the ledger. It should not have survived, pages yellowed and edges curled but still intact. As if it had been waiting for someone to read it.

Waiting centuries.

He swallowed and flipped to a random page.

“Log Day 456…” His voice was low as he read. “The ore vein runs deep. Ten carts hauled since dawn. Two men injured in a roof fall, both will live.” Matthew flipped more pages. Most of the early entries were routine, labor counts, ore yields, tunnel expansions, repairs on the shal’kors. Ordinary details of a thriving mining kingdom.

“Log Day 571…” Matthew paused. “The shal’kors ran through the night without pause.”

Florencia leaned closer, brow furrowed.

But Matthew ignored her and flipped ahead another section. Most entries stayed normal. Until a particular shift came.

“Log Day 701—Strange hum in the stone.” Matthew’s voice dropped a level. “Some say it’s wind in the shafts. Feels deeper than that.” Matthew looked up staring at the wall behind Eb…where faint grooves carved into the stone stretched horizontally.

They weren’t natural.

Matthew spoke. “Something…moved through the rock, perhaps,” he said, his skin prickling. He flipped a few pages. “Log Day 719—Voices. The tunnels echo though no hammer strikes. Miners say voices answer back, voices whispering, and not our own. Strange times.”

Florencia gave him a look, but truthfully she felt the same icy knot forming in her stomach. Matthew’s heart hammered louder with each new line.

“Log Day 720—The shal’kors froze.” Matthew read slowly. “All at once. Their eyes dimmed. None know why.” Matthew exhaled sharply. He did not like what that implied. Florencia, needing something to distract her mind, had begun rifling through the other books scattered across the long stone table they were all beside.

Dust flew from covers, parchment crinkled like dry leaves. She grabbed a heavy history tome from under a pile and dropped it onto the table with a thud.

Eb jumped like something had exploded.

“What is that?” Matthew asked.

Florencia skimmed the top of the page. “Hm…it…describes the war between the Dwarves and Elves that happened here. Says the Elves tried to claim Darlimir.” Florencia flipped ahead. “The war ended in year 10,689, during autumn…Elves were driven out…Dwarves used the shal’kors to force them back…” She frowned. “And then…everything stops. It jumps ahead to year 11,000—the year they abandoned these mines, and the pages after that all are blank. But before that, there is tons of history about these mines.”

Matthew felt a cold ripple crawl up his spine.

Blank pages.

He returned to the ledger in his hands as Florencia continued to read.

Then, he flipped many more pages as he skimmed through.

“Log Day 823…” He felt sweat bead on the back of his neck despite the cold. “Whispers have appeared deeper within the mines. We are not sure if it is exhaustion from the long days or something else. Log Day 829—Miners missing.” His voice cracked slightly on the word missing. “A group of miners went missing going into the Kanmagnus region. They said they found a tunnel leading to a great underground city. A rescue party has been sent.”

Eb rubbed his beard, staring hard at the ledger. “Kanmagnus…” he murmured. “I have never heard of such a place.”

Florencia closed her eyes. “This place is too big,” she whispered. “We should go now.”

Matthew turned one more page. The air shifted. Cold, then colder. Almost as if something drew nearer.

“Log Day 830—Bells in the Deep.” Matthew read, slowly. “Odd ringing noises, like bells across the mines. It didn’t matter where you were. It came from every part of the tunnels and echoed. Today our shal’kors broke down a wall. Inside we found another pathway leading to the underground city. It looks long forgotten. No Dwarf is allowed to proceed further until the missing ones are found.”

Matthew whispered, “Bells…ringing everywhere in the dark?”

Florencia’s knuckles whitened around the hilt of her short sword. Eb pressed a hand over his chest as if steadying his heart. Matthew’s lungs felt tight. Whatever stirred below had frightened the Dwarves enough to flee. He turned to the final pages. The ink was smeared. Written in panic. Words jagged and uneven. Matthew almost didn’t want to read it. But he did.

“Log Day 832”

His voice was barely audible as he read.

“Log Day 832. Year 11,000. There is not much time. Anyone who is stupid enough to enter these mines is a skullknotted fool. It is coming. It is coming for us all. We Dwarves flee now to Khazadryn. Whatever is left of us. The bells ring in the dark. The whispers move like wind. The tunnels shake as if something huge crawls behind the walls. It came from the dark below. We are running. It is coming for us all. The others are trapped in Kanmagnus. Flee these mines. If you are reading this, leave. NOW!”

Matthew’s hands trembled as he closed the ledger. His breath felt cold leaving his lungs. Florencia took a slow step back, hand drifting instinctively toward her sword.

Eb whispered, “Oh dear, may Lu protect us…”

Zeen stood backed into the doorway, refusing to enter the study again. Matthew swallowed thickly. He then looked down at his hands. They were shaking. But not from the cold. From knowing they were now walking in the footsteps of an ancient catastrophe. Zeen opened his mouth to demand they leave again. But Matthew cut him off with a sudden cry. The ledger slipped from his hands and slammed onto the stone floor. Matthew fell forward grabbing his cursed arm. A searing, burning pain shot from his wrist up through his upper arm.

Florencia rushed forward immediately. “Matthew? What’s wrong?”

He gasped, dropping to one knee, hand digging into his arm. “It—burns—” he growled through clenched teeth.

Eb stumbled forward next. “What is it? What is it, lad?”

Matthew shook his head violently, breath sharp, sweat forming instantly along his brow despite the cold. He felt something moving under the skin, like black fire crawling through his veins.

Or…something calling to him. A pulse answered from deeper in the mines. Florencia grabbed his shoulders to steady him, her eyes wide with worry.

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BELLS IN THE DEEP

MATTHEW CLUTCHED THE SPOT WHERE THE BLACK DOG HAD BITTEN HIM weeks ago, breathing through clenched teeth.

"You okay?" Florencia's hand pressed against the center of his back, steady and warm despite the chill of the mines.

Matthew forced air into his lungs. "I'm fine," he lied, exhaling shakily. "It…happens."

Eb wheezed beside them, pushing his spectacles up with a trembling hand. "My lad, you must be taken to an infirmary after this. You look drained. This is the second time in a day."

"Did you already forget, Eb?" Matthew muttered, rubbing the spot where the pain had seared through him. "I'm cursed. They can't help me."

Zeen stiffened, the golden glow of his aetheris flame flickering across the stone walls. "Cursed," he repeated, almost whispering the word. "That would explain why Ludwig pulled you aside so many times back at camp."

Matthew nodded, worn and resigned. "Could be a warning. Or nothing at all. I still don't know."

Florencia stepped closer, concern drawing lines in her face. "If it warns you…then warn us. Because right now we need every warning we can get after that mist."

But before Matthew could answer, Zeen lifted his flame higher and looked around the chamber with the unease of a man expecting the walls themselves to crumble. "We should move. Every second we linger in this cursed place makes the hair stand on my arms." He motioned for them to

follow back up the short stairway into the inferno-warm lava chamber. But halfway up, voices erupted—the unmistakable murmur and shuffle of a crowd. Heavy bootsteps. Metal armor clanking. Zeen halted first, nearly stumbling into the orange glow of the lava chamber.

And then all of them saw it.

The refugees of Ardester, dirty-faced, terrified, clinging to one another, poured like a river of frantic bodies through the far archway. Behind them marched Eldorian soldiers, their armor dented and dirt-streaked, their faces pale with exhaustion.

Matthew's breath caught. "Crask…" he whispered. "Of all times, now?" His stomach dropped. Running was impossible now; the moment he sprinted, they'd spot him. And hiding? There was nowhere. The lava chamber was open, stone, barren except for the immense Dwarven statue spewing molten fire. He froze, instincts screaming. Surrendering felt like captivity. But fleeing would only make him look worse. And maybe… maybe he deserved the consequences.

So he stepped back behind Eb and Florencia, head bowed.

Zeen waved desperately to the incoming soldiers. "Over here! Down this way. This path is clear!"

General Ludwig was among them, his eyes scanning the chamber. Iris. Prince Nere. Baron. Several more Matthew recognized by face if not by name. And then Nere's gaze caught him.

"The Elf?" Nere spat, stopping dead in his tracks.

Several soldiers reached for their swords immediately. Zeen raised both hands, stepping between them. "Wait, he helped us escape the red mist. And I was bringing him into custody myself. The old man and the girl, villagers only. Harmless."

Matthew swallowed hard.

Ludwig stepped forward, feathers ruffled, jaw clenched. The look he gave Matthew was…worse than anger.

Disappointment.

Matthew had seen that expression before, but in Lu's eyes. His chest tightened. Matthew slowly raised his hands, palms open. "I'm not running." His voice cracked. "I surrender."

Florencia's eyes widened. But there was nothing she could do, and she knew it. Nere swung off his hippogriff, marching up until he stood nose-to-nose with Matthew. "You will pay for your crime, Elf," he hissed.

Matthew met his gaze without flinching, not defiant, just tired. “I understand.”

A soldier stepped forward and snapped a chain around Matthew’s wrists. Another pulled an aetheris lock collar over his head, the cold band clicking shut around his throat.

Immediately the air changed, thickened. His connection to aetheris vanished. Matthew clenched his jaw, fury stinging behind his ribs. Not at them, at himself. He had sworn to rescue his siblings. Lu had promised guidance. He was supposed to wait for Frey’kro, for further instruction. But now? Shackles. A collar. Surrounded on all sides. Where was Frey’kro?

Soldiers shoved Matthew forward, ordering him to walk. Behind them, the refugees murmured about the red mist, demons, and monsters they saw. Ludwig lifted his voice above the noise. “Escort him. And move the civilians. Once we exit the mountain, we head straight to Rohland, no stops.” The soldiers steered everyone through a corridor of golden stone, past two towering Dwarven statues whose hammers guarded the entrance like twin giants. They pushed the massive doors open. A breathless hush fell. The Hall of Roynar stretched before them, gold-pillared, impossibly vast, a cathedral of ancient Dwarven might.

Ludwig lifted his flame higher. “We rest here momentarily as scouts check the red mist.”

Relief rippled through the villagers. Soldiers lowered packs, mothers sank to the floor with their children, and wounded men slid down the golden pillars with grateful groans. Matthew, however, was shoved against one of the pillars and kept there. The first soldier guarding him spat. A thick, wet glob that ran down Matthew’s cheek.

“Elf freak, by the sovereigns I hope to see you burn,” the man snarled.

Another soldier spat, “You’ll get what you deserve. Murderer.”

Then another, “Spawnless cur,” which was an insult curse towards a coward. A few more soldiers muttered that Elves were all liars, traitors, cowards, and evil. But Matthew didn’t move. Didn’t lift his head. Didn’t wipe the spit away. Maybe this was his penance. Matthew sat slumped, his wrists bound in iron, the aetheris lock collar still cold against the base of his throat.

He said nothing.

He didn’t react when another soldier spat. Or when the second one after him kicked his shin hard enough to bruise. Or when the scattered mutterings

from the crowd behind them became louder, Elf, murderer, traitor, curse-born. He deserved some of it. Not all. But enough that he didn't lift his head when spit struck his cheek for the third time.

Then Zeen finally stepped between him and the soldiers. "That's enough," he barked. "Get back to your posts. I'll watch him."

The nearest soldier scoffed. "Watch him for what? To see if he murders again? We should just kill the Elf now."

"He surrendered," Zeen said sharply.

Another chimed from behind him. "And murderers do that now, do they? Remember what happened last time when General Kael let him in?"

Matthew stayed silent. He let the words soak in. But eventually they drifted off, muttering. Zeen stood in front of him. "Your curse," Zeen said low, worried rather than confrontational. "Is there anything else I should know? Something immediate?"

Matthew lifted his eyes. Shadows slipped across the marble floor in ripples of orange torchlight. They almost looked like fingers. "I'm cursed to die," he murmured.

Zeen blinked. "That's…vague. Can you elaborate?"

Matthew opened his mouth, unsure of where to begin—or if he should bother. But he didn't have time.

Heavy footsteps approached.

Ludwig.

The general's golden Human eyes burned even from across the hall. He made no move to draw his weapon. He didn't shout. He didn't even scowl. He simply stood in front of Matthew.

Matthew braced himself.

But Ludwig walked past him to Zeen. "Keep an eye on him and make sure he is alive," he ordered.

"Yes, sir."

Ludwig then added, nodding toward Matthew without looking at him directly. "Once we are clear of this place, he answers for what he did."

Matthew lowered his eyes.

The villagers huddled near the pillars, wrapped in blankets and clutching children. Some whispered prayers to Lu, Elmira, and Oryneth. A few simply sat in utter silence. The air felt heavy, thick with metal, ash, and breathless dread. Matthew heard every word Ludwig whispered to Nere and Iris across the room.

“Those flesh monsters devoured them entirely,” Iris murmured. “Consumed them.”

Nere grimaced. “Was it aetheris that brought those monsters?”

“No aetheris I’ve ever seen,” Ludwig replied. “Clearly it is from something else. Those beasts, are unlike anything l’ve ever seen in my life. We need to find the cause of it or nowhere will be safe.”

Matthew’s stomach knotted. What had they witnessed? What had they all stumbled into in the red mist? Even the children were quiet. And that was wrong. Children never stayed quiet for this long unless they were too scared to make sound. Matthew rubbed his thumb along the edge of his restraint, slowly, at first, then faster as a new sensation crept under his skin. Wind. But not wind. A whisper. A breath, ghostly and cold, brushing the back of his neck. Matthew jerked upright, searching the hall. But there was no movement.

But his arm, began to burn. Not a sting. Not a throb. A burn.

“What is it, Elf?” Zeen whispered, noticing him tense. “Is it your arm—”

“Yes.”

“Is it warning you?”

“Maybe,” Matthew whispered. “Something’s here.”

Zeen flinched, because the moment Matthew said it, both of them felt it.

A breeze, too cold for a place filled with so many torches, rushed across the marble. Pebbles rattling.

Matthew heard it again. A whisper.

But this time, it didn’t drift behind his ear. It slid through his skull.

And it said, “…leave.”

Matthew stiffened. The mining-ledger’s warnings slammed back into his mind. The tunnels echo though no hammer strikes. Voices answer back…

Loud bell noises ring in the dark…

Whispers moved like wind everywhere…

“What is that?” he hissed.

Zeen’s hand tightened on his sword hilt. “I don’t know. But I feel it too.”

Across the hall, Ludwig paused mid-stride. Even he sensed it, if only faintly, because he suddenly stopped, turned, and scanned the room with narrowed eyes. The villagers murmured uneasily.

“General?” Iris called from near the far pillar. “Did you feel that?”

Ludwig lifted a hand. “Quiet.”

The hall fell utterly still.

And then—

BOOOOOM.

A tremor rippled through the floor. Torches flickered. Several villagers screamed. It wasn’t enough to topple anyone, but enough to jolt every bone awake. Matthew’s arm erupted with heat. Burning. Warning. Something coming.

A metallic roar echoed from the western hall. Not a living roar. Not an animal. A sound like metal tearing free from stone. Every soldier turned. Swords unsheathed, flames of ignis minor rising around the Aetherians’ hands, gold, blue, green—painting the entire hall in trembling color. And then the doors at the far end rattled violently.

“Stand ready!” Ludwig shouted, stepping forward.

Matthew strained to see around the pillar. Something massive dragged itself toward them.

Something—

The doors burst open. What stepped through was no animal. No monster. No demon.

It was a shal’kor. But unlike the small ones upstairs, this one was enormous, fifteen feet tall, thickly plated with gold, its glowing eyes flickering. Its beard, metal and braided, hung down its chest. Scratches and dents covered its body. Steam hissed from cracks along its sides. And its voice buzzed like a failing mechanism:

“INFERNIUM…INFERNIUM…INFERNIUM…”

Children screamed. Villagers scattered. Even soldiers stepped back instinctively. No one dared stop it. No one even seemed to know whether it had spared them or simply failed to notice they were alive. They didn’t understand what it was as they all watched in terror. Matthew didn’t move. He couldn’t. He was frozen, not with fear, but with awe.

The shal’kor staggered. Its legs shook violently, joints rattling. It turned slowly, its head sweeping.

Then it spoke again.

“Visitors…visitors…welcome…to Darlimir…”

A cold gasp rippled through the crowd.

The machine shuddered, its voice cracking. “Arachnids have been exterminated…in the west hall…please be careful.” And it continued walking, limping, straight past them into another hall without a single acknowledgment.

Children hid behind parents.

Even Ludwig looked shaken.

Zeen whispered, “What in Lu’s name…?”

Matthew whispered, “It’s functioning. They’re all still functioning…”

Eb looked pleased, almost childlike, at the sight of the great machine. And yet here it was, still serving a people long dead. The echoes of the shal’kor’s metallic voice had barely faded when two scouts sprinted into the great hall, breathless, pale, eyes wide with something between relief and terror. “GENERAL LUDWIG!” one shouted, stumbling over the marble tiles.

Ludwig turned sharply. “What?”

“The mist—” the soldier gasped. “The red mist, it’s pulled back! It’s gone, sir!” A collective exhale swept through the hall. The mothers burst into tears. Men sagged to their knees in relief. A few of the soldiers clenched their fists and whispered thanks to Lu and Elmira. Matthew felt the burn in his arm quiet, only slightly. Not gone. Never gone. Florencia and Eb shared a relieved look, but Matthew felt something like dread instead.

Ludwig raised his voice. “Pack everything! We move immediately!”

Soldiers sprang to action, gathering villagers, stuffing supplies back into makeshift bags, checking torches and reins. Hippogriffs were brought in from the far chamber, their talons scraping nervously across the marble. They hated this place. Matthew could feel it in the way they jerked and hissed and shook their wings. The group began funneling out of the Great Hall of Roynar, back the way they came, toward the entrance tunnels. The golden doors were pushed open with a grinding groan. Matthew didn’t resist when Zeen tugged him forward by the arm.

“Come on,” Zeen muttered. His voice had changed, not angry now, but tight. Uneasy.

Matthew walked. He didn’t fight it. He felt eyes on him. Not from the villagers. Not even the soldiers. Something else. Something around them he couldn’t put his finger on. Something that mounted with every step upward. They retraced their path through the tunnels, through the narrow sandstone

passages, then steep stone stairs, then another carved hall where broken shal'kors lay scattered across the stone. Some still twitched—gears clicking faintly even though their limbs were shattered. Their eyes were dead, but their bodies flickered as if something had touched them recently.

It made Matthew deeply uncomfortable.

"Keep moving!" Iris ordered the villagers. "Stay close, stay quiet!"

Up ahead, Ludwig, Iris, and Baron all cast ignis minor. Their flames hovered in distinct colors, causing long shadows to ripple along the ceiling as the group ascended. Matthew kept glancing back. Something was wrong, deeply wrong. His arm pulsed again, like it recognized something familiar, something old and odd.

"We're almost near the bridge," Iris called from ahead.

Matthew's boot hit the top step of another shallow stairway when the floor shuddered.

Thrum.

Just a soft vibration. But pebbles rattled. Dust sifted down from the ceiling. Children whimpered. The hippogriffs shrieked and reared back, wings flapping violently.

Ludwig spun. "Everyone stop moving!"

Zeen froze beside Matthew, one hand fisted around the hilt of his blade.

"An earthquake?" a villager whispered.

"No," Iris murmured. "Shut up and be quiet."

Matthew's arm ignited in pain. Burning. Burning. Burning. He gritted his teeth so hard his jaw popped.

"What in the neth'rose is wrong?" Zeen hissed. "What now?"

Matthew shook his head. "Something's coming."

No, awakening. His breath quickened. His heart hammered. There was the faint sound of a whisper that slid through the hall.

Zeen stiffened. "Did you hear—"

He didn't finish. Because from ahead, a second tremor hit.

THRUMMMM.

Harder.

The chandelier in the hall swayed.

Cracks spidered up the wall.

A father clutched his daughter.

Suddenly a bell rang. One toll. Then another. Deep. Metallic. Echoing through every vein of stone in Darlimir.

DONG…DONG…DONG…

Everything stopped. Even the hippogriffs stood rigid. Matthew’s blood turned to ice. The ledger. He remembered the words.

Zeen looked at Matthew in horror. “Tell me this isn’t what the bloody Dwarves meant in that varn ledger!?” Zeen cursed aloud.

Matthew opened his mouth. He didn’t need to answer. Because suddenly, across the hall—

A shape appeared. Floating. Pale. Translucent. A blue aura drifted off its withered body. It was a Dwarf, once. Its beard was long, spectral, barely clinging to its jawbone. Its eyes were hollow pits of darkness. Its mouth hung open in soundless terror, and its body looked withered, as if death had been gnawing on it for centuries.

Matthew’s breath choked. Zeen squinted. “What are you looking at? There’s nothing—”

Then the bell toll shook the cavern again. And dozens, no, hundreds, of other spirits flickered into existence along the halls above and below. Dangling from ledges. Standing in crumbled doorways. Hovering along forgotten walkways. Elves, Dwarves, warriors, miners, some so mangled in death their bodies were twisted wrong. All watching with soundless, open mouths.

Matthew’s voice cracked. “General Ludwig!” he shouted. “We need to go. NOW!”

Ludwig whirled, his flame glowing bright. For the first time since Matthew had met him, Ludwig looked truly afraid. “Everyone move!” he barked. “Go, go, go!”

The villagers didn’t need convincing. They surged forward, pushing past soldiers, scrambling up the stairs. Some of the women sobbed. Men dragged families by the arms.

Zeen grabbed Matthew by the collar. “Move!”

Matthew leaned close, whispering harshly, “I need these chains off!”

“No.” Zeen hissed. “Not happening.”

“Zeen, listen to me!” Matthew snapped. “You want to live? Then you need all the help you can get!”

“You’re cursed, what in the neth’rose can you do to help!”

“Whatever is here, these THINGS don’t care! I’ll let you arrest me again.”

Zeen hesitated. Just long enough. And then he heard it. All of them heard it. Not a bell. Not a whisper.

A scream.

A scream so loud it cracked the stone. So deep the walls shook. There was no mistaking what it was. Not undead. Not any Dwarven ghost. Not an arachnid. This was something else. Something very old. Matthew's eyes widened as a blue light spiraled up from the darkness below, in the pit of the main part of the mines. Circling the cavern like a cyclone of flame.

"It's coming," Matthew whispered. Zeen swallowed. Then he unlocked the chains. The collar snapped off. Matthew gasped, aetheris rushing back into his veins violently, all at once. The scream came again. Closer.

And then—

At the far end of the chamber, a massive shadow crawled into view. Long limbs. Skeletal shape. Blue fire leaping across its body like lightning on bone. It clung to the stone walls, ripping them apart as it climbed, moving impossibly fast for its size, like a spider with too many joints. It pulled itself onto a ledge, and stepped into the torchlight. Matthew felt his blood freeze. The creature was enormous, as big as a house, its body a swirling vortex of black shadow and cracking blue flame. Its face was a massive skull, its jaw unhinged and its Human teeth jagged and uneven. It was wrong. So wrong. And every undead Dwarf and Elf vanished instantly at its presence. Like they feared it. Like they knew it. The creature opened its skull-mouth, and let out a scream that shattered the cavern. The bridge quaked and the torches blew out. Matthew staggered backward grabbing his ears like everyone else.

Nobody breathed. Nobody could.

The villagers stumbled back and clung to each other, too terrified to even think of running. Matthew felt the scream. Felt the brand of the black dog on his arm. It burned white-hot as if answering the monster's screech. He staggered, clapping a hand over the mark, gasping.

Zeen's face went white. "Lu help us…"

Ludwig reacted first. Golden flame burst around his clawed hand as he leapt forward with unnatural speed, feathers trailing behind him. "BOR'RAMU!"

A golden firebolt tore through the air, struck the beast square in the skull, and fizzled like a candle in a storm. There was not even a flicker. The

creature didn’t move. Didn’t flinch. It simply turned its vast, hollow eye sockets toward Ludwig.

Ludwig’s face drained of color. “Oryneth help me,” he said. Then the beast lunged. Its claw, wreathed in blue deathfire, slammed into the stone where Ludwig had just been.

The impact shattered the entire platform, sending Dwarven carvings flying, leaving a crater where the general had stood.

Ludwig reappeared on the opposite staircase with a burst of gale step, panting, shaking, his left shoulder bleeding. He was a Strider like Matthew.

“It’s immune to aetheris!” a soldier screamed.

“Oh drekk,“ Iris cursed from behind him.

“Oryneth almighty,” Baron whimpered beside Iris.

“RETREAT!” Ludwig roared. “Back into the mines! MOVE!”

The villagers didn’t question it, they bolted back across the narrow bridge spanning the chasm. Soldiers herded the terrified mass like cattle running from a wildfire. But the creature didn’t go after them. Its head turned. Slowly. Toward Matthew.

Its empty sockets focused, locking onto him as if he were the only thing in the cavern.

Zeen swallowed. “Why is it staring at you?”

Matthew backed up. One step. Two. “I—I don’t know.” But he did. Deep inside he felt it. The curse. The dog’s bite. The Oblivion flame. The creature knew him. Recognized him. Wanted him. He could feel darkness, the same darkness when he met those shadows in the vision from earlier. Somehow they were related, the shadows, the black dog, and this—this demon. Its jaw cracked open, fissures of blue light splitting down the sides of its skull, revealing a burning abyss inside. And it screamed again, a scream aimed directly at him. The bridge trembled violently. Chunks of stone rained down. A villager slipped, nearly tumbling over the edge before a soldier caught him.

But Matthew froze. Because the creature moved. Fast. Too fast. It lunged straight for him. Blue flame trailing behind like a comet’s tail. Matthew yanked Zeen with him just as the creature’s claws ripped through the floor where they’d been standing. Stone exploded. The ground beneath them collapsed completely.

Screams erupted everywhere.

The entire walkway crumbled, tilting sideways. People scrambled, clinging to handrails, to broken edges, to anything solid, while others, not so lucky, fell into the dark below.

Matthew grabbed Zeen's wrist, but the bridge buckled. "Jump!" Matthew yelled. They leapt onto the next platform, rolling across weathered stone as dust filled the air. Matthew scrambled to his feet in time to see Ludwig sprinting along the upper ledge toward the creature, shouting orders at Iris and Baron.

"Keep the people moving! Don't stop! MOVE!"

More soldiers mounted their hippogriffs, flinging themselves into the vast open cavern, hoping to fire down at the creature, but the creature opened its maw. A thin, precise beam of blue fire shot upward. One heartbeat later, a hippogriff and its rider evaporated into ash. Matthew felt his stomach drop.

It did not burn the man. It erased him.

Zeen grabbed Matthew's shoulder and pulled him down the slanted stone stairway. "Move, Elf! MOVE!"



Ludwig roared, slashing at the monstrous thing to draw its attention. Stone and flame thundered through the ancient Dwarven chambers as the beast shrieked. The rest of the group bolted deeper into the mines, each footstep chased by tremors and smoke. Baron and Iris veered from the fleeing crowd, blades drawn. "We need to help him!" Baron bellowed, racing up the ascending steps.

"Obviously!" Iris cried back, her voice tight with fear. "But what do we do against that? Even aetheris fails to wound it! Regular arrows just go through it."

Baron didn't answer. He only ran. Nere started after them but halted when Iris turned and barked, "Stay with the people prince! Lead them!"

Teeth clenched, but Nere obeyed. He turned to the frightened villagers, shouting commands as he guided them through the winding tunnels. Zeen, and the three companions beside him, followed behind, their shadows flaring against the flickering torchlight.



Down below, they emerged onto a vast balcony carved into the stone. Crumbled statues lined the edges. Above them, shouts rang out, a blur of movement. Matthew looked up just in time to see the creature snatch Baron mid-air. Ludwig dove aside, barely evading the creature's reach. A deep, burning sound echoed through the air as the beast opened its mouth. A torrent of blue flame surged out. Baron screamed. His body erupted in azure light, skin, muscles, and bones vanishing in a flash into the demon's mouth. Nothing remained.

"Frey'kro where are you?" Matthew muttered, but then he noticed Iris. She was already running, too late to turn back. The beast's chest pulsed, and another beam exploded forward, catching her in mid-sprint. For an instant she was suspended in light, then burned to ash. The cavern shook violently, dust and debris raining from above.

"No!" Ludwig's voice cracked through the chaos for everyone to hear. Matthew's heart clenched. The pain hit deeper than he expected. His old comrades, gone before his mind could accept it. He had trained with them, spoke with them, eaten with them. But now they were ash. And he couldn't stop it.

On the far side of the balcony, Nere shouted as he directed the remaining villagers toward a narrow passage beyond the chamber. "Move! Go! Go!"

But before they could reach it, a new sound cut through the stone, a cold, metallic rhythm. Footsteps. From a shadowed hall on the balcony's edge came the clanging of armored boots striking. The air thickened and all

motion stilled. Then, from the darkness, emerged a towering knight clad in black iron. A torn, tattered cape fluttered behind him like dead wings—and a massive greatsword was strapped across his back. He moved slowly, deliberately. The villagers recoiled from him as if another monster had entered.



A young man, blade drawn, blocking the path forward. Silvanus then noticed Eb with strangers, a nantherwin woman, a soldier and an Elf. They stood across the chamber, watching from the opposite side. Above Silvanus, streaks of blue light flared again as more soldiers screamed. He looked up into the beams of destruction, “What…the…rauk.”

Then Eb’s voice cut through the tension. “By the ancients it is… Silvanus! Silvanus! Over here!”

Silvanus turned, slowly, toward Eb. Then toward the Elf. Recognition flickered in his eyes. He looked at the young prince last. “I have no quarrel with you boy,” Silvanus said. “Get out of my way.”

The prince hesitated, still unsure if this was mercy or manipulation, but something in Silvanus’s gaze told him not to test fate. He lowered his blade and barked to the villagers, “Move! Now! Head left!” They ran north, disappearing into the deeper tunnels. Then the beast screamed again. A blast of blue fire crashed down from above, engulfing the central bridge and shattering the stone. Silvanus noticed a Zanari fighting, the general descended through the fire, his body burned and bloodied, right arm missing, his white feathers soaked in blood. With a final push, he used gale step, teleporting from a Dwarven pillar to the balcony just as the creature landed behind the Elf.



“Run,” Zeen cried, pulling Matthew and Florencia forward toward the black knight. The creature, vast, skeletal, descended on its hind legs behind Matthew, flame pouring from its open jaw. It towered above them.

“Move!” Ludwig growled, jumping down and shoving past Zeen, Eb, and Florencia. “Move—go!” Ludwig yelled at Matthew. They ran toward the black knight as the beast roared again and swiped. Ludwig dodged with another gale step, reappearing above on the balcony’s edge. He turned, raising his blade. With a swift angular slash, his sword flared gold, aetheris cutting a radiant arc through the bridge separating them from the great demon. The stone beneath them cracked, groaned, then began to fall. The beast let loose another beam of blue fire, striking the tunnel ahead. Stone shattered. Rubble blocked their escape.

The ground around the black knight began collapsing under his feet. He stood firm, gaze unshaken. Matthew turned and saw the knight drawing his greatsword, and then the knight sprinted forward. “In Oryneth’s name Eb,” the knight cursed, voice deep and sharp as a bell toll, “get the neth’rose out of here!”

He charged.

The creature lunged forward toward Matthew and the rest of the group, mouth wide. But the black knight leapt over everyone with leathery wings unfurling from his back. His sword began to change mid-air, tendrils of dark red muscle writhing over the blade, bloodlike tentacles wriggling as the weapon transformed into something alive.

With a roar, he drove the blade into the beast’s back. The creature shrieked. The scream shattered what was left of the bridge.

Above them, Ludwig watched, stunned the knight could harm the beast. But below, the balcony crumbled. Stone gave way. “Run!” Florencia shouted. They sprinted, the floor falling beneath their feet. Silvanus, locked with the creature, plummeted into the great abyss of the Dwarven mines.

Zeen lost his footing, grabbing the edge of the broken platform. Matthew reached out, but stone cracked.

Florencia acted fast. “Va’nerium!” she screamed.

From her palm, a whip-thin wire of purple flame shot out, latching onto a distant stone column.

It held.

She caught Matthew’s arm just as the ledge beneath him gave way. But Eb vanished with Silvanus and the beast, swallowed by the pit. Zeen clung to the edge, panicking as his grip loosened, but the block crumbled.

“Zeen!” Matthew shouted.

The young soldier met his eyes. Then he fell.

Matthew stared, wide-eyed, frozen. “Let go of me,” he shouted to Florencia.

Florencia looked at him, stunned. “What?!”

“I have to go after them!”

“Are you insane?!”

“I can save them!” his hand slid from hers. He had failed Tina. He had failed his siblings. But he would not watch two more people fall while he lived.

“No! Don’t be foolish!” she cried.

Matthew let go and plummeted into darkness. Wind screamed past his ears, his thoughts lost in the roar of descent. Below, a burst of dark blue flame illuminated the abyss. A massive shape thrashing, roaring in pain. The black knight was atop the creature, sword embedded in its chest now. From both sides, Matthew heard the cries of Zeen and Eb spiraling into the pit with him. He twisted his body toward the stone wall, flattening himself against it. If he timed it right, if he could just push off—

“Crask,” he muttered under his breath. The void stretched on forever. They were falling into Darlimir’s deepest dark. Below, the thick Dwarven pillar rose through the cavern’s center. Blue mist swirled eerily around it, and beyond that, further still, Matthew glimpsed the shadowed floor of what looked like a vast arena, stone archways and winding stairs carved deep into the earth. The creature reared, seizing Silvanus in its clawed grip and hurling him aside. The knight struck a distant wall and fell, vanishing into the blue haze. The creature roared again and jammed its claws into the great Dwarf pillar in the center of this pit, halting its own descent.

Matthew’s body skimmed past the stone surface, and with a burst of aetheris, he activated gale step. He launched toward Zeen, caught him mid-air, then kicked off the wall again, teleporting them both to a narrow stone platform wrapped in a spiral of ancient Dwarven stairs. They crashed hard, tumbling over cracked stone. Mist filled the air, blue, thick, and unnaturally silent. Matthew landed on top of Zeen, the man winded, his eyes wide.

“You alive?” Matthew grunted.

Zeen groaned. “By the neth’rose—my lungs…my spine…”

Matthew pushed himself up, his limbs still shaking from the fall, and scanned the uneven stone around them.“You’re alive. Stop complaining,” Matthew said.

But then he saw it. There, at the base of the broken stairs, Eb’s body lay crumpled, twisted unnaturally against the jagged floor. His robes were torn, one arm splayed out beside him, fingers slack. His chest did not move. Matthew’s heart dropped. “Eb!”

He stumbled forward, nearly falling over loose rock, and dropped to his knees beside the old man. His hands hovered above him, unsure where to touch. Blood streaked the side of Eb’s face where he’d struck the stone, with a pool of blood beneath him, and his eyes were half-lidded, staring into nothing.

Zeen arrived behind him, still limping, breath ragged. He didn’t speak at first. Just stood quietly beside Matthew. He stayed there for a long moment, too long. The air around them was still. Both of their expressions hollow.

Matthew didn’t move. He stared at Eb’s face, his fingers curling around Eb. “Drekk!!!!” Matthew placed a hand gently on Eb’s chest, hoping, stupidly—that maybe he’d feel something beneath it.

A spark. A flicker. Anything. But there was nothing. Eb was gone. The mist curled around them, quiet. Zeen said nothing. The only answer was the shifting of stone in the distance and the occasional distant wail of wind. Though whether that was wind or something else, neither of them could tell anymore.

“There’s nothing we can do,” Zeen whispered. “Like I said before, I can’t bring the dead back. I can only reverse fresh wounds.”

But then a sound shook the cavern again. A dark figure descended through the mist above, landing hard onto the broken stairs below them. The black knight. His armor was battered, plates bent and burned. His

wings were extended from his back, leathery and torn, before folding into shadow and reforming into his shredded cape. His sword still pulsed with corrupted life, red tentacles twitching along its blade.

He stabbed the weapon into the stairs to steady himself, then began climbing, his towering figure approaching Matthew and Zeen.

Zeen stepped back slightly. Matthew stood over Eb's body, jaw tight, tears sliding down.

Silvanus loomed above them now. "Matthew Peregryn?"

Matthew looked up at him, startled. "Yes."

The knight's gauntlet tightened on his blade. "What were you doing in these mines with him?" His voice was low, but sharp with fury.

Matthew opened his mouth, hesitating. "The red mist…it forced us in. We didn't have a choice."

Silvanus narrowed his eyes within his helmet. "Where is she? The little girl. Tina."

Matthew's face fell. "How do you—"

"Answer the varn question!"

"She was taken. By goblins. I tried—"

The knight was already moving. He released his sword, lunged forward, and grabbed Matthew by the throat. With a single motion, he slammed him against the wall. "You let this happen!?"

Matthew gasped, struggling. "I—I didn't—"

"I was sent to put you down, Elf." Silvanus snarled. "RAUK!" Silvanus cursed in fury. "If I'd reached Ardester sooner, if I'd been faster—none of this would've happened!"

Matthew choked out the only thing he could. "I know where they took her!"

Silvanus didn't move.

"To Drearth," Matthew gasped. "They took her to Drearth!"

Still the knight held him, unmoved.

Zeen stepped forward, drawing his blade. "He's telling the truth! I didn't believe him either. But the goblin kidnappings are happening…"

Silvanus's grip loosened. Matthew collapsed onto the ground, coughing, gripping his throat.

"Where is Drearth, you rauking Elf?" the knight growled.

Matthew pushed himself upright. "Southwest of Eldoria. In the Sea of Aethira. My siblings were taken there. That's how I know."

Silvanus clenched his gauntlet into a fist and turned away, staring down at Eb's body.

"Why were you sent to kill me?" Matthew asked quietly.

Silvanus ignored the question, muttering more curses under his breath as he moved past the old man's corpse and descended toward the deeper edge of the colosseum.

Matthew followed hesitantly.

"What is this place?" Zeen whispered. He scanned the towering columns and the many dark halls encircling the arena.

"This is Kanmagnus," Silvanus answered.

Matthew's eyes widened. "That's what they warned us about…"

"We need to leave," Silvanus said grimly. "Now." He moved through an archway into a vast colosseum, identical to the last but wider, deeper. Shadows writhed along its edges.

"We can't just leave Eb here, we have to—" Matthew shouted.

"He's dead, we need to worry about ourselves."

Zeen ran after him. "Is that creature coming back? What even was that thing?"

"It's a da'mirith," Silvanus growled, his voice colder now. "A soul-eating demon. Created long ago by the Nihilkins. Those who are consumed by the demon remain trapped within its domain—forever. That's why we need to rauking move!"

Then came the bells, low, and distant. Echoing through every dark hallway. They looked around. The sound came from all directions, from the black halls circling the arena.

"The demon." Matthew whispered.

"It's coming back! Drekk!" Silvanus cursed again.

"How do you know?!" Zeen shouted, sword drawn.

Matthew didn't answer. His arm burned, searing up to the elbow with pain. Silvanus lifted his greatsword. "You're both rauked," he said. "You have no idea what you've brought upon yourselves."

The scream came again, louder this time. The da'mirith's cry rattled the stone. Matthew turned, voice sharp. "How do we get out of here?!"

The knight spat his answer. "I don't know. I never come this rauking far down."

Then Matthew froze.

In each hallway, pale blue figures began to emerge, ghostly, half-formed. They lined the edges like silent witnesses.

Matthew backed up, eyes wide. “Does anyone else see them?!”

Silvanus turned slowly. “You can see the te’thali?”

“So that’s what those ghosts are…?”

Zeen looked around, confused. “What are you talking about? There’s nothing there!”

A pulse of light flared from one of the halls, brighter, darker, colder. Then the da’mirith emerged. It crawled out of a tunnel with crooked limbs, and moved along the wall like a centipede of shadows, blue fire licking across its limbs. It shrieked, a screeching howl that tore through the colosseum.

Matthew and Zeen stood beside Silvanus, swords drawn.

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DEMON OF VIOLENCE

THE DEMON'S SCREAM TORE THROUGH THE CHAMBERS. SILVANUS BRACED himself, boots grinding into the ancient Dwarven stone as the da'mirith lunged from the broken terrace above. "Get out. Now." His voice boomed across the colosseum.

Matthew and Zeen didn't hesitate. They spun and ran, their footsteps vanishing into the maze of shadowed halls. The da'mirith's body unfolded, skeletal, smoke-wreathed, flames crawling across its bones. Its tail snapped out behind it, forging itself from blue fire and sharpened shadow.

It delivered the first strike with that tail, a whiplash of black-blue flame honed like a blade. Silvanus pivoted, raising his sword. Steel met spectral fire, and the tail severed cleanly, dissolving into black smoke.

The beast didn't even flinch. It spat a volley of blue fireballs—unnatural, spiraling in violent arcs that defied the natural world. They came down like falling stars, detonating along the broken arena floor, ripping stone apart. Silvanus sprinted through the explosions, shards of stone screaming past him. He gritted his teeth. This wasn't a battle, this was punishment. And all because of that Elf he thought.

If he had found him sooner and put him down.

Tina would never have been taken.

Eb might still be alive.

The knight snarled under his helmet, fury sharpening every thought. Now look, Silvanus was here, fighting a varn da'mirith.

The creature roared again, a hollow, cavern-shaking shriek. Its bone limbs elongated unnaturally, arms stretching with audible cracks, claws grinding as it rebalanced itself on all fours.

Then it fired a beam of concentrated blue darkness from its maw. Silvanus dove, feeling the impossible force graze his side as the beam annihilated the wall behind him. The stone didn't crumble, it evaporated.

Perfect.

The beast reared, letting out another scream. Blue flame surged outward, forming a burning circle that swallowed the perimeter of the colosseum, cutting off any escape.

"Wonderful," Silvanus growled.

The undead, te'thali, materialized along the balcony levels above. Their hollow eyes watched him. Their mouths opened, releasing a low collective hum, their eternal lament.

Then the da'mirith lunged.

Silvanus parried once, twice, then severed its right arm, driving backward under the momentum. The severed limb dissolved into embers before it even hit the floor. The beast didn't slow. It swung its other arm. He severed that too. But still, the creature pressed on. Its reformed tail stabbed forward like a spear, forcing Silvanus to roll aside as it cracked stone where his head had been.

"That's enough," he hissed. "Nok'rith!"

Red translucent aetheris flared along his body, his Crimson flame, burning from within. He activated it, power surging through his body with unnatural speed. He dodged between the beast's limbs, slashing where he could, cutting bone, fire, and shadow. For a moment, the da'mirith staggered. Silvanus seized the opening. He drove his sword upward, straight into the soft gap beneath the creature's jaw.

The monster froze. Silvanus roared, wrenching the blade free and slicing downward in a brutal vertical arc. The beast's skull severed, falling with a heavy, hollow clatter before disintegrating into black smoke.

But the victory did not hold.

A violent gust of blue wind erupted outward. It slammed Silvanus backward, hurling him across the chamber until he crashed onto the stone floor and landed against the far wall. Pain rippled through his ribs, his armor cracking upon impact. He forced himself up. The da'mirith's skeletal

body began to peel away, its bones crumbling, its form collapsing, as if it were shedding one layer to reveal something worse beneath.

What remained was a shadow of impossible shape, fluid, twisting, encircled by dark-blue flame. Its movements were no longer bound to any physical anatomy; the thing twisted its own torso as though bone and flesh meant nothing to the creature. It lunged, grabbing Silvanus's helmet and crushing it with inhuman force. Pain seared his skull. Silvanus howled and sliced its arm away, gaining a half-second of freedom. The beast's other hand punched him in the abdomen. He flew. Stone shattered around him as he hit the wall and slid down among the broken tiles, breath knocked from his lungs.

His vision blurred and his armor split apart.

Blood dripped down his jaw. He was going to die.

The da'mirith screamed triumphantly at him. Above, the te'thali echoed its scream with their own twisted chorus. Silvanus lay still, chest burning, vision darkening, and realized the truth:

He could not kill this thing. Not like this. Not as a mere man.

He hated what he was about to do. He hated the Elf even more for forcing his hand, for making him spend years he could never reclaim. "Drekk," he cursed under his breath. "By the neth'rose…if I don't use it, I die."

He planted his sword in the ground and hauled himself upright. He removed his cracked helmet, revealing his pale, blood-smeared face. He closed his eyes. Red aetheris ignited around his head, not as flame, but as a storm. It spread over his entire face, burning without heat, reshaping his face while his armor shifted with him. His cape was reforming as massive, leathered wings—shadowy and monstrous like before. His missing helmet no longer mattered; his face itself dissolved into a floating skull wreathed in red fire.

The te'thali shrieked as one. Their hollow voices declared the name he loathed:

"Tharrok. Tharrok, Demon of Violence."

Silvanus—Tharrok—his Oathracki form, he looked up and roared. The first wave of te'thali dove toward him to defend their master, spectral blades raised. Silvanus swung once—an effortless, horizontal arc. The tendrils on his sword lashed outward, slicing a dozen wraiths in one sweep.

More descended.

He launched upward with his wings pushing him up, then crashed down with tremendous force. His sword plunged into the stone. From the ground burst a mass of blood-red tendrils, piercing, tearing, ripping through hundreds of undead as if they were mist. The da’mirith shrieked—an echo of fear. Then it charged, lunging with its claws as Silvanus ran under the beast.

Silvanus surged upward again, wings slicing the air, and drove into the beast with unstoppable force. His blade plunged into its chest. He pushed upward, lifting the demon with him, slamming it into the cavern ceiling. A muffled scream trembled through the stone. Silvanus tightened his grip, and unleashed everything. Red bloody tendrils detonated from within the da’mirith, exploding outward.

Dark blood vaporized.

Blue fire sputtered and died.

The cavern shook, raining dust and gravel. And the monster fell. Tharrok glided down with his wings, landing on the stone, his sword burying itself beside him. He knelt there, wings sagging, breath raw. The dead stared from every ledge, hundreds of te’thali horrified into silence. He lifted his skull and roared back at them, a sound that rattled their spectral forms.

Then they charged at him.



The roar that ripped through the cavern didn’t sound mortal. Matthew ran through the half-formed streets of the underground ruin with Zeen, every step pounding. The air grew thicker the deeper they went, the blue mist crowding their throats. “Keep running!” Matthew barked, breath ragged.

“But that knight—!” Zeen coughed.

Matthew didn’t slow. He didn’t even look back. “Who cares about him! He was just trying to kill me!”

Another roar thundered down the tunnel, shaking the city dust loose from the carved ceilings. A rumbling shockwave followed a heartbeat later, buckling the path beneath Matthew’s feet. Silvanus must be fighting the beast. Matthew did not know which monster he feared more.

The cavern city opened around them, an impossible, haunting maze stretching along a deep, cold canyon. Crumbling battlements rose from cliffsides. A dark blue river wound through the abyss below, glowing faintly with ghostlight. Matthew stared over the railings as he ran. Te’thali, those dead, withered spirits—floated through the waters like drifting corpses, pulled along the current without resistance. Others hovered silently among shattered homes and collapsed towers, their mouths gaping wide in eternal, silent screams.

“What…in the sovereigns’ names…is this place?” Zeen rasped.

Matthew didn’t have an answer. He didn’t think anyone living did. But the deeper they moved, the heavier the air became. Something unseen pressed on Matthew’s chest, pushed into his thoughts, curled cold fingers around the edge of his hearing. “Don’t look at them,” Matthew muttered, though he wasn’t sure why he said it or who he was saying it to.

Dozens of te’thali perched on ledges overhead. Dozens more lined the walls at their sides, hovering close enough that Matthew felt the cold lift of their breath on his neck. Their hollow eyes never blinked. Their mouths never closed. They just watched. Matthew didn’t dare slow down. He could feel their hunger, the way the undead leaned toward him as if sensing the burning curse on his arm. Then the humming began. Low at first, then growing with every step. Dozens of voices humming in unison. It set every hair on his neck standing up.

The humming grew louder, until it filled the ruins. Matthew’s left arm burned, the bite mark searing his skin. His breath hitched painfully. Every instinct in him screamed that something was coming.

Then a withered Elven spirit drifted out of a broken archway, its long hair sweeping weightlessly behind it and its jaw unhinged into an oval void. Before Matthew could swing, the ghost seized Zeen by the throat with a spectral blue hand.

Zeen didn’t even see it, he saw nothing. His legs kicked wildly as he was lifted into the air, his fingers clawing at nothing. “Something’s choking

me…Matthew…MATTHEW!”

Matthew’s sword flashed through the air, straight through the ghost. No resistance, damage, or effect. “Crask!” Matthew swung again, and again, wild, desperate. His blade sliced through empty air. The ghost didn’t even look at him. It only opened its mouth wider, the dark-blue hollow within connecting directly to Zeen’s face like a funnel.

Zeen’s body jerked. His mouth stretched open in a silent scream as a stream of blue light poured from him into the creature’s maw.

“NO!” Matthew roared. He tackled the ghost, but he went right through it, falling onto stone as Zeen’s body went limp in the creature’s grip. But another spirit grabbed Matthew by the neck forcing him onto the ground. It was cold, intangible, he felt the pull immediately, felt the cold pouring into him. His vision tinted blue, the world warping at the edges.

He felt his life draining. He felt his strength slipping away. He felt, empty. “So this is how I die…?” he thought numbly. He wasn’t meant to die here. His visions showed something else. Something worse. Something inevitable. This wasn’t it, so why?

But a massive shadow slammed between him and the te’thali. A black shape tore the spirit off him with one sword, his tendril red blade of metal and flesh. The undead shrieked in pain. Matthew blinked hard, breath returning, vision clearing, and saw it towering over him: a skull-headed knight. Red flame around the skull face. Wings like a demon.

Matthew froze on the ground, heart pounding.

Was that—that monster—him?

He didn’t have time to understand it. The skull knight grabbed the undead choking Zeen, ripped it away with one brutal motion, and sliced it in half with a sweep of his sword. The ghost split into burning fragments, evaporating in a painful shriek. Dozens of others charged. The skull knight roared back. His sword carved through te’thali that vaporized every ghost that dared come close.

Matthew scrambled to Zeen, breath shaking, pulling the limp man into his arms. “Zeen—Zeen—come on…come on…” He placed an ear to his chest. A heartbeat. Weak. But alive. “Thank Lu,” Matthew whispered. The skull knight stepped heavily beside him, the ground trembling as the monstrous wings folded and the flames recoiled. The demon slowly straightened, the red fire dimming, his skull shifting back into a face, ashen, exhausted, blood streaking down his cheek.

It was Silvanus. He staggered, swaying. “Take…him…” Silvanus growled. Matthew threw Zeen over his shoulder. His legs screamed under the weight, knees nearly buckling. But he held. Silvanus pointed toward a shadowed hallway. “Run. Now.”

Matthew sprinted for the passage. His feet pounded uneven stone, slipping in loose rubble, lungs burning. Behind him, he heard Silvanus stumbling after him, metal plating dragging. Matthew risked a glance back. The knight was staggering, leaning on the wall with one hand while clutching his enormous blade in the other. His armor was dented, cracked, nearly shattered. His steps were heavy, like he carried more weight than should exist.

But he was alive. And he was following. Matthew swallowed hard. “Where do we go? This tunnel, what’s down here?”

Silvanus gritted his teeth. “Just move. I’ll tell you when we’re safe.”

As if sensing the knight’s weakening, the cavern filled with whispers again, echoing coldly through the stone. The te’thali were following. Matthew didn’t need to see them to know. Then Silvanus rasped a spell under his breath, “Ignis minor,” a red flame flickered to life around his hand, illuminating the tunnel in bloody light. They reached the end of the tunnel. A chamber with carved pillars and two circular stone doors framing the far wall. Matthew stopped, chest heaving.

Behind them, the undead shrieks grew sharper, closer.

Matthew didn’t know why he knew what to do next. But the burning in his arm flared, white-hot, and something tugged inside his mind. A whisper. “Matthew…Matthew…to your left. Go left. The door. Through it.” It was Frey’kro. The voice was faint, strained, as if reaching him through the chamber.

Matthew spun, pointing. “That way! We go that way!”

Silvanus didn’t question it. He shoved past, slamming his shoulder into the circular stone door on the left. It groaned but opened, scraping along the floor. They rushed in. Ghostly blue shapes surged into the chamber behind them, hovering, reaching, but none crossed the threshold. Something unseen stopped them. The undead froze mid-air. Dozens of hollow eyes stared at them from the doorway as a cold mist wafted off their bodies. But they did not enter.

Matthew and Silvanus backed away…and the great door slammed shut on its own. Silvanus’s eyes sharpened beneath the sweat and blood.

Matthew stood speechless. “Why aren’t they entering?”

Silvanus didn’t answer.

Matthew swallowed. Ahead, a pale light poured into the cavern. Matthew gently laid Zeen against a rock. Then turned and walked forward, slowly, cautiously, toward a ledge that opened into a massive underground abyss. Moonlight filtered through a crack far above, its silver glow painting the canyon walls.

And directly across the gap…stood a stone fortress stretching from one side of the cavern to the other. Massive, silent, and ancient.

Six colossal statues of werewolves lined its front, three on each side, each gripping a sword pointed downward, as if guarding whatever slept within. Silvanus stopped and leaned beside a stone tablet carved into the wall. Strange symbols, runes Matthew had seen on the shal’kors. The symbols were carved all over the tablet. But one word stood above them all, carved deep into the stone in their language.

Ek’sheera.

Matthew’s breath left his lungs.

This was it.

The relic Lu told him he needed. But why now? Why after nearly dying a dozen times? Where was Frey’kro? Why hadn’t he appeared like he promised? Did something happen?

Matthew stepped forward, staring at the titanic hall across the canyon, awe and dread tightening in his chest. This place felt ancient. Older than the Dwarves of Darlimir. Older than the Elves. Older than anything he could ever imagine.

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THE TEMPLE OF EK'SHEERA

MATTHEW HEARD ZEEN RASPING. HE SPUN AROUND AND RAN TO HIM AND crouched beside him. "Zeen? Zeen."

A soft groan escaped Zeen, but his eyelids didn't lift. Not properly. Only a flicker. His pupils, once dark, were now washed into a cloudy blue haze, unfocused, shifting in the wrong directions when he tried to turn his head. Matthew swallowed hard.

"Matthew?" Zeen whispered hoarsely. "Where…where are we?"

Matthew swallowed. His own voice came out quieter than he meant. "We're…still in the mines. But we're safe for the moment."

Behind him, Silvanus limped along the cliff-side ledge, armor clacking with every agitated step, sword dragging as he grabbed at his armor. The black knight stood, blood drying on his armor, white hair dragged by the cold subterranean breeze. "By Lu's bones, we're trapped in here," Silvanus hissed, gaze sweeping the abyss as though searching for a crack that wasn't there.

"At least we're safe from those demons," Matthew muttered back over his shoulder, though even as he said it, dread curled in his stomach.

"Shut your bloody mouth, Elf." Silvanus muttered, he didn't turn. His voice echoed off the dark walls. Matthew watched him warily, every instinct in him braced. This was the same man who choked Matthew in the air and swore to kill him. The same man who transformed into a skull-headed demon to battle the da'mirith. A man with that kind of power could change his mind again at any moment.

Matthew drew a slow breath, trying to steady himself. His thoughts drifted painfully, back to Eb, who had fallen to his death; to Florencia, who had been last seen scrambling for safety above. Everything in him felt heavy, sagging with guilt and exhaustion and helplessness. It all happened so quickly. Eb's death hurt worst of all.

What am I doing? What do I even do now? But instantly, he forced those thoughts away. He couldn't afford to unravel, he was here at the temple, this is where the relic is, this is how he saves his siblings. But first he needed answers. He cleared his throat and wiped away the tears for Eb and called toward the knight. "Who are you?"

Silvanus didn't answer. He only sat on a rock, leaned on his greatsword, and pulled a squat round flask from his belt, uncorked it with a practiced flick, and took a long drink. The liquid barely wet his lips before the bottle wheezed empty. "Curse this bottle," the knight snarled, tossing it over the cliffside. The sound of the flask hitting the abyss was swallowed instantly by darkness.

Matthew tried again. "Why did you say earlier that you 'should have killed me'? Why? What do you want from me?"

Silvanus finally looked up. His eyes, in the dimness, were dark."Just shut up." Silvanus said, voice tinged with exhaustion.

"Tell me," Matthew snapped. "Any reasonable person would want to know why you wanted to murder me."

Silvanus leaned back, stretching his legs, setting his blade up against the rock—and he stared at Matthew with an expression too old and worn for his youthful face. "Well," he murmured, "it doesn't matter anymore. I have no need of killing you…at least for now."

Matthew's hands curled into fists. "Like I'm supposed to just believe that? You expect me to believe you changed your mind that easily?"

"If I wanted to kill you," Silvanus said, so casually it chilled the blood —"I would have left you for the te'thali. But now," he rose, rolling his shoulders, armor scraping—"you are going to be my guide."

"Your what?" Matthew recoiled. "I'm not guiding you anywhere."

"Yes, by the rauking sovereigns you are," Silvanus growled. "You're taking me to this drekking land you mentioned. Drearth."

Matthew blinked. "Why?"

"Why?" Silvanus let out a joyless laugh. "Because Drearth is where they took Tina, isn't that what you said? That's where the goblins took the

girl. So that's where we're going."

Matthew's throat tightened at the mention of Tina again. He remembered her scream as they dragged her away. How she vanished into the green mist, because of that demon-masked creature who knew him. He'd failed, just like before. "And if I refuse?" he asked quietly.

Silvanus's eyes narrowed. "You owe Eb. Make no mistake, Elf. Everything that's happened. The old man and the girl are blood on your hands."

Matthew's jaw clenched. "I didn't kill Eb. I tried—"

Silvanus cut him off with a sharp gesture. "Shut the rauk up," the knight said coldly, "you are the only reason they are gone. And it was my fault I didn't put you down." Silvanus looked over at the cliff's edge, scanning the canyon."Drekk, it doesn't even work here…"

Matthew stiffened. "What doesn't work?"

Silvanus ignored him.

Matthew pressed. "That thing you turned into earlier? The skull, wings, whatever that was? Are you saying you can't transform into that… monster?"

"Stop asking questions." The knight's tone sharpened. "You're already irritating enough."

Matthew scoffed. "Are you cursed?"

Silvanus chuckled, low and humorless. "Cursed? That's one word for it."

Before Matthew could respond, Zeen groaned again. Matthew whipped around, immediately crouching next to him. "Zeen. Are you alright?"

Zeen's breathing hitched, "Matthew?" His trembling hands clawed at his face. "Matthew. I can't…I can't see."

Matthew's stomach sank to his feet. "It's probably temporary," Matthew said, though he did not believe it. "A side effect from the te'thali."

"No," Silvanus said flatly, walking up behind Matthew "He's blind, just look at him. The te'thali tried draining his soul, but they failed and only took his sight."

Zeen began to sob.

"It'll be alright," Matthew tried weakly. "We'll figure this out. We need to reach the Eldorian soldiers and Ludwig can help."

"Rauk!!!" Zeen cursed loudly. "By the sovereigns. They won't accept me…" Zeen's broken voice cracked.

“What are you talking about? You’re a soldier for Eldoria, they won’t just throw you away. You’re an Aetherian. You’re valuable.” Matthew said, trying to steady him.

“Eldoria won’t take back a blind rauking nantherwin. I’ll bring shame to my house that adopted me. They’ll all say they were right about nantherwins—that we’re weak…that I am weak…that I don’t belong…I failed my family. How am I supposed to be a proper soldier? I can’t DREKKING see!!!” His words dissolved into more tears.

Matthew reached for Zeen’s arm, trying to steady him, when Silvanus suddenly stepped forward, Matthew noticed the greatsword in his hand. “What are you doing?!” Matthew shouted.

Silvanus pointed the massive blade inches from Zeen’s face. “We should put the dog out of his misery,” the knight said with chilling calm. “He’ll be dead weight. It would be better to kill him—than for the te’thali to devour the rest of his soul. Then to have him be trapped here.”

“He’s alive!” Matthew yelled. “He can still walk!”

“Blind,” Silvanus countered. “In this place? He is already dead.”

Zeen’s voice trembled.

“No!” Matthew shouted. “Not here. Not like this. If Zeen chooses death later, that is his choice, but not until we’re out of these cursed mines!”

Zeen sniffed, terrified.

Silvanus considered Matthew for a beat…then slammed his sword down—not into Zeen, but into the stone beside his ear.

A warning.

Matthew exhaled shakily. Silvanus sheathed his blade on his back. “Understand this, Elf,” he said, voice dropping to a low growl. “The only reason your head is still on your shoulders is because you claim to know where Tina is.”

Matthew clenched his jaw.

“And if she is dead…” Silvanus stepped close enough for Matthew to feel his breath, “I will peel you apart, bone by bone.” He gripped Matthew’s arm, tight enough to bruise, and then let go.

Matthew steadied himself and watched Silvanus walk away. But something caught Matthew’s attention, half-buried in dust and lichen, jutting from the stone near the rim. A vertical slab, more like a standing stone than part of the wall, tilted slightly as though the earth had tried to swallow it over the years. The same symbols he had seen on the shal’kors.

He stepped closer, brushing dirt and moss away with his fingers. Words revealed themselves, ancient common, formal and old, like something copied out of a forgotten scripture. He read aloud, voice low.

The path ahead is hidden in mist,
yet truth is the key to all things.
Ask, and the echoes shall answer.
Seek, and the way shall reveal itself.
Knock, and the gate will open,
but only to those who walk seeking truth.
The blind who see not the truth
shall wander in darkness.
The one who dares to knock—
shall find the bridge unseen,
crossing the abyss where none dare walk.
Speak the answer, and the abyss shall grant passage.

Matthew stared at the last line, heart thudding.

Behind him, Silvanus growled, “What is that?”

“It’s a riddle,” Matthew said, still studying the stone. “A key of sorts.”

“We don’t need riddles. We need an exit. The doors are shut, and I can’t fly us out of here.” Silvanus shouted. But then he muttered, “There must be some sort of restriction for people like me.”

“If we go back out there,” Matthew said, gesturing toward the sealed doors, “we’re walking back into the te’thali…and maybe another da’mirith. With a blind man. You really want to bet on that?”

Silvanus glared, but he didn’t argue.

Matthew read the riddle again, thoughts racing. The blind, the one who knocks, the one who seeks. Truth. Mist. Gate. Bridge. His curse-burned arm throbbed again, hot under the fabric. Matthew licked his lips, speaking in his head rather than out loud. “Oryneth,” he thought. “The father sovereign.”

Matthew swallowed and drew himself up.

“The answer is the Father Sovereign,” he said, voice echoing faintly. “Oryneth.”

The cavern answered.

A low boom rolled up from the darkness below, a buried thunder. Dust shook loose from the ceiling. The entire ledge trembled beneath their feet. Silvanus spun toward the canyon just as the stone began to shift. From the

depths, something massive and narrow rose. A long spine of rock with pale sigils, emerging from the void. The tip of it met their ledge with a grinding jolt, then continued, arching gracefully across to connect with the opposite rim before settling in place.

A narrow bridge.

Silvanus snorted. “Well. I’ll be varnd,” he walked to the start of the bridge, stomped once to test its stability, then strode out without hesitation. The massive knight barely seemed bothered by the dizzying drop yawning on either side.

Matthew exhaled, shaky relief mixing with fresh anxiety. He turned back to Zeen. “Ready?” he asked gently.

Zeen gave a weak nod. Matthew helped him up, moving slowly until Zeen had both feet under him. The young soldier swayed slightly, hands groping for purchase. Matthew took his hand and placed it on his own shoulder. “Hold on to me,” Matthew said. “One step at a time. Don’t rush.”

“I can’t see anything anyway,” Zeen muttered.

Matthew didn’t look down as they stepped onto the bridge. The stone was cool and faintly damp under his boots. The air rose from the chasm below, thin and cold. But eventually the far ledge rose up beneath them, welcome and solid. Zeen’s boots hit rock. Silvanus stood waiting near the black archway, arms crossed, expression unreadable. The werewolf statues loomed overhead, each one twice the height of a house, fanged muzzles lowered, eyes carved to stare eternally at the cavern. The stone swords they held were bigger than trees.

Matthew shivered. “Who built this?” he whispered.

“It doesn’t matter,” Silvanus muttered. “Let’s move.”

The archway was an opening of perfect black. No torchlight. No glimmering crystals. Just darkness. Silvanus stepped into it as if it were nothing more than a doorway to a cellar. Matthew tightened his grip on Zeen’s arm and followed. The instant his foot crossed the threshold, the temperature plummeted. The air in the tunnel was dead-still, thick with dust and something else—an old, metallic tang that reminded him of forgotten blood. Silvanus muttered under his breath, “Ignis minor,” and red aetheris flared around his left hand. The flame burned…but the light didn’t spread far. It stopped a few feet from his hand, swallowed by the surrounding void. “This place suppresses aetheris,” Silvanus growled. “Drekk.”

Matthew glanced back over his shoulder. The entrance behind them was shrinking. Or rather, the light from it was. It dimmed, until only darkness remained. In heartbeats, it was gone. Only darkness remained.

“Silvanus?” Matthew whispered. “Zeen?”

But there was no answer. His fingers clutched at air. Zeen’s arm vanished. The faint clank of Silvanus’s armor was gone. The knight’s dim red flame blinked out as if snuffed.

He was suddenly alone.

He tried to move, took one blind step forward, and the darkness peeled away. He stood in a different room. A circular chamber. Stone floor slick as still water beneath his boots, rippling with his steps. Pillars rose on either side, leading to a small staircase ahead. At the top of the stairs was a tall stone door etched with the snout of a werewolf and a sigil he didn’t recognize.

Faint, cold light leaked in through narrow slits in the walls, like high windows he couldn’t see. Matthew’s heart pounded.

“Zeen?” he called. “Silvanus?”

Nothing. Not even an echo. Then a voice spoke. Not Frey’kro. Much deeper.

“You.”

Matthew turned in a slow circle, but there was no one there.

“You, young mortal,” the voice growled. “I see into you. I see what you are, cursed Elf.”

Matthew clenched his jaw.

“You seek power forged in light,” the voice continued. “Power made by the Heliorens. You come to Ek’sheera’s door. You think you deserve what you ask for?”

Matthew straightened his back. “I seek the relic,” he said firmly. His voice sounded small in the large chamber. “I was sent by Lu himself. Guided by Apostle Frey’kro.”

“Lu,” the voice rumbled. “The Whale of the Deep?” A low sound that might have been amusement echoed from everywhere and nowhere.

“Why do you seek this relic, Matthew Peregryn?”

Matthew hesitated. The voice knew his name. Who was this voice? What did it want? A demon? Matthew then thought about it—it would be so easy to say, because Lu told him to. To lean only on that. But the voice felt like it could smell lies. “I was told I must…and,” Matthew added quietly,

“because my siblings were taken. By goblins. And another child was taken too. If there’s any chance this relic helps me save them, I’ll take it.”

The chamber was silent a moment longer.

“Better,” the voice said at last. “But words are only wind in the mouth. Many mortals swear to serve the Heliorens. Until the Nihilkins offer them comfort, revenge, power, or even escape from suffering. You speak of sovereigns, of faith, of duty. Yet you are already cursed. Tainted. Marked by the Nihilkins.”

Matthew’s bitten arm flared with heat, as if in answer.

The voice pressed on. “Those who bear the Luminarch relics and turn from the light are unmade. Cast into the Neth’rose, devoured forever. Do you understand what you ask for, mortal? Do you understand the weight you wish to carry?”

Matthew’s throat felt dry. He thought of the black dog. Of the shadows. Of the visions of his own death. He thought of Elara calling for him. Finn’s small hand slipping from his fingers. Tina screaming. He thought of Eb’s laugh, and then Eb’s body. He drew a breath. “Yes,” Matthew said. His voice trembled, but he didn’t look away from the unseen presence. “I don’t want the Neth’rose. I’ll serve the Heliorens until the end. If they give me a task—” Matthew hesitated on his words for a moment. Would he do anything the Sovereigns of Light asked? Would he really? Or did he only do it because it benefited him?

No.

He does want to do what was right, especially if it means protecting others and saving those he loves. “If they give me a task…I will do my best to see it through.”

The voice was quiet for a long moment. Then it spoke slowly,“Interesting. Very Interesting Matthew Peregryn. Frey’kro has spoken for you. But it is not the apostle who decides. Nor even Lu. They know this.” His voice rose with power, “I am Ek’sheera. I judge who may bear my gift. You will prove yourself, Matthew Peregryn. Prove that, when the dark offers you what you most desire, you do not bend.”

The door at the top of the stairs rumbled. Stone grated as it rose slowly into the ceiling, revealing another chamber beyond, shrouded in dim light.

“Go,” the voice commanded. “Let us see if you are the one. Or if you are just another liar.”

Matthew’s heart pounded against his ribs, but his legs moved anyway. One step. Then another. He climbed the short flight of stairs and walked through the doorway into the trial. The door dropped behind him with a thunderous slam.

Darkness. But different. Here, the dark felt thicker, denser, as if it wrapped itself around him like a cloak. Then the floor beneath him shimmered to life, glowing faint blue patterns radiating outward in a slow pulse. As the light spread, the room emerged, a vast hall, edged by tall pillars, windows filled with blinding white light on either side. No benches. No altars. Nothing but the watery floor, with a pale glow. It resembled the Lumanian church back in Liora.

Matthew stepped forward uneasily. But that was when something stepped out from behind one of the pillars.

Himself. Or…something shaped like him.

A shadow Matthew. Its form was pitch black, body rippling like a silhouette of smoke. Gold eyes gleamed in its face. It was like the black dog. Its presence was familiar to him. And in its hand, a sword identical to Matthew’s Khazadryn blade, except forged entirely of living shadow.

The voice whispered, “Kill or be killed.”

Then the shadow smiled. A cruel, hollow imitation of his own smirk. The dog’s smile.

It charged without hesitation. Matthew drew his sword, barely in time. Steel clashed with shadow with a crack that burst through the hall. The force drove Matthew backward, boots skidding on the glowing floor.

The shadow laughed. “Do you really think,” it taunted, voice an echoing mockery, “that you can save anyone?”

Matthew gritted his teeth, blocking a flurry of rapid attacks. He could feel the blows numbing his arms, reverberating through his bones.

“You lost Elara. Lost Finn. Became a murderer. You lost Tina. You killed Eb.”

“No,” Matthew snarled, parrying desperately.

“You failed,” the shadow sneered. “You’re nothing. Just a cursed Elf pretending he matters. You deserve to die.”

Every swing was faster than the last, the shadow blade hacking at Matthew with uncanny speed. He barely managed to deflect each blow, stumbling back, lungs burning. He couldn’t land a single hit. Not one.

The shadow circled him like a wolf stalking its weaker twin.

“You don’t fight for the light.” Its grin widened. “You fight to feel important. You fight to pretend you’re not a coward.”

Matthew roared, breath ragged. He swung wildly, but the shadow melted out of range, its form bending unnaturally.

“Pathetic,” the copy hissed.

Matthew hit the floor hard, the shock rattling up his arms. His vision blurred. The shadow loomed over him, blade angled down.

And suddenly, it wasn’t the shadow standing there.

It was that Eldorian soldier on the docks, the one Matthew murdered.

Pete.

The boy’s eyes were wide and accusing, blood pooling at his chest. “Why did you have to run away? Why did you murder me?” the boy whispered.

Matthew’s stomach churned.

“It was an accident,” Matthew croaked. “I didn’t mean—”

“Just like you didn’t mean to lose Elara? Or Finn? Or Tina?”

The blade hovered above him.

“Just like you murdered Eb?”

Matthew froze. But then he snapped. He wasn’t going to play this shadow’s games. He shoved himself up with a guttural yell, sword slashing in a wild arc. Not out of fear, out of refusal. Out of defiance. He remembered Greg’s words on the ship: “If you don’t have the hunger to kill. Then you can’t save anyone or yourself.”

He remembered the hunger, the drive when fighting the goblins to protect Tina. He remembered his siblings. He wasn’t dying here. Not like this. His sword flew, shadow-steel clanged loud enough to crack the air, and for the first time, the shadow stumbled.

Its voice wavered. “What…what is this?”

Matthew pressed forward, adrenaline burning in his blood, blocking a downward slice and shoving the shadow away.

“You’re wrong,” Matthew panted. “I’m not nothing. And I’m not losing anyone else.”

He moved faster now, each strike driven by purpose, by rage, by desperate hope, and refusal to break. He had to kill this shadow. The shadow backpedaled, its once-fluid form jerking awkwardly.

“You can’t win.” it hissed. “You can’t stop what is coming.”

Matthew dodged left, swung right, the blade scraping along the shadow's side with a flash of light.

The shadow screamed. A raw, distorted wail.

Matthew didn't answer. He didn't think. He moved. Blocked. Stepped behind, and drove his blade straight through his own dark reflection. The shadow shrieked, dissolving into smoke. The black vapor twisted upward, then vanished entirely into the dim ceiling. Matthew fell to one knee, chest heaving. His hands shook. Sweat dripped from his chin.

He did it.

He actually did it.

A round door at the back of the hall slid open.

Matthew stood and approached, sword sheathed, legs still trembling. He stepped inside. It was a sanctum. A sacred chamber carved with spiraling patterns of silver and gold. Marble pillars rose like tree trunks, and in the center stood a pedestal, holding a glowing white orb swirling like a miniature sun caught in snow. The air buzzed around the relic.

And then, footsteps.

The black dog emerged from behind the pedestal. The hound wasn't dead. Its golden eyes pulsed. Its voice was like splitting wood. "Hello… Matthew." The dog padded forward, teeth bared in a hideous grin. "You seek the relic of Ek'sheera." It chuckled. "If you want the relic, you must bow to the kings. It is the only way."

Matthew unsheathed his sword instantly. "I'll kill you," he spat. He charged and swung. But the blade passed through the animal like smoke. Before he could react, the dog barked, a concussive explosion, and Matthew was hurled across the chamber, slamming onto the stone floor.

Pain flared up his spine. His sword clattered away. The dog approached slowly, savoring each step. "If you want the relic," it repeated, "you must bow to the kings. Do you not care for Elara and Finn? Do you not long to return to Liora, where you belong? Do you not want this nightmare to end? Do you not want to meet Greg again? Your family? It is simple, Matthew."

Matthew's breath shook. He did want to go home. More than anything now. The dog was right. Matthew felt the temptation like a hook in his chest. "Yes…" he whispered. "Of course I do."

"Then take it," the dog crooned. "It is yours. You deserve it. Ask only for their blessing."

Matthew got up walking past the dog and stared at the relic. At the salvation he wanted more than anything. His hand trembled. His heart screamed. This relic would allow him to save Elara and Finn, to return home. But a memory bloomed behind his eyes as he reached. Lu's voice in the cavern. Frey'kro's guidance. Truth rising in him. Understanding struck him. This was a test. Matthew paused just a few steps away from the relic. He gently lowered his arm and clenched his fists in realization. "No, I can't." he said softly.

The dog's snarl was immediate. "What did you say?"

"I said no," Matthew growled. "I know who I serve. But this…this is clearly a trick."

The dog roared with a fury of curses, panic, and rage. "Then I will rip the truth from your corpse! I'll RAUKING KILL YOU!!!!"

The dog charged and lunged into the air. The impact crushed Matthew onto his back. Its jaws opened wide, not like a dog's, but like the demon it was, jaw splitting impossibly far, blossoming like a flower with teeth as it prepared to tear his face off.

"IT WOULD BE AN HONOR," the creature shrieked, "TO END YOU FOR THE NIHILKINS—"

But a bestial figure with black fur moved like a shadow. A sword flashed and impaled the demon straight through the gut. The dog howled, a sound so shrill it rattled the chamber, and dissolved into black smoke above Matthew. Matthew pushed himself up just in time to see the figure stepping forward. Not a dog. Not a monster.

A werewolf.

The beast had black fur. Gleaming armor. Ancient Human eyes that held both sorrow and wisdom. Its voice was deep, resonant, nothing like the demonic growl from before. "You have done well, Elf. You have proven your strength against that dog during your sword duel with it. Your loyalty just now. And your refusal to bow to the Nihilkins."

Matthew stared in shock. "You…you're Ek'sheera."

The werewolf nodded. "And that demon, the salrot, is vanquished. Banished back to its masters, the Nihilkins. He will trouble you no longer. You beat him, and I ended him."

Matthew tried to steady his breathing as the werewolf approached the pedestal.

“You are worthy, but that does not remove the Oblivion flame sadly. You are still cursed,” Ek’sheera continued. “You will need this relic for what is coming. Follow the path ahead. Then the relic will lead you to Ishd’kar. Frey’kro awaits you atop the bridge of the Salfer Mountains.”

Matthew’s stomach dropped, “The Salfer Mountains?”

“It has been nine days now, Matthew,” Ek’sheera said softly. “Time does not flow the same in this sacred chamber.”

Nine days. Matthew staggered. Nine days gone? While everything above the mines continued unraveling?

“You must go now, Matthew,” Ek’sheera said gently. “Take the relic. And be strong, the end is near.” The werewolf touched the orb. Its form dissolved into radiant smoke, white and black, swirling into the relic. The orb glowed brighter. Snow-like particles whirled around it in endless spirals. Matthew stepped forward.

And lifted the relic.

Then light swallowed him whole. When it faded, a stone doorway yawned open, revealing the outside atop a snowy mountain. Icy wind blasted his face.

Behind him, another doorway opened. Silvanus barreled through with Zeen stumbling behind him. “Where in the neth’rose were you?!” the knight boomed. “Are you trying to run away now? Has shame finally found you?” Silvanus said glaring down at Matthew.

Matthew didn’t have time to argue. “No,” he said firmly. “I’m not trying to run away.” He walked past Silvanus toward Zeen, helping him through the doorway. “Come on. We’re outside. We made it.”

Silvanus stepped closer, eyes narrowing. “What is that thing in your hand?” he demanded.

Matthew raised the glowing orb slightly. “This,” he said, “is how we save Tina. When we get to Drearth.”

Silvanus’s jaw clenched. Shock flickered across his face, quickly replaced by suspicion.

“We must head to Ishd’kar, so we can get off this mountain,” Matthew cut in, helping Zeen down the first snowy step. “We need to get there so we can then save Tina.”

Silvanus stared at him. Stared at the relic. Then, without a word, he pushed Matthew out of the way. The truth was plain now. Silvanus was stuck with Matthew.

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PART

FIVE

The Ending of the Beginning

Aurora · Matthew · Torm · Florencia · Oathrackis

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THE DIMMING LIGHT

Tharndusk the 19th, Year 11,219
(The last month)

AURORA SAT BESIDE HER MOTHER AND FATHER IN THEIR ELEVATED SEATS. The servants had spent the entire week transforming the castle into a world of white and gold. Lumora lanterns hung from silver chains. Frosted laurels draped the pillars. The musicians were already rehearsing for the winter ball tonight. The one that was supposed to be Aurora's great farewell celebration before she left Eldoria to marry Prince John of Belfour.

Aurora Titus, she thought bitterly. That would be her new name. Her new chains. A man she barely knew. A man whose kingdom lay beyond the Eldergrove Peaks—far from Eldoria…and far from Vince. If she didn't leave tonight, she would never see him again.

That thought alone made her heart twist.

Her father's eyes fixed on the great oak doors of the grand hall, cold, stern, unblinking. He looked like a statue of himself. Her mother sat poised, flawless, unreadable.

Aurora, on the other hand, was the only one shifting in her seat, her nerves rattling under her skin. They were all waiting for Prince Nere and General Ludwig.

Word had come hours ago: survivors from Ardester were arriving today. Eldoria was swelling with refugees. Rohland evacuated, Mire emptied,

Keensin on the brink. Their kingdom was drowning in crisis. And they were not even sure what they were fighting.

Too many souls, too many whispers of monsters, too many people begging for answers no one had. Aurora's mother, Orkora, had told her this morning that they would be leaving Eldoria immediately after the ball. The moment the last lantern dimmed, they were gone.

Not openly.

Not through the usual front gates and carriages, but through another means of travel. One Aurora could only guess at.

She assumed they were going to the Island of Mirk, the mysterious land at sea her parents visited several times every year, the one no one ever spoke about in more than quick glances and half-sentences.

But she wasn't sure anymore. Nothing was certain now.

BOOM.

The doors slammed open.

The announcer's voice echoed through the hall, "Prince Nere of Eldoria. General Ludwig!"

Aurora stood so fast her chair scraped. Ludwig entered first, and the sight of him made her stomach drop. His right arm was gone. Bandaged and bound to his side, the sleeve pinned up and empty. His feathers were matted with dried blood. His usually regal posture was slumped, strained, as though he had walked miles in agony without rest.

Behind him followed Nere. Uninjured, but pale. Too pale.

Her father shot to his feet. "LUDWIG!" Ronan boomed. "By the seven kingdoms, what happened to you?"

The hall fell silent.

Even the servants froze mid-movement. Ludwig knelt before the throne —a scene so wrong, so jarring, Aurora felt her breath stop. Nere went straight into his mother's open arms. Aurora had prepared herself for him to smirk at her, to say something cutting, but he didn't look at her at all. He looked…small. Shaken. Ashamed.

Ludwig lifted his gaze to the king. "My lord," he began, voice hoarse. "What we encountered in Ardester…was unlike anything ever recorded in the Eldorian archives."

Aurora leaned forward, her pulse pounding.

Ludwig continued, "We did not find the source of the disappearances. But we learned what is happening. A red mist descends upon the villages.

Within it appear creatures, monsters with no form, no true shape—and they devour the people. They reappear endlessly inside the mist no matter how many we kill. We had no choice but to flee into the mountains."

Aurora's mother gasped softly.

Ludwig swallowed. "We retreated into Darlimir, the Mines of Roynar. And inside…something else was waiting." He paused, and Aurora saw fear flash across his feathered face. "An unholy demon," Ludwig said. "A being we could not harm or name. It killed many of my soldiers. And…three of our Aetherians."

Aurora's breath left her completely. Three Aetherians? Dead?

Her father's jaw clenched so tightly Aurora heard a pop. "And your arm?" Ronan forced out.

"The demon, my lord."

Silence. A cold, suffocating silence.

A ripple of gasps came from the nobles lining the hall.

"So the red mist appears without warning," Ronan said grimly. "Monsters we cannot kill. A demon in the mines. Goblins stealing children. Grimrave at the border of the Dwarves." He sank back in his throne. "By the sovereigns," Ronan cursed under his breath as he rubbed his temples.

Aurora had never—never—seen him like this. Her father was steel wrapped in iron. But now…he looked hollowed. Strained. Older.

"General," Ronan said, "rest. Physicians will tend to you. Then meet me in the council chamber. We must put Eldoria under immediate lockdown."

Everyone flew out of the room.

Orders raced through the air.

Before Aurora could even blink, her father was already striding toward the staircase. Above them, on the second-floor balcony, stood King Althren of Belfour. Tall, cold, and beside him, Prince John.

Her betrothed.

Aurora's stomach knotted.

Ronan reached the balcony, motioning for his family to follow. Aurora rose, smoothing her gown, and hurried upstairs with her mother and Nere.

Althren didn't even wait for them to arrive. "Ronan," he said, "we must inform Lord Netton—"

"No," Ronan snapped.

Althren blinked. "No? Ronan, surely you see this situation demands his assistance. Everything we have done will be for noth—"

“I said not here, we will evacuate first, all of the royals. Then we…” Ronan paused, breathing hard.

Aurora’s heart thudded. What lord? What secret?

John stepped closer, folding his hands behind his back. “Your father means well, Aurora,” he said warmly, “but clearly he is stalling and afraid.”

Aurora’s skin crawled. Stalling? King Althren spoke as if they had a higher master. They were keeping something from her. From all of them.

“Ronan, have you still not told them?” Althren asked Ronan, sounding genuinely irritated. “Your own children don’t know yet? Ronan, we agreed—”

“I will tell them,” Ronan growled. “When the time is right.”

“And when would that be? When this red mist devours the city?” Althren shot back. “Our alliance will be for nothing, the marriage between your daughter and my son will be drekk! Do you even understand what will happen if we—“

Ronan exhaled sharply and rubbed his temples. “Yes, I rauking understand,” Ronan hissed under his breath. “I’m just thinking…”

“Well think faster, because this kingdom is about to collapse by a force we do not know.”

Aurora exchanged worried glances with her mother, who said nothing, but her lips were thin, tight, unreadable.

Ronan looked up, his face cold, “We pack what matters and leave tonight.”

Althren composed himself. “Agreed, no more of this winter ball. The people can have the ball another time, but we need safety. I assume we will be taking the castle route?”

Aurora’s heart sank and her mother nodded stiffly. Her father nodded too. The winter ball was being cancelled. This was real, she thought. They are all leaving tonight. And if she didn’t run away with Vince…

She never would.

Ronan faced his family. “Pack only what you can carry in a single case.” His tone made her shiver as they all started walking away down the hall.

This wasn’t a request.

This was the end of something.

Aurora felt trapped inside her own body, inside the future they were forcing upon her. Her father left without looking back. Her mother

followed, summoning a maid to gather the noble houses for an emergency meeting. Her brother stormed off, face stony and unreadable. Aurora now walked alone in the hall, trembling.

The world was falling apart, and hers with it. No more of being carried by other people's choices. She needed to speak with Vince as soon as possible. They were leaving today.

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ARRIVAL OF THE AERALYNIAN

NINE DAYS SINCE ARDESTER FELL, AND STILL THE CITY HAD NO ANSWERS. The streets were swollen with refugees, a river of shivering families funneled through by exhausted Eldorian soldiers shouting orders through numb lips. Children cried, horses huffed steam, people argued and pleaded and prayed. The entire kingdom felt like it was about to explode, living on the edge of something already unfolding.

Torm wandered straight through the chaos with the casual ease of a man strolling through a summer market. His hood was drawn low over his hair, with a pleased grin resting beneath it. He stuck out his tongue to catch a snowflake. “Delightful,” he said warmly, as if admiring a holiday decoration rather than a city suffocating under fear. “It truly is the most wonderful time of the year.”

The grail jingled faintly in the bag strapped across his back. He patted it fondly. Bastion had shouted at him for half the journey from Ardester to Eldoria—something about restraint and secrecy—but Torm remembered only fragments. Bastion always thought too much. Torm thought in simpler terms: the grail needed blood, and Torm had fed it well. Entire villages, Scone, Berks, nearly all of Ardester, had been erased by his hand, though he felt no particular pride in the task. It had simply been…required.

Still, the grail had glowed red and Bastion told him that Marriott would take things from here—he must go there straightaway. So Torm did.

But Eldoria looked different than he remembered.

Busier, filthier, more desperate than before.

Torm hummed to himself as he slipped down the familiar narrow alleyway toward a dangling, creaking sign shaped like a skeletal hand gripping a lantern.

Marriott's Shop.

The creepiest store in Eldoria, yet somehow the most convenient. Torm pushed inside. The shop was packed.

People stood shoulder-to-shoulder, jostling, murmuring over artifacts and trinkets. Some wore furs, others tattered rags, but they all had the sharp Eldorian look, dark hair, black eyes, skin like snow. Everyone except the massive man in the corner holding a skull up to the light. He had strawberry-blond hair, tied in a man-bun, with a golden eye. His shoulders were broad enough to block the firelight behind him.

Interesting, Torm thought. The golden-eyed man lowered the skull and marched straight toward a cluster of rough-looking fellows near the window. "It's time we leave," the man growled.

"How long are we staying here, Olric?"

The group muttered in agreement.

"Yeah, Olric. This place is getting flooded. We stay longer, and we're dead with the rest of them."

Olric turned, jaw hard. "No doubt. Whatever the neth'rose is happening to Eldoria is death upon us all. Some varn curse from the sovereigns. Where are the Heliorens now? The false deities the people cling to." Olric said brushing his sweaty brow. "Anyway, I read the letter. We will be leaving immediately."

They nodded grimly.

"We'll take the boats," Olric continued. "Sea's safer. The land is too risky now."

The men nodded, muttered for Gordu, and left.

Torm blinked. It amused him that the red mist had already twisted rumors like vines throughout the kingdom.

No one knew the truth. That he had fed the grail for its awakening. He slipped between patrons until he reached the counter. Marriott stood behind it, floating just slightly, as always, almost Human in posture, but distinctly wrong. His mask lifted, fixed on Torm without blinking. The skeletal merchant turned away from Torm and addressed the customer in front of him. "Take your belongings and leave."

The poor man blinked. "But I—my things aren't—"

“Leave.” Marriott’s voice dropped to an unnatural tone, cold and echoing.

In seconds, the entire shop emptied as if a silent explosion had gone off. Patrons stumbled out, some muttering protests, others too frightened to speak. The door creaked shut behind the last of them with Marriott locking the door and turning the sign so it said closed.

Marriott lifted a bony hand toward Torm. “Place it on the counter.”

Torm grinned and plopped the bulging bag onto the counter. Torm pulled out the grail. Its surface pulsed with a deep red glow.“The grail,” Torm said with a flourish. “As Bastion demanded.”

Marriott’s face tilted. “So the Aeralyn completes the task. Miracles do occur, I see.”

“Obviously we could do it. Did you forget we are better than any other race in every way?” Torm reminded him smugly.

“Of course,” Marriott answered with dry indifference. “Follow me oh high one,” he said sarcastically.

Torm did, carrying the grail and weaving through the narrow hallway behind the counter and into a cramped wooden room. Marriott gestured sharply, and Torm shut the door.

“Set it on the table.”

Torm did.

Marriott hovered his hand over the grail. Shadows swirled around his fingers, curling down like black smoke. The grail responded, glowing brighter until the room itself felt drenched in crimson. The iron vessel trembled, and began to shrink. Torm stood transfixed as the grail collapsed inward, folding itself until it settled into the shape of a small jet-black cube. A dozen tiny red eyes blinked open all over its surface, shifting and never still.

Marriott lowered his skeletal hand. “The Oculis Vorum. It is finished.”

Torm leaned in. “So…what now?” he wiggled his eyebrows.

Marriott’s skull did not move. “An innocent must place the Oculis Vorum into the Vel’thar. Not you.”

Torm frowned. “An innocent?” Then he perked up, “What? You don’t think I’m innocent, you walking corpse?”

“A child,” Marriott clarified. “One whose mind has not yet grasped the nature of evil, and therefore unbound from moral consequence. Only a child may activate the Vel’thar’s ancient seal.”

Torm blinked. “That is…tedious.”

“Yet required.”

Torm folded his arms. “There couldn’t have been another way?”

Marriott stared at him a long moment. “Can you do it, Aeralyn? Or will you fail…as your people were always meant to?”

Torm’s jaw tightened. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Can. You. Do. It?”

Torm snatched the cube. “Obviously…I…can.”

“Good.”

Marriott floated out of the room. Torm followed, only to discover the shop was suddenly bare—shelves empty, lanterns gone, walls stripped. “When? What happened to your inventory…your shop?” Torm questioned, frowning.

Marriott shrugged a massive satchel onto his back. “It is time for me to leave. I am called elsewhere.”

“Leaving? Where?”

“To watch the upcoming festival of course,” Marriott answered, drifting toward the alley exit. “As you lead. Do enjoy.”

Torm paused.

As he leads.

The words settled into him.

“And where will you be watching?” Torm pressed.

Marriott glanced back. “The Neckwah Mountains, across the Dandilin River. That is where the others will be meeting.”

“Others?”

Marriott floated out the shop and into the alley and vanished into the shadows of the city.

Torm looked down at the cube. Its red eyes blinked at him, hungry, eager. He stuffed it into the pouch hooked to his belt.

A child.

He just needed one child to place the relic inside the Vel’thar. Then the great unraveling would begin. Eldoria would fall. The world would remember the first Aeralynian liberator.

But he wanted more.

He looked south toward the castle towering over the snowy city. Its banners limp in the cold. If he was to begin the end of Eldoria…

He wanted an audience.

He wanted to kill the king first, personally.

He walked back into the bustling main street, the cube warm against his hip, its eyes pressing against the pouch. He spotted his opportunity immediately—a cluster of boys throwing snowballs, squealing and chasing each other in the street.

Torm grinned.

“Oh, darlings,” he said, almost gently. “Who would like to earn some extra crown?” The boys lit up and rushed toward him, laughing and shouting over one another, unaware.

Torm straightened, smiling.

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SECHERA OF ISHD'KAR

THE WIND SCREAMED.

Matthew trudged through knee-deep snow, one hand gripping Zeen's wrist so he wouldn't lose him to the whiteout, the other clutching the glowing relic against his chest so it wouldn't slip from frozen fingers.

They didn't know where they were going.

Matthew's cheeks were raw and burning, the cold so sharp it felt personal, as if the mountain itself were trying to freeze him before anything else could reach them.

Zeen stumbled, nearly collapsing, but Matthew hauled him back upright. "Careful—careful, stay with me." he shouted, though the wind tore half the words away.

Ahead, Silvanus pushed through the storm without hesitation, his black armor rimed with frost, his cloak snapping violently behind him. The snow plastered itself across the knight's beard, but he hardly blinked. Nothing slowed him.

Matthew cast a glance over his shoulder. Just hours ago, or what felt like hours, they had been deep inside the bowels of Darlimir. Yet here they were now, spat out atop the Salfer Mountains. The great doors they'd entered through were now shut, sealed into the mountain's side. No path back.

The storm raged harder.

The very clouds churned as if stirred by some sovereign-like hand, thickening so rapidly Matthew could no longer see where the sky ended and

the mountain began.

Then the earth groaned. The mountain shuddered under their boots, a low violent quake that made both Matthew and Zeen lurch. Zeen cried out, grabbing Matthew's shoulder. "What! What the neth'rose is happening now?!"

Matthew had no answer. Not for the quakes, or the storm, or the fact that the sky seemed to be unmaking itself.

Silvanus yelled over the wind, "There's a cave, just ahead! MOVE!" They pushed through the whiteout, the storm clawing at them. Matthew could barely see Silvanus anymore, just a dark shape forcing its way up a small incline. Every step felt heavier, as if the mountain itself wanted to drag them all down.

Another quake hit harder. The snow cracked beneath them, sending a small avalanche sliding down the cliffside to their right. Matthew didn't even hear it hit bottom; the storm swallowed the sound.

Finally they stumbled into the cave, a narrow jagged hollow carved naturally into the mountainside. Zeen nearly collapsed but Matthew guided him to sit against the stone wall. Silvanus stood at the mouth of the cave, watching the churning white void outside, as if trying to discern something hidden within it. Matthew dropped to his knees, breath ragged, the relic in his hand pulsing with gentle warmth despite the freezing cold.

"What in Korineth is going on?" Matthew muttered.

Silvanus ignored him.

Typical.

Instead Silvanus stretched out his hand and cast ignis minor. The red light flickered across the cave, glinting off the black knight's armor. But even the flame appeared weaker than it should have been, shrinking against the oppressive cold that seemed eager to swallow it. Silvanus turned back toward the storm with an expression Matthew didn't recognize, not quite fear, but something adjacent to it.

Wariness. Or Unease. Something that made even Silvanus keep his distance. "Those quakes…" the knight muttered, "they're not normal quakes."

Matthew swallowed hard and rubbed warmth into Zeen's cold hands. "Another da'mirith, you think?"

No answer.

The mountain rumbled again, much louder. Zeen flinched violently and clung to Matthew's cloak. "Tell me that isn't something coming for us?" he whispered, voice cracking. Matthew wished he could lie.

But Silvanus finally stepped back from the mouth of the cave and looked at Matthew with thinly veiled suspicion. "Where were you?" he demanded. "Back there, when you vanished. When you came out, your Elf face was white as bone."

Matthew lifted the relic slightly, its sphere glowing in swirling white pulses. "I—I don't know," Matthew admitted. "It was dark. Then I was in some kind of chamber, temple. I faced something there. And when I left…I was given this."

Silvanus stared at the relic. "What type of aetheris is it?"

Matthew shook his head. "I don't think it is aetheris. The thing I met in the chamber gave it to me, he went by Ek'sheera. This relic is what we need to save Tina. I know it may sound strange, but I was commanded by a deity to retrieve it."

"No, it's not strange." Silvanus then stepped forward. "But which deity exactly?"

"Lu."

Silvanus let out a sharp, disbelieving laugh. "By the neth'rose. Lu? The great whale sovereign of the sea? So you're a murderer and a liar. What was the Harbringer's name?"

"Harbringer?" Matthew's jaw tightened. "Believe whatever you like. But I'm telling the truth. Something horrible is happening."

"Welcome to life, Elf."

The mountain shuddered again. Loose snow outside whipped through the cave, carried by the cold wind biting at Matthew's skin.

Silvanus scowled toward the storm and then turned suddenly and stepped toward him, looming tall and dark over Matthew. "Who actually sent you on this mission? Which Harbringer?" he demanded.

Matthew hesitated only a moment. "I told you already. And you don't believe me. They told me to get this relic, and that it will help save my siblings. And that also means we can save Tina."

Silvanus's jaw twitched. He looked away, muttering something under his breath. Then, out of nowhere, Matthew asked softly, "Is she your daughter? Tina?"

Silvanus froze, cold and sharp. "No."

But Matthew had seen something flash across the knight’s eyes, something aching, something old and sad. “Family, then?” Matthew pressed gently.

Silvanus didn’t answer, but he didn’t have to. Matthew saw it in the man’s shoulders, in the tension of his jaw. He cared deeply about the girl. But for what reason, he did not know.

The storm howled louder again. Snow blasted horizontal past the cave mouth. The quakes grew stronger, shaking the walls themselves. Matthew steadied Zeen, whose breath trembled with every quake. Matthew swallowed hard. This storm was not natural, they could all feel it. Something angry.

Silvanus lifted his head sharply. “Understand this Elf, if this is some sort of trick, if we do not make our way to that island you speak of. I will scalp you and leave you for the nightwalkers. Do you understand?”

Matthew frowned.

“Do you understand?” he growled.

Matthew gritted his teeth. “Yes, I understand,” he said angrily.

The relic warmed suddenly in Matthew’s palm, first a faint pulse, then a steady thrum, and then a blinding flare of white and gold that lit the entire cave mouth. Wisps of golden particles spiraled off its surface, drifting upward as if caught in a gentle, unseen current. Matthew froze.

Zeen flinched at the brightness he couldn’t even see, lifting an arm instinctively. Silvanus turned sharply, red flame in his hand flickering against the relic’s gold. “What now?” Silvanus muttered, as though Matthew had personally chosen this moment for a miracle.

But Matthew didn’t answer. He couldn’t. Because the relic moved. A string of gold trailed from the sphere like golden dust, stretching forward, slipping past Matthew, past the cave’s threshold, and out into the roaring wall of snow beyond. The trail shimmered like paint floating in water, beckoning.

Matthew swallowed. “It’s…guiding us.”

Silvanus scoffed. “Or luring us to our deaths.”

“Maybe,” Matthew admitted, tightening his grip on Zeen’s arm as he stood. “But it doesn’t matter. We need to get off this mountain.”

Silvanus stared at him, jaw tight. The blizzard winds ripped past the cave mouth, tugging at Matthew’s cloak. “Do you even understand what you’re doing?”

Matthew bit back the urge to snap.“We don’t have a choice,” Matthew finally said. “Unless you know another way off this mountain.”

Silvanus scowled…but stepped back. That was agreement enough. Matthew turned, helping Zeen onto his feet. “Hold my cape,” he said gently. “Stay close.” Zeen nodded shakily, gripping the edge of Matthew’s cloak like a rope.

The relic’s golden trail drifted outward, steady. Snow slapped his face like shards of glass. Again, Zeen leaned heavily into Matthew for balance. Behind them, Silvanus emerged, flinching as needles of ice clattered harmlessly against his armor.

They trudged into the storm, the faint golden glow ahead was their only guide through the white void. Every few steps, Matthew looked back. Not because he doubted the relic, but because the mountains felt…awake.

The quakes rolled again, more violent this time, nearly knocking all three of them off their feet. Matthew braced himself, clutching Zeen tighter, boots sliding in the drifts.

“What in the neth’rose is causing that?” Silvanus roared. Silvanus was scanning the ridgelines with the eyes of someone who had seen too many impossible horrors in one lifetime. They moved higher up the slope. The storm began to thin. Not disappear—just…moved aside.

Like something far above was parting the blizzard around them. Matthew felt a strange tension in the air, pressure, almost like altitude sickness, but…sharper.

Trees finally appeared, skeletal and white, their branches heavy with frost. Ahead, jagged ice formations rose out of the ground.

The sky changed. No longer the stormy gray of winter, but a hazy, luminescent blue, almost like dusk suspended in time.

Matthew stared upward, breathless. “Whoa,” he whispered.

Zeen, still blind, whispered, “Are we safe? What’s going on?”

Matthew hesitated, “No idea.” And then the snow beneath them shifted. Something enormous stirred in the drifts. First a low rumble, then a violent burst as a towering ice construct rose from the earth, shaped like a volcanic mountain with cracks glowing blue across its surface. It let out a hollow, cavernous roar that sent shards of ice fluttering downward.

Zeen whimpered.

Silvanus drew his sword.

Then more creatures emerged. Skeletal ice warriors dragging themselves from snowbanks, frost-wolves with crystalline ribs, and figures in shapes Matthew couldn't categorize, all made of ice and winter.

Matthew stumbled backwards, shielding Zeen. "Silvanus—"

"RAUK," Silvanus barked.

But before Matthew could shout anything else, every creature stopped. Every glowing head turned. Not toward Matthew or Silvanus. But toward the relic. They raised their arms—all of them—and pointed. Straight ahead. North. Toward the narrow canyon carved into the mountain.

Silvanus did not lower his sword. "What is this, Elf? What's happening?"

"I don't know. I'm not behind this."

An ice skeleton stepped beside Silvanus, silent and unmoving, its empty sockets staring inches from his face. Silvanus swung immediately, shattering the creature into shards.

The others did nothing.

Not even flinched.

They continued pointing.

Matthew swallowed. "I—I think they want us to go through the canyon."

Silvanus growled. "Obviously," he looked around, "Or they want us trapped in it, so they can kill us."

"We're already trapped," Matthew said softly. "Look around."

Silvanus did, "I could take them," he scoffed. His sword lowered. They continued forward, the relic pulling them into the narrow canyon where the ice walls rose like jagged blue cathedral spires. While the quakes grew stronger again.

Something enormous roared beyond, shaking snow loose from the cliffs above. And then—

They emerged into an open ledge overlooking a vast white abyss. The storm below churned and the stars glimmered in the sky, closer than they should be. And across the gulf stretched a massive stone bridge flanked by colossal serpent-headed statues with wings and claws.

Dragons.

Matthew's heart pounded and Silvanus stiffened.

Zeen whispered, "What?"

A figure stepped onto the center of the bridge from the opposite side. Cloaked in white, feathers for a face, movements elegant and weightless.

Silvanus immediately aimed his crossbow. “Not another step! Who are you?!”

The being stood still, watching. “I am Apostle Frey’kro,” it said. “Ek’sheera foretold your arrival. Follow quickly. Time is upon us.”

Matthew stepped forward and Silvanus watched hesitantly, but they all followed.

The bridge groaned beneath their boots, stone cracking under centuries of frost. Frey’kro glided ahead as if weightless, feathers rippling like liquid ice, untouched by wind or snow. Matthew kept Zeen close, guiding his steps carefully while Silvanus followed behind them with a hand on the hilt of his sword the entire time. The air grew sharper, yet strangely thinner. Matthew’s breath came out in long, fogged ribbons. His fingers felt numb around the relic despite its warmth.

Ahead, the ruins of an ancient castle rose.

Archways split by centuries. Enormous statues of dragons frozen in mid-roar, their stone bodies half-buried in snow, fangs the size of spears jutting from crumbling jaws. The castle sprawled across the cliffside, pieces of it lost to avalanches or time itself. Silvanus stopped at one point, glancing between the stone serpents and the shattered courtyard. “This place wasn’t built by mortals.” he muttered.

“No,” Frey’kro said. “Ishd’kar predates the kingdoms of Humans, Dwarves, and Elves of Valdorin. Built by the first creations in service to the siblings. The winter seat of Sechera, hidden atop the Salfer Mountains.”

“The siblings?” Zeen whispered.

The ground trembled again beneath them. A deep, seismic groan rolled through the mountains, no longer distant, no longer abstract, but close. Very close.

Snow cascaded off the high cliffs. Something enormous roared. The sound wasn’t like the da’mirith’s screech. This roar was ancient.

“What was that?” Matthew asked.

Frey’kro didn’t stop gliding. “Sechera.”

“The dragon? Sechera?” Silvanus snapped from behind them all. “The creator of winter?”

Frey’kro only nodded, as though speaking his name required care. Matthew helped Zeen climb a set of carved steps that led up to a massive

ice wall. A staircase wound up its side, slick with frost. As they climbed, something began to change in the air around them.

It hummed.

The mountain itself vibrated with an unseen pulse. Matthew slowed, feeling it ripple through his ribs, up his spine, into his skull. A traveling warmth and cold in one, something like the first breath he ever took but purer.

Then he saw it.

A towering blue crystal, almost like a spire piercing the sky, encased in ice but glowing so intensely it illuminated the snowy landscape for miles. Blue flames spiraled off its surface, drifting upward like feathers of light dissolving into the sky.

Matthew stared, heart hammering. “Apostle Frey’kro…what is that?”

Frey’kro turned slightly, head dipping. “That, is a Ma’norian.” The word felt heavy, weighted with meaning even before Frey’kro explained.

Zeen’s blind gaze lifted slightly, sensing the aura though he could not see the brilliance. “And what,” Zeen whispered, “is a Ma’norian?”

Frey’kro’s voice softened, reverent.

“A Ma’norian is a Korineth Crystal forged by the siblings before time began. It is through these crystals that aetheris flows into the world. Every flame wielded, every healing touch, every surge of strength, comes from one of the Ma’norians across the world.”

Matthew felt the truth of what Frey’kro said. While Silvanus was silent, still angry and watching.

But they eventually reached the top of the stairs. The platform stretched across the castle’s inner battlements, overlooking the starry sky and the vast blizzard below. And though the cold remained fierce.

Another quake tore through the castle.

Sechera’s roar was so immense.

It echoed up the mountain.

Silvanus staggered. “Why does he keep doing that?”

Frey’kro spoke quietly. “Sechera cries out to the Heliorens. His heart is troubled.”

“What troubles a dragon?” Zeen asked.

Frey’kro looked back at him, seven eyes unblinking. “The sins of mortals,” he said. “And what they will unleash upon the world.”

Silvanus barked, “What the neth’rose is that supposed to mean?”

But Frey’kro did not answer. Instead, he turned and led them deeper into the castle. Under a shattered archway, into what once must have been a grand hall. Matthew recognized some of the symbols. He’d seen them in the temple Ek’sheera and on the shal’kors. Then a shadow passed over them.

Enormous and swift. Heavy enough to rattle the castle. They felt the wind first, a violent gust tearing through the open hall. Snow blasted inward. The ground shook as the dragon landed on the platform in front. Matthew stepped back with Zeen instinctively. Silvanus drew his sword. Frey’kro lifted his head. The dragon was white as snow. Spined with ice. Wings vast enough to block out the hazy sky. Eyes glowing with frostfire, no pupils. Sechera, the Winter King. Matthew could barely breathe. The dragon opened its jaws. A torrent of blinding white winter-fire erupted toward them.

Matthew cried out, shielding Zeen.

Silvanus braced to leap.

But Frey’kro lifted a single arm.

A wall of translucent feathers spiraled into existence, an ethereal shield that stretched across the hall. The winter-fire slammed into it like a hurricane against glass, but the feathers held, shimmering and rattling with celestial strength. Sechera roared again, shaking the castle.

But Frey’kro spoke. Not in any mortal tongue.

A sound Matthew heard before when rescued after his murder. Something that bent the air.

The dragon lowered its head. The fire died in its throat. Its rage suddenly turned toward Silvanus, its breath steaming heavily in the knight’s direction, lips curling back over frozen fangs.

Frey’kro turned to Silvanus. “Do not fear. Sechera recognizes you, but he will not harm you.”

“Then why,” Silvanus hissed, stepping back, “is he still looking at me like he wants to rip me apart?”

“Because he knows what you are,” Frey’kro said. “Oathracki.”

Matthew stiffened. The memory struck him hard. Arameth. Back in Ardester. He had called himself that. Matthew turned sharply. “What is an Oathracki? I’ve heard that word before.”

Silvanus didn’t answer. But his jaw clenched.

Frey’kro spoke, “Sechera despises the ones who gave their souls to the Son of Darkness. The knight here was given power from a Nihilkin.”

Matthew stared.

Silvanus looked away.

But Matthew didn't press, he filed the knowledge deep.

Frey'kro stepped forward, addressing them all. "The red mist spreading across this country," he paused briefly. "What is happening in Eldoria is the Crimson Night. The Arkilal. A festival not of men, but of demons."

Matthew felt his pulse spike.

Zeen whispered, trembling, "The Crimson Night…"

"Yes," Frey'kro said. "Zareth and the Nihilkins have found a way to breach the mortal world once more."

Frey'kro beckoned them forward with a slow, deliberate sweep of his arm."Stand nearer. The Nihilkins have chosen a mortal to start the Arkilal. This mortal cannot be an Oathracki or a demon. They must be untouched. Merely mortal," the apostle said and then he bowed his head. "They have found their pawn, and the festival is about to begin. What you witness now is rare. Sechera is not meant to interfere with mortal affairs. None of the dragons of Korineth are, they are meant to focus on the seasons and biomes. But what draws near to Eldoria…" His seven eyes drifted toward the white dragon whose talons cracked the stone beneath. "It is the final provocation."

"I don't care about Eldoria. I'm not going to help them fight whatever this festival is." Silvanus said puffing up his chest.

But Frey'kro ignored him.

"Is this the first time? I mean…what the neth'rose is this?" Zeen said leaning on Matthew for support.

"Like I said, this is not the first attempt. Nor the tenth. Nor the hundredth. Thousands of years stack upon thousands, and yet Zareth claws for a path back into the mortal world. The Solvaran speaks of the beginning, when the Father shaped the siblings, and Zareth defied him. Exiled into the spirit realm. Cursed for eternity. And Lu and Elmira…cursed by Zareth after the War of the Sovereigns in year 500." Frey'kro inclined his head. "For ages uncounted, Lu and Zareth have been at war. Even now they strike at one another across the veil. Elmira's fate only deepened their hatred."

Matthew swallowed. "And if Zareth and his Nihilkins cross over again…what happens to us? What exactly will happen to Eldoria?"

The apostle did not soften his answer. "What happened in Ninavah will happen again to all of Valdorin, but also, all of Korineth. The Arkilal is not

the only option for them, there are others. But it seems they were able to succeed with this path."

Silvanus let out a sharp breath. "The Weeping Epoch? War of the Sovereigns?" Silvanus questioned in disbelief and shock. "Holy drekk." Silvanus cursed in realization. "Those legends were true? Where in the neth'rose is Ninavah?" he said staring at Frey'kro.

"A continent far from here," Frey'kro said. "And it burned. Mortals do not remember because Lu led the survivors across the Great Ocean to Orrindel—this world you know now. Your maps do not have it. It is not recorded, only the Solvaran briefly speaks of the war."

Matthew held the relic tighter. "So this is really why you needed the relic." Matthew said noticing. "But what about my siblings? The children who were taken by the goblins? I just…I don't understand."

Frey'kro turned to Sechera, speaking softly in a language that echoed like flutes played underwater. The dragon exhaled a frost-laden rumble. "Yes Matthew, you will still be able to save your siblings." Frey'kro paused. "I know you long for home, and that you want to reach them. And I say again, that you will reach Elara and Finn. Lu promised that. But right now, your time is needed, you have been chosen by the Heliorens. If you do not go, you won't be able to use the gifts of Ek'sheera. You won't be able to save your siblings or the other children. There won't even be a Liora."

Matthew stumbled back breathing hard. Memories flashed, Elara and Finn, the black dog, the visions, the sound of locust wings, the trial within the temple of Ek'sheera, and the strange peace of hearing Lu's voice. It was all a knot tightening inside him. He sighed, short, breathless, but certain. He would do anything to save his siblings. To go back home to the life they had. That's all he wanted now.

But then Matthew realized what was really happening. How could he be so blind? How did he not see this before? Did he already forget?

This was it, wasn't it?

The Arkilal, this is where his visions were pointing, this is where he would die. The word 'Arkilal' twisted in his gut like a sword. That was what the visions had always shown him, this Crimson Night.

His hands were shaking and Matthew remembered each scene in the visions. Seeing the green eye, that was Lu. Then the blood water and the red sky, was that going to be the festival of demons? Ludwig said those who carry the Oblivion are sentenced to die. Matthew stared at Frey'kro. The

angel hadn’t said it outright. But the silence said enough. He was going to die.

Not here.

But soon.

At that festival.

“I can’t go,” Matthew said quickly, “or I will never reach my siblings.” Everyone stared. Even Sechera lifted his massive head. “I can’t do this. I didn’t agree for this, I want to live. I have to live.” Matthew cried, voice shaking.

Frey’kro nodded once. “I understand Matthew. But there is no other way to save your siblings. After the Crimson Night, you will be born again. You will have been bought by Lu, Elmira, and Oryneth—saved, redeemed…you will be a Luminarch.”

“You don’t understand,” Matthew said, voice breaking. “If I die there, then who goes to Drearth? Who saves them? Everyone keeps saying chosen like it’s mercy. But no one asked me. No one asked if I wanted to be used.”

“No one else can take this burden for you. If you do not go, then millions will die. Children, men, and women. And more will come with that. You are destined to die regardless because of your curse.” Frey’kro said bluntly. “Now, you will answer simply, will you go?”

Matthew looked down at the relic. Its light trembled against his palm, beating like a heart. He hated it. But he needed it. “I’m afraid,” he said.

Frey’kro bowed his feathered head. “I know.”

Matthew inhaled slowly.

Born again? Luminarch?

He would become an angel? That’s what a Luminarch was, it was an angel. Matthew gritted his teeth, how does that even work? Besides there wasn’t anytime left, he came this far, he can’t stop. And even though he did want to quit, Matthew was going to die regardless, there was no escaping this curse. The demons would find another way to kill him. And he would be on the run for the rest of his life. From what Frey’kro said, Lu found another way around this curse, freedom for Matthew, escape from the Oblivion.

Matthew took a deep breath and nodded slowly, “I…yes, I will go,” Matthew said, though terror still moved beneath the words.

“Hold on. That Elf isn’t going anywhere. He isn’t dying, he’s taking me to Drearth,” Silvanus growled.

Frey’kro nodded, “Yes, and he will. Because you will be protecting him after the Arkilal.”

Silvanus gave a surprised look. “Protecting?”

Frey’kro stepped aside for Matthew to walk up to Sechera. The dragon lowered his massive form, allowing Matthew to climb. It took effort, Sechera’s scales were like slick ice shaped into knives, but Matthew managed to pull himself up between two armored ridges.

“But what of me? My eyes, I can’t go with them. I can’t even see. Can you heal me? My family, they are in the Mire.” Zeen whimpered.

Frey’kro’s arms folded in thought. “You will remain with me. Lu has other plans for you elsewhere, Zeen Northspire.”

“Plans for me? What would a sovereign want with a blind man?” Zeen asked.

Matthew could tell Zeen and Silvanus were stunned. Matthew couldn’t tell if they were surprised in disbelief that this was real, or if they were shocked by the fact that Lu had plans for them. It was as if a truth you did not want to believe in was real.

Matthew glanced back at Zeen, who stood listening to the wind with milky eyes. His chest tightened.

Silvanus broke the silence with a snarl. “Rauk,” he cursed. “You’re certain he will live?”

“Yes, if he goes. If not, I cannot help him,” Frey’kro’s seven eyes blinked in unison.

Silvanus cursed again and shoved forward until Frey’kro blocked him with a single arm. “One more thing Oathracki,” the apostle said. “I know you seek Arameth.”

Matthew noticed Silvanus pause. Arameth? He knows him? Was this the same Arameth he met at the pub?

Silvanus’s face darkened. “Don’t tell me what to do. If I see him there, I’ll rip his rauking head off. I will have my revenge, my justice.” Silvanus reached toward Frey’kro’s robe until he paused. His hand shaking just above Frey’kro’s arm.

Silvanus looked petrified.

Matthew didn’t know what was happening, but it was like Silvanus was frozen in fear. But then Frey’kro glided out of his way as Silvanus stepped forward breathing hard, eyes wide in terror.

The apostle’s seven eyes blinked in a slow arc again. “You will not defeat him,” he lowered his voice. “Stay with Matthew. Protect him. Then after, you both can head to Drearth. And you can rescue Tina. Focus on that. Do not focus on him.”

Silvanus ignored him and stalked toward the dragon, though fear still haunted his face. Sechera growled, and Silvanus immediately reached for his sword. But Frey’kro murmured an ancient phrase, and the dragon reluctantly softened his posture, though hatred still simmered in his white eyes.

Matthew adjusted his grip on the relic. “Frey’kro. What am I supposed to do with this when I get to Eldoria?”

“Lu will speak with you when you are close. But you will now be taken to Listoff Mountain,” Frey’kro answered. He stepped back. “May the Sovereigns of Light bless you.”

Bright blue light burst from the carved tree sigil beneath them. The castle bent, the sky warped, and everything spun around them like a turning lantern.

Matthew blinked.

They stood atop Listoff Mountain beneath a clear winter sky. Sechera spread his wings, the span so massive it cast half the peak into shadow.

The dragon roared and launched southward. Matthew held on with both arms, feeling the relic warm against his chest. The wind tore at his clothing, and his eyes watered uncontrollably. Behind him, Silvanus clung to a scale ridge, scowling into the wind.

They were moving faster than any stormcloud could travel.

Matthew forced himself to look ahead, but he couldn’t look down, they were so high that nausea rose in his throat.

Arkilal. The Crimson Night. The Festival of Demons.

The event Zareth had planned for Eldoria.

This was it. The moment everything in his life had been dragging him toward. And he prayed silently to the Heliorens, that they would be with him. And that he would be able to pass through this evil.

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THE TRUTH OF THIS KINGDOM

AURORA HAD PACKED AND REPACKED THE SAME FOLDED GOWN AT LEAST three times without realizing it. Her chamber was dim in the waning afternoon light, the sun already sliding toward the horizon as though it too were eager to flee Eldoria. Snow pressed hard against the windowpanes, fluttering in sudden gusts as if warning her that time was running out.

Tonight, everything would change: her departure from the only home she'd ever known. Perhaps forever, and the choice that weighed so heavily upon her, that she felt she might sink below it.

Run away with Vince, she had thought so many times now. Or leave with her family to marry Prince John.

Her hands trembled at the thought of it. Aurora pressed her palms to her forehead as though she could steady her spiraling thoughts by force.

"My lady…" Puruna said softly.

Aurora lifted her eyes.

Puruna stood beside her, folding one of Aurora's cloaks into her traveling case. Puruna's brow was creased with concern. "You look pale. Are you certain you're well?"

Aurora swallowed. "I'm fine. Just…thinking of everything that's happening."

Three villages vanished.

The others evacuated.

A red mist swallowing lives in moments.

Demons in the mines.

Goblins tearing families apart by taking children. And her family preparing to flee Eldoria.

Puruna cleared her throat gently. “So…you are truly going to the Island of Mirk? Until all this passes?”

“That appears to be the plan.” Aurora forced a ghost of a smile. “Not that anyone bothers to actually tell me the truth of the matter.” She snapped the case shut and stood. “Puruna, could you take my belongings to my parents’ chamber? They want us to gather there, before the other houses depart.”

“Of course. Though I still need to find your cousin Eero and his sisters for Lord Benedict. Especially those two girls. Maelyn and Rhiadel are always getting into something.” Puruna nodded, then hesitated. She wore the look people had when truth threatened to spill out. “Aurora.”

Aurora turned. “Yes?”

Puruna’s voice softened. “Do you…want me to send word to Vince? He’s still at the soldier camp outside the castle. If this is your last chance to—”

Aurora’s heart lurched.

She stared at the floor, her breath trembling.

Vince.

Just the thought of him made her chest twist painfully. Everything in her screamed to go to him—run to him—leave all this behind. But could she abandon her family? Could she abandon her kingdom? She still didn’t know.

But one thing she did know, if she didn’t flee with Vince today, she would never have that chance again.

“Yes,” Aurora whispered. “Tell him I will meet him at the soldier camp. An hour from now. Please.”

Puruna nodded. “As you wish, my lady.”

Aurora left her room before she could change her mind, hurrying down the familiar stone halls. She touched each wall as she passed as though committing the castle to memory, the textured ridges of old mortar, the cold window frames that overlooked the city she had grown up admiring, the places where she used to hide when she was only a child. Her footsteps echoed in the deserted corridor, and she wished, not for the first time, that she were ten again, running carefree through these halls, laughing without knowing how fragile life truly was.

She approached the library. She wanted to see it once more before she left the castle. Before she left Eldoria. But as she rounded a corner she collided with a man.

A strong arm gripped her shoulders. “Oh—by the sovereigns,” he muttered, steadying her. It was Carter. His eyes flicked to her, a moment of surprise crossing his face before fading into something guarded. “Princess.”

Aurora blinked. “Excuse me?”

“My apologies, my lady,” he said quickly. “I didn’t expect to find you still in the castle. Weren’t you departing for the Island of Mirk today? I haven’t seen any of the royal ships leave the docks yet. Some of the other houses left according to your father, but when? The ships are still here.”

Her heart skipped. “What?”

Carter sighed, “How can I say this—Houses Verlain and Corven have already left according to your father. But their ships…” Carter took a long pause, “haven’t left the docks. I questioned it, that’s all.”

Aurora narrowed her eyes.

Something felt off in Carter’s tone…his presence in this part of the castle…the strange way he kept glancing toward the stairwell.

“Well, thank you for being so insightful, captain. But you probably just made a mistake, and missed them leave,” Aurora said carefully. “Now, if you’ll excuse me—”

Carter stepped aside with a polite nod. “Yes, of course my lady.”

But as she walked away, he called out again, “Will you and your family be returning after all this?”

Aurora turned, startled. “Why are you even here, Carter? What business do you have in this wing of the castle?”

His smile was too rehearsed. “As I stated before, I was with your father earlier today—discussing security protocol for the city while the royal family is away, that is all.”

Aurora studied him a moment longer, something uneasy pulsing in her chest.

But she forced a nod. “Well…may the Heliorens bless you,” she said.

“Yes, thank you princess.”

She left him behind, but his questions clung to her like cobwebs as she stepped into the next corridor.

The snow outside thickened. The castle, her home, suddenly felt terrifyingly unsafe. Two Belfour soldiers stood before the library doors, not

Eldorian guards, but Belfour soldiers draped in blue capes and wolf-crested armor.

Aurora slowed. “Odd…” she whispered. The soldiers straightened instantly and opened the doors for her as though they had been expecting her. That alone put her on edge; Belfour guards had no reason to be guarding rooms like this, unless it was by their king’s command.

She stepped inside, and froze. Prince John stood alone in the center of the library, lit by the amber glow of the stained-glass window facing the sea. He held a book in his hand, turning it as though admiring its leather cover. He looked up and smiled. “Ah. Finally. I feared you weren’t coming.”

Aurora’s stomach dropped. “John? W—what are you doing here?”

He set the book down gently, though his eyes remained fixed on her. “Waiting for you. I thought you would be here. We haven’t had much time alone, and considering we are to be wed soon, I thought it appropriate we speak privately.”

“I was only passing through,” Aurora lied, already stepping back toward the door. “I really must—”

The heavy doors thudded shut behind her.

Locked.

Aurora rattled the handle. It didn’t budge. A chill spread down her spine wider than any winter breeze. “John,” she whispered. “What is this?”

He took slow steps toward her. “Please, Aurora,” he said softly, “I just want to talk. And I thought…perhaps we could come to understand each other, before we leave.”

Aurora kept backing away, moving around the long sofa, across the library shelves and toward the balcony doors. “John, this is not the place, and this is highly inappropriate. Please let me out.”

But John’s expression darkened. “Stop running from me.”

In a blink, he crossed the room and grabbed her arm, yanking her toward him. His breath hit her cheek, hot, uneven—nothing like the calm, polished prince he pretended to be. “Your eyes,” he murmured. “They’re even prettier up close. I don’t think we’ve ever been this close before. Have we?”

“John—let me go.”

He didn’t.

Instead, he leaned in, pressing his mouth against hers. It was not a kiss. It was a taking.

She tried to shove him, clawing at his chest, crying out for help, but his grip tightened until her bones ached.

“Stop—stop!” she cried. “John—please!”

He didn’t.

So she kicked him hard. Right between the legs.

John collapsed backward with a sharp gasp, but recovered faster than she expected. Aurora bolted toward the balcony that overlooked the sea, but her heels betrayed her and she stumbled. John lunged, slamming her into a table. A sculpture toppled and shattered beside her as she fell, pain shooting up her arm.

John’s weight crashed down on her. The air left Aurora’s lungs in a strangled gasp as his fingers closed around her throat, crushing, relentless. Stone bit into her back as she tried to twist away, her heels scraping uselessly against the floor.

“How dare you,” he hissed, breath hot and shaking with fury. “I am your husband-to-be. You do not deny me.” Her hands flew to his wrists, nails digging in, but he was stronger than he looked.

Her vision swam.

Black crept at the edges of her sight.

“John—stop—please—” The words fell apart into sobs. She sucked for air that wouldn’t come, her chest spasming as panic tore through her. “Please…I’m sorry—please—” She screamed.

Not once.

Not quietly.

She screamed with everything she had left—calling names through choking breaths.

Her father.

Her mother.

Puruna.

Vince.

Anyone. Even Nere.

The walls swallowed her voice. The castle did not answer nor the Belfour guards outside the library.

John released her throat just long enough for her to gasp—only to shove her wrists down hard against the stone. His grip locked her there, iron and

final. “Relax,” he said, voice sickeningly calm now, almost gentle. “Stop fighting me,” he whispered. “You will make this uglier than it needs to be.”

She kicked wildly, heels striking nothing but air. Her sobs turned sharp and broken, her body trembling uncontrollably beneath him. “No—no—please—help me—!” she cried, tears streaming unchecked as terror flooded every thought. She thrashed, desperate, scraping skin raw against the floor, but he only leaned closer, breath steady, certain.

But no one came.

And then—

John’s hand slid up her thigh.

The room felt smaller. The shadows pressed all around. Her heartbeat boomed in her ears so loudly she thought it might burst free of her chest.

She felt everything collapse.

But then there was blood. Lots of blood.

John’s body jerked, his eyes widened. A wet choking sound escaped his throat as a sword jutted from his neck, pushed all the way through until the tip gleamed crimson behind him. Aurora screamed as he collapsed on her, bleeding out across her green dress. She crawled from underneath him and scrambled backward, hands slipping in blood, her vision spinning wildly.

Someone stood above her.

A man she had only ever heard whispers about. White hair spilled over his shoulders, pale skin like snow. The man her father feared. He wiped his blade clean on the sofa cushion as though the murder had been a minor inconvenience. “Well,” he said with a faint sigh, “one gone, many more to go.”

Aurora tried to stand, but her legs shook violently. She reached blindly for a book on the floor, clutching it as a shield.

The doors burst open. The two Belfour guards charged in, spears aimed directly at the man. “Prince John—!”

The white-haired man didn’t even look impressed. “Varium.” A bolt of lightning erupted from his hand, striking the first soldier. The man convulsed, blackened, fell dead. The second lunged, but Torm flickered, literally flickered, splitting into two versions of himself. One appeared behind the guard, grabbed his neck, and slit his throat in one smooth motion.

Aurora scrambled up and ran toward the exit crying, but another manifestation of the man appeared there first, slamming the doors shut and

spearing the handles together in a barricade.“Don’t,” he warned, pointing his sword directly at her face.

Aurora stumbled back, her palms bloody and shaking, tears flooding down her cheeks. “Please…please…” she begged.

“A thank you would be polite princess,” he replied dryly. “After all, I did just save you. A rather inglorious fate, being violated by such a dull royal man.”

Aurora trembled, unable to stop crying. “You killed him! The prince. You killed them all!”

“The prince? Oh, my darling…I didn’t realize.” The man said sarcastically. “A prince who behaves like that is hardly worth the breath he wastes. Trust me, all of you deserve to die. I will kill the rest of them here.” He bowed with mocking courtesy. “Proper introductions though, I am Torm Orwin of Caelithar, judge of the Aeralyns.”

Aurora clutched the bloody book tighter. “Are you going to kill me too?”

“Eventually,” Torm chuckled.

“How did you get in here?” she demanded, sliding along the wall toward the balcony again.

He pointed behind her. “The balcony, of course. I climbed up. Quite gracefully, I might add.”

“And, you are the one who killed all those people with the red mist,” Aurora spat. “You did this. You’re the murderer. The monster?”

Torm smiled. A slow, sharp smile that showed the edge of madness underneath. “How exactly did you come to that conclusion?”

“I heard my father during the banquet, he became terrified of you. When the people vanished, he pointed the blame toward a man with white hair. When nothing logically added up.” Aurora said as her voice cracked. “Why are you doing this?”

His smile vanished. “They call me a monster,” Torm sighed, voice cold as iron. “But the people who rule this country are the true monsters. Their ancestors enslaved mine. They slaughtered my people. They dragged the survivors into the depths of the world—into Noctenheim. Ruled by the cursed Tharûns.”

“Noctenheim? Tharûns?” Aurora repeated. “That’s not even a place.”

“Oh, it exists,” Torm said, stepping closer. “A kingdom buried beneath the land of Valdorin. A kingdom your father serves. Just like many other

royals, like this prince here I justly killed."

"My father would never—"

"He already is," Torm snapped. "I'm shocked you don't know—Eldoria, Drakhar, Belfour, Gornhelm—were the ones who approved it after the fall of Highmoor during the Sundering. Five-hundred and thirty years of slavery. Five-hundred and thirty years of torment."

Aurora's breath faltered. Was this what King Althren was saying to her father earlier? Was this actually possible? She remembered King Althren's words earlier. "Haven't you told them yet?"

Her father's response. "Not yet."

"Enough of this. I've already wasted enough time with you, girl. Where is your father?" Torm demanded. "Now. Tell me, or I will open your throat."

"You're going to kill me anyway," Aurora whispered.

He shrugged. "Of course I will. But lying to me will only make your death significantly much worse. Now, where is the king?"

Aurora swallowed hard and lied. "He's in the council room," she said. "On the next floor. Planning the royals' departure."

Torm's eyes narrowed. He suspected she was lying. But, perhaps out of arrogance and pity, perhaps out of limited time, he accepted it. "Very well," he smiled. "I will be back for you."

He stepped toward the doors, removed the spear, and slipped out. A click echoed as he locked her inside.

Aurora hesitated.

For a long moment she couldn't breathe.

Couldn't think.

The room was silent except for the wind outside and her own frantic heartbeat. Blood soaked her dress. Stained her arms. Dried warm and sticky on her neck. She looked at John's corpse. And the strangest, most horrifying thought broke through her panic: That man saved her. But not because he cared. He wanted her alive long enough to use her? She wasn't sure. Still—his blade stopping John…

She wrapped her arms around herself, nails digging into her sleeves, nausea curling deep in her gut. The thought made her sick—sick with shame, sick with fear, sick with the knowledge that if she stayed here even a moment longer, something inside her might fracture beyond repair.

She had to warn the castle. Her father and her mother. Anyone.

Aurora stumbled to the doors and slammed her fists against the wood. The sound cracked through the corridor, raw and desperate. “Help!” she screamed. “Please—someone help me!”

Her voice echoed back at her, thin and lonely. She struck the door again and again. Her hands burned, her throat ached. She kept pounding, sobbing between breaths, calling out until the words blurred into sound.

Time stretched, seconds felt like endless minutes.

No footsteps.

No answer.

Panic rose again, sharp and suffocating. She leaned her forehead against the door, shaking, fists still raised as if the wood itself might vanish if she stopped.

A click.

It was so quiet she almost missed it. The lock turned. The door opened slowly. Puruna stood on the other side. The color drained from her face the instant she saw Aurora—blood smeared across her skin, her hair tangled and dark with sweat, her body trembling so violently she could barely stand. Her gaze flicked past her once, just long enough to see the corpse in the corner, before snapping back in horror. “Aurora—”

Aurora didn’t let her finish. She collapsed forward, the strength finally gone, and Puruna caught her just in time. Aurora clutched her tightly, choking on a sob that tore up from somewhere broken and deep. “Puruna,” she cried.

Puruna wrapped her arms around her at once, firm and unyielding, holding her as if she would not let the world touch her again. She said nothing at first, only tightened her grip, one hand pressing protectively to the back of Aurora’s head.

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THE CRIMSON NIGHT

THE BELLS WERE THE FIRST WARNING.

Their sharp, metallic clamor ricocheted through the stone corridors of Eldoria castle as Aurora lifted the hem of her dress and hurried beside Puruna. Every step felt like running through a nightmare.

Her hands shook.

Her throat tasted of iron.

John’s blood was still drying on her skin.

She didn’t dare think about the library, not yet. If she thought about his body on the floor, or the way he’d pinned her down, or the warmth of his blood splashing across her face, no, she couldn’t.

Her lungs would collapse.

Puruna stayed beside her, gripping her arm tightly as guards sprinted past in full armor, shouting commands that dissolved into the thunder of boots on stone. “We need to reach my father!” Aurora called out, forcing her voice to stay steady. Somehow, impossibly, it worked. “Be alert—a man with white hair is inside the castle! Deadly! Armed!”

The guards nodded, already raising their spears, already forming defensive lines around her as they moved. Aurora kept pace, trying to swallow the cracks in her voice.

They crossed a hall-bridge between the upper towers, wind howling through the archways, carrying with it the faint ringing of city bells far below. The bells only rang like this for war.

For invasion.

And the screams were growing louder. Aurora's heart pounded so violently she thought it might bruise her ribs. She didn't know if she was running toward safety or toward the end of everything.

Maybe both.

They reached the final set of steps, guards flanking her on all sides. The shadows along the walls jumped and shivered, cast by torchlight trembling from some distant disturbance. Aurora pushed forward and burst into the long upper hall that led to her father's chamber.

She didn't knock.

She shoved the doors open. Her father, mother, Nere, and King Althren were gathered inside, deep in discussion—until they saw her.

"Aurora?" her father said, his face stiffening at the sight of her, pale, shaking, streaked with drying blood.

"Father, he's here. The white-haired man. The Aeralynian." Her voice cracked. She didn't care. "He's the one behind the red mist, behind everything, and he's inside the castle right now!"

Her father rose sharply.

Althren stood half a step behind him, eyes narrowing. Her father looked as terrified as King Althren, as they exchanged glances.

"What has happened to you?" her mother whispered, hand rising to her mouth. "Aurora, your face…"

But Aurora couldn't speak about John. Not with Nere here. Not with her father. Not while the screams of soldiers behind her were growing louder, closer, followed by flashes of bright blue lightning that strobed through the stair hallway.

The entire chamber trembled with the force of it.

"Ronan—" Althren snapped, urgency cracking through his usually controlled tone. "We need to leave. Right now."

Thunder slammed through the outer doors. Men were screaming now. Lightning flashed again. Althren strode to the far wall and gripped the iron candle-holder mounted in the wall. Aurora stared, confused, until he yanked it down like a lever.

The wall shuddered.

A seam appeared.

And then stone slid apart, revealing a narrow dark chamber lit faintly in violet hues.

Aurora’s breath froze and her mother grabbed her wrist. “Inside. Quickly.”

Aurora stumbled with her mother and Puruna, heart racing, glimpsing the terrified look Puruna gave her as they were pushed into the chamber. Ronan sealed the bedroom door behind them and ran back over to the chamber. Inside the chamber was a small round room, no windows, only a central pillar made of metal and inset crystal. The air tasted strange.

Her father stepped forward, wrapped the chain around his hand, letting the purple stone embedded on the front of his hand touch the metal sphere atop the pillar. “Hold on to something,” he said.

The walls slammed shut. Darkness swallowed them whole. Aurora cried out as the floor lurched and they dropped, fast.

The sensation was like falling down a void. Wind shoved against her dress and she fought to keep her dress from rising. Her ears popped. Someone—Nere, she thought, swore under his breath as the descent grew faster and faster until Aurora felt her stomach lift into her ribs.

Then—

A final jolt.

Light burst in through new stone seams as the walls slid open. Aurora staggered out, and froze.

A massive cavern stretched beyond them, glowing with an eerie purple luminescence. Four enormous arched windows ran across the cavern’s far wall, each one radiating violet light like open wounds in the rock. Jagged banners of Eldoria, her family’s banners. Hung from the cavern ceiling. And through the center ran two wide metal tracks. Aurora gasped when something enormous moved past her, taller than any man, forged of black metal with glowing purple segments. Its limbs moved with unnatural precision.

No face. No expression. Only metal and violet mist.

More followed. Dozens of them.

“Father…what are these?” Nere whispered, stepping back as one walked by.

“Shal’kors,” Ronan said grimly. “Keep close. Do not fall behind.”

“Shal’kors?” Nere whispered. Aurora had never heard the word. A hiss echoed from the tunnel across the cavern, and then—

A shape emerged through the violet-lit haze. A massive, metallic construct rolled forward. Something like a building made of steel and glass,

but moving on wheels. Steam billowed from the top.

Pipes rattled.

The ground trembled beneath it and it screeched to a stop. And then a voice spoke echoing everywhere. “Welcome, royals of Eldoria. The train to Noctenheim has arrived. Please prepare to board.”

Aurora froze. Her breath turned thin.

Noctenheim.

That name was said today, from the murderer.

This could not be real.

She felt sick.

Her father stepped aboard the train without hesitation. “Convenient. But good, it arrived. Come,” Ronan ordered. “We’ve no time, we must leave now.” And just like that, Aurora was expected to follow—expected to sit quietly while her entire world tilted into madness, the last hour had become a living Neth’rose for her.

As she stepped inside the train car, she saw plush seats, and shal’kors walking the aisles like attendants.

It looked civilized. Wrongly civilized. She sat beside her mother and Puruna, while Nere, Ronan, and King Althren settled across from them.

Her mother reached over and brushed Aurora’s hair back, but her hand trembled. “Aurora,” she whispered, eyes glossy with fear, “what happened to you?”

Aurora swallowed hard, voice barely audible. “John is dead.” Silence fell like a dropped curtain.

King Althren’s jaw tightened.

Aurora narrowed her eyes at him. No grief. No horror. Just irritation. Annoyance. As if John were an inconvenience and not his son. Her stomach twisted at the thought again. She looked to her father, wanting answers. Needing something to anchor herself, but her father only pressed his hands together and shut his eyes tightly.

The doors sealed. The train lurched forward. It rattled deeper into the earth, the violet lamps flickering across metal walls as Aurora held onto the armrest to steady herself. Every time the wheels struck a junction in the track, a tremor went up through the carriage. The thought of John and what he had tried to do made nausea rise in her throat. Tears came flooding down her cheeks, as she turned away from her family.

But no one spoke.

Not at first.

The weight of what had just happened in Eldoria castle. The screams, the lightning, the look in John's eyes, the blood soaking her dress. It all hung over her. She stared at her bloodstained hands. They wouldn't stop shaking.

Puruna sat rigidly beside her, lips pressed tight, knuckles white on her lap. She was terrified, too terrified to speak.

The shal'kors marching up and down the aisle, their joints hissing soft bursts of purple mist. Their metal feet clanged rhythmically against the floor, a mechanical heartbeat echoing through the train. Aurora flinched every time one passed.

Her brother broke the silence first, voice trembling. "Father…what of the soldiers? The generals? We cannot simply abandon them."

Ronan exhaled sharply through his nose. A sound Aurora recognized as barely controlled despair. "There was no choice. We had to leave. Once everything is settled, we will return. But for now, we must protect our family."

Aurora thought of Ludwig. Of the council who were still left. Her cousins. The people—maids she had despised, loved, tolerated. People she'd grown up with. And most of all, she thought of Vince. She was supposed to meet with him. She was going to run away with him.

But that dream was over.

Everyone was left behind. Locked aboveground.

King Althren leaned forward, elbows braced on his knees. "We must focus on the living now, Nere. The dead, and those soon to join them, will remain where they are."

Aurora lifted her gaze sharply at him. How could he say that? Innocent people were going to die from that Aeralynian, their people. She stared at him in disbelief. How could he sit there with dry eyes, calm as a stone, when his son's blood was still on her skin? Her father noticed her expression and her breathing quickened.

But Aurora was looking at the purple-white glow reflecting through the window. An enormous cavern wall passed outside, carved with lines and columns. Metal beams reinforced its height, vanishing upward into unending darkness.

She swallowed hard, her voice shaking. "Father…where are we truly going?"

Silence.

Ronan did not answer, he simply ignored her.

Aurora wanted to scream. She wanted to rip the walls apart.

But the train continued its descent into the earth.



Torm ascended the staircase like a storm given flesh. Soldiers in eagle-crested armor braced at the landing, swords raised. “That trembling little liar misled me,” Torm murmured, almost disappointed.

“Stand back!” one guard barked—

But the warning never finished. Torm moved forward in a blink with his blade already swinging. A single clean arc sent the soldier’s head rolling free. The second soldier cried out and swung wildly, but Torm caught the blade with an effortless twist, then drove his small dagger up through the man’s jaw.

Teeth cracked and the body dropped.

More soldiers surged from the corridor before Ronan’s chamber.

“Kill him! Kill him now!”

Torm’s grin widened. He extended his arms, sword loose in one hand, posture relaxed—insulting. They closed around him in a full circle.

“Or’kint,” he said as he spun once.

Lightning erupted in a perfect ring around him, a dome of crackling blue and white that consumed every soldier near him.

Armor blackened. Bodies dropped in twitching heaps, smoke rising from their joints. Two guards still blocked Ronan’s chamber door. They hesitated, and that was enough. A clone of Torm materialized behind them, silent as mist. One throat opened beneath the blade; the other guard staggered back as Torm himself buried his winged sword through the soldier’s chest.

Torm shoved into the king’s chamber.

Empty.

He froze. Then kicked over a chair so hard it splintered against the ground. “Where the neth’rose…are they!” he cursed. He stalked toward the balcony, flinging the doors open. Snow swirled in, melting instantly on the heat radiating off his furious face. Footsteps thundered behind him.

“General Vince! He’s in the king’s chamber!” a soldier shouted.

Vince burst in, sword drawn, eyes sharp. “Where is the family!?” Vince snapped. His gaze raked the room and fell on Torm. “What have you done with them!?”

Torm shrugged. “Darling…if I knew, I wouldn’t still be here.”

“Spread out,” Vince ordered the others. “By the authority granted to me. Surrender now, or face judgment.”

Torm laughed softly. “You’re worried about the wrong storm.”

Vince frowned. “What do you mean?”

Torm lifted his chin, eyes glowing like embers. “Isn’t it obvious now, you fool? The Crimson Night is about to begin. And there is nothing, nothing your pathetic kingdom can do.”



Evening deepened over Eldoria. The clouds thickened into a bruised mass overhead, obscuring the moon. The last shops were closing; families hurried indoors as the snow began to fall harder. A little boy wove through the crowd, clutching the small black cube carved with dozens of red eyes. The Oculis Vorum.

Torm’s instructions echoed in the little boy’s thoughts. Place it in the Vel’thar. Then walk away. Just walk away.

The little boy swallowed.

The pillar stood tall in the center of the square. Children played nearby, kicking snow, completely unaware of what was coming.

The boy trembled.

A soldier barked suddenly. Not at him, but at a hooded man behind him. “Hey you! Take off that hood!” The boy froze, watching from the edge of his sight.

Two guards shoved a stranger against the wall. “What kingdom are you from?”

“Drakhar kingdom! Please, I just carve mugs!” The hooded man said.

Their shouting drew eyes away from the Vel’thar. The boy knew this was his moment. Heart hammering, he climbed the stone steps, nearly tripping up to the pillar. With shaking hands, he lifted the cube and pushed it into the square opening of the pillar. It fit as though the pillar had been made for it.

Every eye on the cube snapped open, all of them, darting wildly in every direction without blinking this time. Ancient symbols carved vertically along the Vel’thar, ignited red, glowing as though blood flowed beneath the stone pillar. Lines spiraled upward, wrapping the pillar in swirling light.

A small tornado formed around it. Transparent, but threaded with red veins like living muscle.

People turned. Then screamed.

Soldiers rushed forward with their swords out. The tornado shot skyward, widening, climbing until it vanished into the clouds. The snow around the pillar melted into steaming puddles.

Faces. Stretched, withered faces with screams and roars, flickered inside the vortex as it rose. Bells rang across the city. A blast of wind exploded outward. The boy, the people, and the soldiers toppled backwards.

Then came the sky.

The clouds darkened to ink, laced with red lightning. A vast scarlet veil descended around Eldoria, encircling the entire city in an enormous dome of churning red light. It thickened…and thickened…and then became flesh. A massive, living wall, covered in blinking eyes. The pillar shook with a massive roar. The earth split. The Vel’thar rose, no, the earth around it sank. Revealing a colossal obsidian tower beneath, jagged with spikes, swallowing the square as it climbed higher and higher until its crown stood even with the distant castle towers.

People fled.

Screams echoed everywhere. The pillar atop the tower transformed into floating cubes, each covered in red eyes, orbiting the tower like flies. Then

they shot outward, slamming into the city with thunderous force. Wherever they landed, people died instantly, crushed or pierced or simply swallowed by the ground as the cubes melted into the stone.

Blood seeped up from the earth. A slow, rising tide.

Within minutes, Eldoria stood in a pool of dark red nearly a foot deep.

Children cried. Parents carried their little ones onto wagons, crates, anything above the seething water. Then there were flesh-walls that towered above, sealing the city and the castle. The sky was gone. Only flesh remained. A horizontal tornado ripped open the flesh ceiling, a swirling rift of black and red. A beam of red radiance pulsed inside it like a heartbeat. People stared upward, frozen between terror and disbelief. It was the moon, bloody and bright.

Then a voice rolled through the city. “Welcome, all! Today is a day unlike any other. A day of truth. A day of rebirth!”

People fell to their knees. Some prayed desperately to the Heliorens. Others cursed the Sovereigns of Light entirely.

“Today you join the great festival! The Arkilal! The Crimson Night!” The voice thundered with laughter. “We have gathered many souls…but not enough to bring forth our kings sadly. And so—” The blood around their legs began to ripple. “You will offer your flesh. Your bones. Your souls. For Lord Zareth…and the Nihilkins!”

The blood erupted.

Figures rose from it, skeletal forms wrapped in glistening sinew. From the fleshly ceiling came red mist and shadow-giants descending, dripping red mist. Flesh-beasts of all sizes clawed out of the blood-soaked streets. Some towering above rooftops, others crawling, slithering, snapping with Human teeth the size of hands. A monstrous thing with a single green eye loomed behind the little boy.

The boy turned and screamed in horror.



Back in the royal chamber, Vince stared past Torm from the balcony at the horror unfolding below. “What in Oryneth’s name is happening?” he muttered.

“General! What are your orders!?” the soldiers cried behind him.

Torm smiled faintly. “Justice.”

Vince hesitated. “Take the remaining men. Get to Ludwig and Kael. Defend the city!”

“What about you, sir?”

“I’ll handle him. GO!”

They ran.

The castle shook under distant roars. The voice echoed again across the sky.

“LET THE FESTIVAL BEGIN!”

Vince struck first, teleporting through the air with gale step, blade aimed for Torm’s throat.

“Leh’garo,” Torm whispered. Eight copies of him burst into the chamber, every one swinging.

Vince weaved and dodged, cutting through illusions. “San’trum!” A golden arc sliced across the room, severing Torm’s clones. The real Torm twisted aside and countered with a blast—

“VARIUM!” Lightning roared toward Vince. Vince teleported again, charging forward.

Torm snarled, spinning, “OR’KINT!” Electricity erupted around him, but Vince leapt back.

More clones materialized. Torm lunged with killing intent.“VARIUM!!!”

Vince planted his foot, raised his hand—“BOR’RAMU!” Flame met lightning. Lightning carved through flame. Flame tore through lightning.

Both strikes hit. Vince’s cheek split open, skin sizzling. One of Torm’s clones intercepted the blast, exploding. The real Torm slammed across the room, half his face burned raw, one eye bleeding. He screamed, clutching his face. “WHAT HAVE YOU DONE!? HUMAN FILTH!”

Vince staggered up, raising his sword again, shouting the firebolt again. The bolt of fire flew—

But Torm swapped with another clone. The flame struck the fake Torm and blew it apart. The real Torm appeared behind Vince, eyes blazing. He shouted the lightning cast once more.

Lightning punched through Vince’s chest. His body convulsed violently as he screamed—and he collapsed, armor glowing, flesh charred, smoke rising from finger joints.

Silence.

Torm fell to one knee, panting hard. His aetheris was completely drained. He could feel the void gnawing at his limbs.

“The neth’rose…” he hissed. He pushed himself up, then fell back down again onto the floor resting on the ground. He slowly turned his attention to the balcony where the snow had melted entirely, steam rising in plumes.

The air was hot. Stifling.

He looked out at Eldoria and all he could hear was screaming and the roaring of beasts. For a moment…Torm only stared.

But then, the corner of his mouth curved upward. This, all of it, was justice.

Justice for Caelithar.

Justice for the Aeralynians.

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THE BLOOD BELOW

FLORENCIA STOOD NEAR THE NARROW WINDOW OF THE INN CHAMBER, THE city of Eldoria stretching unseen behind the curtains. She was just another refugee now, like the many who had fled Ardester and the others. The curtains were drawn, shifting faintly in the winter draft, whispering against the stone walls.

In her palm rested a crystallized stone no larger than a plum. The Maverâck Stone was veined with faint silver fractures that pulsed like far off lightning trapped beneath ice on its surface.

It was her secret.

She had never shown anyone, not Eb, not Tina, not even that Elf. She couldn't tell anyone who she was and why she was here. They wouldn't understand.

But something stirred in her chest as she thought of Matthew again.

That Elf.

Reckless.

Stupid.

Brave beyond reason.

He had leapt into that dark pit without hesitation, for an old man and a soldier who despised him. He hadn't paused, hadn't calculated. He had simply let go of her hand.

He was an Elf. Why?

She could never do such a thing. No, not ever.

Not for her enemies in Serakos. Not for those who had stolen what belonged to her, her birthright, her future, her place, what once was hers.

And yet…the Elf had done it for those who hated him. What kind of Elf was he?

She lingered on the thought a moment too long.

“What am I thinking?” she whispered again sharply to herself. She tightened her grip around the stone as if to steady her mind. “I need to focus.”

She had stayed longer than she should have at Eb’s home. Grown closer than she intended. She had wasted time. And she was nowhere nearer to finding a shard while at his home.

Her gaze dropped to the crystal in her hand. “I will find it,” she breathed. Her fingers tightened until the edges bit into her skin. The fractures within the stone flared faintly in response, light stirring at her resolve. “I won’t die,” she murmured. “I will find a shard. I just need more time to weave through the Interstice. Just a little more.”

Her jaw crunched hard.

The room felt too small and too temporary. Like a borrowed shelter before the storm reclaimed her. “Thank you,” she said softly, lowering her eyes. “All of you. For your patience. For your courage. You sacrificed everything for me.”

Her voice thinned, but did not break.

“I will not let your lives fade into nothing. I will avenge you. And I will find this aetheris that will help take back what once was ours.”

The crystal pulsed once more in her hand, faint, but alive.

“I’m coming back, Shaleen. I am coming back.” She closed her eyes for half a breath, steadying herself, before sliding the crystallized stone back into her satchel.

But then—

“RUN!”

A rolling wave of Human panic surged up through the floors of the inn, rattling shutters, quaking lantern hooks, a sound so feral and collective it felt like the city itself had found a voice. All shrieking the same word. “RUN! RUN!”

Florencia fastened the clasp of her purple dress quickly, when she then heard a loud booming voice outside—and the sudden warmth of the air that made her pause mid-movement. The inn had been icy earlier, snow piling

against its stone walls. But now a strange heat pressed in from every windowpane.

She frowned, touched her neck, feeling sweat bead along her skin. “What…?”

She stepped into the hallway just as an entire family barreled past her. Mother clutching two crying boys, a father dragging a bag, all of them white-faced with terror. Florencia stumbled back against the wooden molding.

“Move! MOVE!” someone screamed down the hall.

Then she heard it.

The voice. No, not a voice at all. A presence. A deep, echoing call reverberating behind her ears, through her skull, like someone whispering from inside her own thoughts. She slapped her hand against her temple, thinking she was imagining it.

But she wasn’t.

The air itself hummed with something ancient.

“What in Elmira’s name is happening?” she whispered. Then even more people poured through the corridor, racing toward her. Shoving. Crying. Praying. Florencia pressed herself flat against the hallway wall, ponytail slipping over her shoulder, breath quick and uneven as they passed her. Her violet Vowed flame sparked around her left hand as she prepared.

Then she turned—

—and Florencia’s blood went cold.

A shape stood at the far end of the hall. A red skeleton, pieces of decayed flesh clinging to its ribs and limbs like rotten scraps of cloth. In its hand was a long black sword. No hilt, just jagged metal bent into a wicked edge. The skeleton jerked its head toward her.

It screamed. Not a Human cry. A shrill, stabbing, metallic scrape that shot needles into her ears.

Florencia gasped, slammed herself back into her room, and snapped the lock shut. The moment the bolt slid in place, the skeleton’s sword punched through the wooden door, driving through the panel as if it were wet bark.

“Elmira help me.” she muttered under her breath. More blades tore through the door.

Four of them.

Black, serrated, clawing for purchase as the undead tried to pry it open.

Florencia stumbled back gripping the Maverâck Stone more tightly.

Splinters flew across the room.

The hinges groaned.

The entire frame bent inward. Florencia spun to the window, ripped aside the curtains, and the world outside made her blood run cold. The entire ground was red. It felt like the Neth'rose.

People ran through it, splashing foot-high crimson waves. Eldorian soldiers hacked at grotesque flesh beasts rising from the blood water. Hippogriffs dove from the air, their riders firing arrows down into a chaos she could barely comprehend.

A tremor passed through Florencia's body. She turned back just in time to see the door break inward. Three skeletons burst through. She reacted on pure instinct.

She summoned her aetheris and thrust her palm toward the skeletons, and shouted. "VEYCLAST!" Three sharp violet shards exploded from her hand. Razor thin and glowing. They sliced through bone and rotten sinew cleanly, and the skeletons fell apart before they even reached her carpet.

But then she heard more.

A lot more.

A woman screamed in the hallway. Another shriek cut off abruptly. Florencia looked out the broken door frame and saw two women collapse, slashed open—before a massive sludge-creature barreled through the hall. Its round mouth split horrifically down its chest, swallowing both women whole as soldiers tried to hold the corridor.

Florencia choked.

She had seconds. No more. She yanked the window up, stepped onto the sill, and hurled herself into the open air. "VA'NERIUM!" A glowing purple wire shot from her palm, latching onto the stone of the building across the alley. The wire pulled taut, swinging her in a jolting arc. But another skeleton leapt from her window latching onto her leg. Her shoulder slammed against the wall with a rough grunt as the skeleton held on—forcing her to release the aetheris. They both plunged into the blood below.

The moment Florencia hit the surface, the blood surged into her mouth and nose, thick, metallic, hot like spilled animal guts. She gagged, thrashed, kicking wildly as the skeleton clawed over her and held her down.

She couldn't breathe. She couldn't see. Just blood. She drew her short sword under the blood and drove it blind. She felt it puncture. Felt bone crack. The skeleton melted—literally melted on top of her.

Florencia broke the surface with a gasp, blood streaming from her black hair down her face. She spat violently, shaking her head, her entire body trembling in panic. Then she heard more roars. The alleyway ahead boiled with demons. “What in Elmira’s name…” she muttered.

Behind her, arrows hissed through the air.

“MOVE! MOVE!” the Eldorian soldiers shouted, unleashing volleys of arrows that struck the nearest demons, bursting them into red sludge that sank into the pool. Florencia scrambled toward them, half-running, half-wading. What in the neth’rose was this?

But just as she neared them, she heard a scream. Another woman’s scream, from the left.

She turned. And saw something she would never forget.

A towering flesh monster held a woman by her ankles, lifting her high before dropping her into its vertical maw. Its mouth unfolded into a wet vertical slit. Other slender, eel-mouthed demons sucked men and women into their narrow jaws like serpents consuming rabbits.

Bone crunched. Screams choked off. Blood rained everywhere. Florencia gagged and staggered backward, face twisted in horror.

Then the ground shook. A massive two-legged titan thundered into the street, so tall it blotted out the rooftops. It crushed a family in front of her with one step, folding them into the blood like crushed berries. “W—what is this!? WHAT IS ANY OF THIS?!” Florencia cried, voice breaking.

Before she could flee, the rooftops above lit with green fire. “EERO! SHIL! TAKE IT DOWN!” a voice commanded. She looked up—

A Zanari. The eagle-person she’d seen in Darlimir, now armored and fierce, directing two Aetherians with one arm.

Eero summoned massive orbs of wooden roots wrapped in green flame. They grew mid-air, large as wagons, before slamming onto the titan, burrowing into its flesh, spreading roots through its body. He must have chosen the Vaylin path, class Hexborn.

The spell slowed the titan. Shil’s bow flared into existence, pure emerald fire. She drew back an arrow the size of a tree trunk.

“SHOOT IT!” the general roared.

Shil loosed. The arrow flew like a comet and struck the titan’s skull. The monster exploded, into chunks of meat and red spray. A towering waterfall of red washing down over soldiers and civilians. Florencia covered her head as a warm crimson wave drenched her again.

She gagged, slipped, staggered to her feet. Then she turned and ran south, toward the castle, toward anything that resembled safety. But there was no safety. This living nightmare was everywhere.

Suddenly a massive one-eyed demon erupted from the blood in front of her, round-bodied, long-armed, its singular green eye staring straight into her soul. Its mouth stretched wide, too wide, smiling at her with horrific joy.

It lunged.

But soldiers behind her attacked, spears striking its flesh, but the demon snatched them with its long arms, shoving them into its gaping mouth. Bones cracked like branches. Florencia screamed, sprinting backward. She fired another Va'nerium wire, hooking it to the roof, climbing desperately as the demon dove where she had stood a heartbeat ago. She climbed, slipped, and pulled herself over the edge. Screams rose below her still, echoing through the blood-flooded streets. Demon birds swooped above, carrying people like dolls and dropping them into the mouths of other demons. Others tore riders from hippogriffs mid-air, both beast and soldier spiraling to their deaths.

Florencia gasped for breath and looked up and froze. In the sky, above the black spire that had erupted where the Vel'thar once stood, within the horizontal tornado of black-red clouds—six shadowy forms floated there in front of the red bright moon. Still taking shape. Figures. Beings. Something ancient was gathering. Not arriving, gathering.

"The Interstice…I need to go there. Now," she whispered, her voice thin, almost swallowed by the strange heat pressing against her neck. Her hands shook as she pulled the Maverâck Stone from within her satchel. The crystal felt heavier than before, colder. She lifted it, channeling her focus, willing it to open, to split the veil, to answer her.

"No…" her breath quickened. She pushed her hand forward again and again, trying to force the connection. "Come on…"

The stone remained inert in her palm. "The neth'rose," she cursed, panic seeping into her tone. She thrust her hand outward again, summoning the weave, shaping the path to the Interstice the way she had done before, once, twice, again.

But nothing.

Tears welled and spilled freely down her cheeks now. "Drekk!" she cried, louder this time. "Drekk, drekk, DREKK!" Her body trembled violently. The air on the roof had grown unnaturally hotter, suffocating, the

stench of flesh all around, yet a thread of cold crept slowly up her spine, sharp and deliberate.

She felt watched. Not merely seen, known. As though whatever stirred in the tornado were peeling through flesh and thought alike. The shadows in the rising tornado above did not swirl aimlessly.

They coiled.

And for one terrible instant, she felt as though they were reaching for her specifically.

Hearing more monsters behind her, she ran. And suddenly the one-eyed demon climbed up beside her, wedging its claws up the building, hauling its grotesque body onto the roof, teeth snapping. She shot another veyclast.

Three violet shards pierced its eye. It shrieked and reeled backwards and fell from the roof—

—and then something grabbed her. A demon bird. It snatched her by the shoulders and wrenched her high into the sky. Florencia screamed, limbs kicking, her dress whipping in the wind. Below her, demons and soldiers clashed in a nightmarish storm. Above her, another bird collided with a hippogriff, both spiraling in a violent tumble. The bird carrying her shrieked and let go. “No—NO!” she screamed, falling, falling—

She plummeted straight toward the black tower. She fired her wire one final time, catching a spike, swinging hard into the black tower wall. Something cracked in her shoulder. She cried out, pain flashing white through her vision. Her boots, slick with blood, slipped on the stone. Below her, more demons climbed the spiked tower, licking their teeth, clawing upward toward her, grinning up at their meal.

Sobbing and shaking, she hauled herself into the open window of the black tower. She collapsed onto the black stone stair floor, bloody, bruised, terrified—then forced herself up, staggering up the spiral staircase. “Help… please…someone help me…” She dragged herself up the steps, echoing with distant screams from every corner of Eldoria. “Somebody save us…”

And behind her, the demons crawled in through the window.

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BELLY OF THE BEAST

"How much farther?!" Matthew shouted into the storm.

The cold bit at his face as Sechera cut through the sky like a streak of white winter fire. Snow clouds churned beneath them, and the wind tore past them in long, ragged howls. Matthew held tighter to the dragon's scales as Silvanus crouched behind him, grumbling curses every few seconds.

None of them knew how long the dragon intended to fly until reaching Eldoria. Sechera moved with purpose, wings spanning wider, his white eyes locked ahead. They broke above the storm clouds at last.

The sky above was pale and moonlit, beautiful in a strange, breath-stealing way. Matthew exhaled, finally catching his breath. Sechera glided over the cloud sea with a sweeping grace, scanning downward through the storm.

Then—

Lu's voice struck Matthew's mind. Fading around the edges like someone being dragged away. "Matthew. Matthew."

Matthew perked up.

Silvanus cast him a suspicious sideways stare, unable to hear a thing. The relic in Matthew's hand erupted with gold flashes, swirling white particles, and a pulse of energy like a heartbeat against his palm. But Lu's voice grew strained, as if some unseen weight pressed harder on him with every word.

"The relic…the relic…it will only awaken within the Arkilal," he said. "Oh mortal…hear me. You must reach the top of the Vel'thar, the obsidian

tower, before the ritual is complete. Only there…only there can the relic break this evil."

Matthew felt his chest tighten, the air around him somehow colder, heavier. His hands trembled.

"Once upon the Vel'thar, you must speak the words aloud," Lu continued, more urgent now, his voice like a flickering flame. "You must say, 'with this relic, I summon, one of the great Angels of Light…the Luminarch of Death…Ek'sheera.' Only then will he come. And only once."

Matthew swallowed hard. His palms were sweating despite the winter wind. "How will I know it's working?" he shouted into the wind.

A pulse moved through the air. Faint and ancient. "We…are with you, mortal…" Lu's voice was beginning to fade. Cracks formed in the edges of it, as if distance, or something worse, was pulling the great whale away. "You must—"

The voice cut out violently, like someone ripping a thread from the loom. Sechera dove into the storm and burst out the other side.

Matthew's mouth went dry.

Ahead waited a great red storm dome. A shadowed sky swirling with black clouds. But his visions didn't show him this. There were massive golden rings spinning the size of mountains, carved with eyes, rotating around Eldoria. The rings dipped into the earth and rose again, spiraling endlessly, watching everything.

Silvanus stopped breathing for a moment. "Neth'rose…" he whispered. Then louder, panicked, "Put us down! PUT US DOWN!"

"What?!" Matthew twisted toward him.

"I SAID PUT US DOWN! Tell this beast to land!"

Matthew shook his head. "We can't! Those people in there will die! And it is the only way we can save Tina and the rest of the kids. Did you already forget what the apostle said?!"

Silvanus pulled out his crossbow and aimed it at the back of Matthew's head. "Turn. Us. Around."

"What is wrong with you?! Why come with us if you're just going to abandon this now?!"

Silvanus's voice cracked into something Matthew hadn't heard before, actual fear. "I won't let you die, Elf! You walk into that thing, we'll never reach Drearth. We'll never save that girl and she will be gone forever. I

won’t allow us to throw away our lives for sovereigns I DO NOT TRUST! We don’t know if that apostle was telling the truth!”

Matthew clenched his teeth. “If we don’t stop this, Tina dies regardless! Everyone dies regardless! You have to trust me, trust them! There won’t be a tomorrow! We have no other choices here!”

Silvanus’s voice dropped into a trembling, hateful growl. “They’re all varn evil…every last one of them. The Makers never cared for mortals. It’s all a varn trick! It’s some sick game!”

Then Silvanus froze.

He wasn’t looking at Matthew anymore. Something else had taken his attention. And then Matthew saw why. Along the Neckwah mountain ridge were figures. Scores of them. Dark silhouettes standing atop the mountain with stone pillars crowned with flame.

Silvanus trembled, then stiffened—then erupted with roaring fury. “By the Sovereigns of Light…” he growled.

“Silvanus?! SILVANUS WHAT ARE YOU—?!”

Silvanus didn’t answer.



Silvanus slid himself off the dragon.

For a moment he was falling, then his cape tore open like flesh unraveling, splitting into his great black, leathery wings. His armor warped, blackened, sprouting spikes. His skull ignited with red flame, melting into his skeletal crown of fire. His sword twisted monstrously, growing small arms and hands—twitching tendrils, glowing veins of red light. Silvanus roared as he plummeted. “ARAMETH!!!!”

Silvanus struck the mountain like a flaming meteor, shattering stone beneath him as he rose in full Oathracki form…Tharrok, the Demon of Violence. His sword was scraping the ground, fire zipping past his

jawbones. Ahead of him stood a figure in a red cloak, masked beings, and towering armored shapes.

And at the center, a tall beautiful pale Half-Elf with long black hair watched.

Silvanus's voice rattled like bones in a furnace. He launched forward, only to slam into an invisible barrier. The air rippled red as lightning cracked along the dome.

"You shall not enter," said the masked figure in crimson robes, staff raised.

Silvanus howled, he could not care less, he slashed at the barrier with heavy, furious strikes.

Some of the Oathrackis giggled and laughed at him, mocking him.

Until his blade actually pierced through.

Then silence fell.

The barrier cracked, then tore open, and Silvanus leapt through, raging for Arameth's throat. But a blur of talons dropped from above. An Elven woman with long birdlike legs slammed onto his back. And with a swing of her long thin blade, she sliced off one of his wings cleanly. Silvanus roared in agony, whipping around and swinging wildly, missing by inches.

But still he charged at Arameth again, charging in a full sprint with his greatsword pointed at him.

Arameth only lifted his arm. And black sludge curled around his hand.

Silvanus shoved his blade forward—

But Arameth did not move. Not even a step. Something shifted at Silvanus's feet. Black sludge gathered beneath him. It surged upward in a single, precise motion, hardening as it rose. It pierced straight through his armor. Through him. Silvanus choked on the scream as the force drove into his chest, missing his heart. Pain exploded through his body, stealing the strength from his arms as his blade faltered mid-strike. He staggered, breath torn from him, eyes wide with disbelief.

Arameth gaze lingered on him. Calm and unmoved. Not with satisfaction or anger, but something quieter.

The robed figure above everyone on the cliff, tapped his staff once. A blast of unseen force slammed into Silvanus, hurling him through the air and off the cliff. Silvanus tumbled, smashing against rock after rock, plummeting down the mountain until he hit the bottom, rolling lifelessly into the snow. His form flickered back to his mortal body, as he coughed up

blood, limp, broken, and staring up at the sky. Silvanus clawed at his chest where the gaping hole was, spitting more blood as his eyes slowly closed, “A—Arameth….” he whispered.



High above, Arameth sighed.

“Thank the sovereigns someone got rid of him,” an Oathracki said.

The Elven woman beside Arameth and the Oathracki scoffed. “Don’t act like we are allies. Under different circumstances, we’d kill one another.”

“After this,” the robed figure Malbronne said, “you may return to slaughtering each other as you wish. For tonight, the Crimson Night unites all Oathrackis.”

The drums of black skeletons beside them thundered:

Doom…doom…doom…

Arameth looked skyward toward Sechera, watching Matthew’s approach like a child admiring a staged play. “Is that? The Elf…” he muttered to himself.

The robed leader stepped forward, staff raised high. Below them, the red mist spread across the valley of Eldoria like living venom. The air grew warmer. “We welcome our kings,” Malbronne, leader of the Oathrackis proclaimed, voice echoing across the mountain. “And we welcome the one above them—Lord Zareth! When enough souls are claimed, he will enter the mortal realm. His kingdom will be born upon Eldoria’s corpse!”

The wind shifted. The sky darkened further and the drums quickened.



Matthew dared a single glance over his shoulder and wished he hadn’t.

Silvanus was gone.

The man who was supposed to stay by his side…vanished into the darkness below, swallowed by the jagged throat of the mountains. Matthew could still hear the faint echo of Silvanus’s roar, distorted by wind and distance. The group of people atop the mountain, the strange gathering of figures, watched with the sounds of drums playing with anticipation, as though witnessing the inevitable fall of a character in a story they already knew the ending to.

Red lightning crackled across the clouds, lighting them in demonic flashes. Every bolt illuminated Matthew’s face, revealing raw trembling fear. Sechera’s breath rumbled beneath him, a deep huffing sound of agitation. The dragon’s scales shivered. Matthew held the orb close to his chest, gripping it so tightly his knuckles went bloodless. The orb pulsed faintly, and regret poisoned him.

He didn’t want to do this anymore.

He wished. Deep within himself, that he had never been chosen at all by Lu. That he was never cursed by Zareth. Everything he had endured, his siblings he had lost, the death of Eb, the murder of Pete, every nightmare that clung behind his eyelids like old ash…all of it collapsed onto him at once. His mind spiraled, and for a moment it felt impossible to breathe.

He thought of Elara and Finn. Of their faces when he had last seen them. Of little Finn and Elara clinging to his sleeve asking to play. If he had just played with them that night, instead of worrying about who he wanted to be. He could have stopped them from being kidnapped…and then he wouldn’t be here.

But what awaited him in the Crimson Night? What monster? What deity? What if Silvanus was right?

Lu had told him the orb would unleash atop the tower, but what if that was wrong? What if he was just a pawn meant to die so someone else’s

story could continue? What if he died here…and he wasn't reborn?

His siblings, they wouldn't be saved. Matthew felt himself slipping into panic, breathing faster and faster, chest tightening. What if he walked right into what the sovereigns wanted him to do? What if…the Heliorens did not care?

No, they are the Heliorens. Of justice, of goodness, of love. They are trying to help him, they have to be.

Whatever lived within the Arkilal…

It was going to change him. One way or another. It would change him.

"Crask…" he whispered, voice barely audible against the wind. The gold rings of the Arkilal loomed before them. Massive halos of spinning metal and flesh, each lined with thousands of shifting crimson eyes that tracked him with hungry fascination.

Sechera roared, the sound shaking the cold from Matthew's skin. The dragon folded its wings slightly and dove, slicing through thick layers of cloud.

Strangely, he found himself wondering if Florencia was all right. For reasons he couldn't explain, he thought of her dark eyes and the small smile she wore when she forgot to guard herself.

Where was she?

Was she even alive?

He had forgotten her in the chaos of it all and the guilt stabbed him.

But then Sechera opened its maw wide, white fire erupting forth like a stream of molten starlight. The fire shot across the sky, a long beam of shimmering, spark-filled destruction. It slammed against the red mist surrounding Eldoria, revealing the barrier stretched over the city like the membrane of a giant womb.

Sechera didn't stop. The fire drilled into the barrier as if carving a tunnel through a mountain.

A hole peeled open in the red curtain of mist. Pulsing, wet, like flesh parting beneath a blade. Sechera banked sharply and dove straight into it. Matthew ducked his head against the dragon's scales, clutching Ek'sheera against his chest as they plunged through. Behind them, the fleshy hole sealed shut within seconds.

And they were inside. The world changed instantly. The air became hot and thick. The walls around them pulsed. Everything was flesh. Sechera flew through a living corridor, its fleshly walls contracting and expanding

like the inside of a beast's lung. Eyes were embedded everywhere, blinking wetly, following him. "CURSED ONE…" the voices hissed.

Matthew stiffened.

"There! There! A cursed one enters!"

"He carries the Oblivion!"

"He must die! Death waits for him! Death! DEATH!"

The voices vibrated inside Matthew's skull, rattling his mind. Sechera roared at them and flew faster. Ahead, another barrier of flesh pulsed like a giant lid. Sechera inhaled sharply and unleashed another white-hot torrent of fire. The fleshy membrane convulsed and rattled, pulsating like a spider web struck by wind, and then burst apart in a violent explosion of blood.

The spray hit Sechera and Matthew like a wave of warm rain. Matthew gagged, but then he saw.

The city of Eldoria appeared beneath them. If it could even be called a city anymore. It was a nightmare made real. Buildings drowned in rivers of blood. Flesh titans walked the streets. Hundreds—thousands—of demons crawled, slithered, flew.

Tentacles erupted from walls. Skeletons with wet flesh and empty eye sockets dragged screaming civilians into the red water to be eaten. Giant demons devoured people whole. The castle towers had cracked. The sky was red flesh, red lightning flashing across it like veins. And at the center—

The black tower rose like a needle into the sky. Matthew knew, Lu had said it—the relic must be awakened there. Sechera angled their descent toward the tower…but dozens of black demon birds noticed them. Their screeches ripped through the sky.

The first slammed into Matthew, tearing him from Sechera's back.

He fell and clutched Ek'sheera with both hands but his grip slipped as the wind tore it away. Another demon bird swooped down, grabbing him by the legs, talons cutting into his skin, and yanked him upward. Matthew screamed, drawing his sword, but the demon let go.

He fell again.

Then another bird dove to catch him low near the ground, but an arrow struck its skull and it exploded in a mist of black blood. Matthew plummeted the rest of the way and crashed into the pool of blood below. It engulfed him instantly. He choked, scrambling to the surface, gasping for air. The relic—he saw it fall from his hands. It sank into the blood and the relic shot up a white beam, that pierced the air like a lighthouse. A beacon.

Matthew staggered upright, vision blurred, hair plastered to his face with gore. But then, small sludge demons crawled from beneath him in the blood like leeches, their tiny mouths chattering with razor teeth.

Instinct took over.

He swung his sword in wide arcs, slicing the tiny creatures apart. Blood splattered over him.

But more kept coming.

Dozens.

A tentacled creature struck him from behind. One tendril wrapping around his throat, dragging him backward into the blood. He struggled, choking under the blood water. Then arrows flew like silver streaks. Soldiers burst through the blood, hacking the demons apart. Matthew staggered and was suddenly hauled out of the water by two people he remembered from Eldoria's camp, Shil and Eero.

His chest heaved so violently he thought he might vomit. The entire world was a blur of red, red sky, red lightning, red water, red screams. He felt like he was suffocating under it. "Crask…" he gasped, wiping blood from his eyes.

"The Elf?" Eero said, shocked. "The neth'rose are you doing here Elf!?" he barked.

Matthew couldn't speak. His lungs shaking, panic filling him. Sechera roared overhead, spitting white fire that tore through demon birds. Matthew forced the words out through blood-soaked breath. "I can stop this…I need the relic. And I need to reach the top of that tower!"

Sechera released another wave of shimmering white fire that vaporized a cluster of demon birds.

The sky lit up like a second sun, the reflection shimmering across the bloody surface below. "A dragon…" one of the soldiers whispered. His voice was a stunned rasp. "By the sovereigns…a real dragon…"

But there was no time to marvel.

No time to breathe.

"I dropped the relic," Matthew said, swallowing hard. "It's glowing. It's over there in the blood. We have to reach it, or we're all dead!"

"A relic?" Eero snapped, incredulous. "What relic—"

Matthew cut him off, voice cracking, "I DON'T HAVE TIME TO EXPLAIN! You'll have to trust me! Just this once! Trust me or everything

dies!” But the ground trembled with the impact of approaching demons and there was no time for debate.

“Shil! Eero! TAKE THOSE BLIGHTED DEMONS DOWN—NOW! Where are those horses!?” Ludwig roared from a distance. The sound of his voice cracked across the city like thunder. Golden fire erupted from his claw palm as he shouted “Bor’ramu!” A blazing golden bolt of fire shot forward, incinerating a hulking demon that had been sprinting toward Matthew and the others.

“Captain!” Shil called out. “Where do we send the civilians!? Where the neth’rose do we even take them!?”

“NOWHERE IS SAFE!” Ludwig bellowed back without hesitation. “WE SAVE WHO WE CAN! GET THE PEOPLE TO THE ROOFS AND OFF OF THESE STREETS!” He spun, firing another bolt of golden fire into a mass of crawling flesh monsters. They exploded into chunks of red, showering the alleyway. A scream tore through the noise. A group of children were trapped. Six of them. Backed against a half-collapsed wall while small fleshlings and red skeletons closed in around them.

“Eero—WITH ME!” Shil yelled. She leapt across the blood like a dancer and flicked her hand. A fiery emerald bow materialized in her grasp. She drew back on the ethereal string and loosed an arrow of pure light. It struck the first demon in the head. Its skull imploded with a shriek. Eero followed, casting a whirlwind of emerald leaves that sliced the creatures apart. The air shimmered with aetheris, hot and sharp.

Matthew barely had time to take in the sight. He needed the relic. He needed it now. He vaulted off a wall, using gale step to propel himself upward. The rooftop met his feet with a jolt. Matthew braced and ran. But below him, Eldoria was dying. Men and women were being ripped apart. Children drowned in the lake of blood. The smell of burning flesh mixed with the thick stink of iron. Hippogriffs dropped from the sky with demon birds latched onto their necks. Every corner of the capital screamed.

It was the end of the world.

Matthew darted across the roofs. Breathing ragged, limbs burning, looking for the relic’s distinct white beam. He skidded to a stop as a massive, trunk-legged demon smashed through a building. He turned and saw General Kael, as he stood atop a half-destroyed wagon, swinging his great sword in wide, brutal arcs.

The demons circled him like wolves.

Kael roared, stabbing the great eye of one of the creatures. It collapsed, dissolving into blood and intestines, but more swarmed him instantly. Kael fought like a man possessed, protecting a cluster of survivors hiding behind him, the last barrier between them and death. But even great warriors fall when the world is collapsing. More and more demons surged. Kael's sword lodged in one creature's jaw and he couldn't free it in time. Demons grabbed his legs. Others seized his arms lifting him up. They tore him apart.

Matthew turned away, a scream caught in his throat, bile burning inside. His nightmares had not been exaggerated. They had been merciful.

Suddenly, light.

A faint white glow reflected off the rooftops. Matthew turned and ran toward it remembering his mission. He reached the edge of the roof and looked down.

There.

A soft beam of white light pierced through the surface of the blood.

The relic.

Matthew jumped, landing with a splash, the blood water soaking him.

But as he reached for the relic, the surface churned. A demon rose from the red water. A towering sludge beast with a cylindrical feeding tube extending from its chest. The tube was latched around the relic like a mouth. And two people, one woman, one soldier, were tangled in its tentacles, weak and gasping like they had been submerged for far too long.

"Varn…" Matthew breathed. The demon peeled open a dripping red eye, smiling with jagged teeth forming across its surface.

Then it lunged.

Matthew sprinted up the wall of the building behind him, and teleported. He launched himself into the air, and descended like a lightning strike, driving his sword directly into the demon's eye. The beast let out a horrific screech, its body convulsing violently before collapsing into flesh.

The relic fell.

The two captives fell.

And Matthew fell with them. He hit the blood water hard. His chest heaved. Every nerve burned. He forced himself upright.

Grabbed the relic.

And then he hauled the soldier and woman to their feet, but it was too late. A horde of demons poured down the street like a river of limbs and mouths. Behind them, more skeletons rose from the blood, their blades

dripping. Matthew stepped in front of the woman, sword raised. His breath trembled with fear, “Get out of here!” he cried.

But he never noticed the demons behind them.

He spun too late. Dozens surrounded them, laughing, clicking their tongues, eyes bulging with hunger.

Matthew swallowed. Hopelessness settled in him. “I’m not going to make it to the tower. Everyone is dying….” he muttered.

A small demon rushed him. Matthew turned and killed it. Another came —killed. Two more—killed.

But they kept coming.

They were endless. “Lu…help me…” he whispered.

Something large erupted from the blood, a tentacled monstrosity, and immediately wrapped its tendrils around the soldier. The man screamed but vanished inside the demon’s gaping maw.

The woman shrieked, stumbling back, but a red skeleton lunged and grabbed her by the ankle. She hit the blood water with a splash.

Matthew snapped.

He charged, slashing through skeletons, bones and rotten flesh exploding with every strike. But when he finally cleared a path—

The woman was already halfway inside a monster’s mouth. Matthew watched helplessly as she was swallowed alive. He staggered back, breath wild, vision shaking. Then, he let out a scream in horror as he was surrounded.

Demons were everywhere. And he was suddenly grabbed. A demon lifted him high by the waist, dangling him above its drooling mouth. Matthew stared straight into its throat, lined with bodies and acid.

Then a bolt of golden fire blasted the demon’s head into a burst of steaming gore. Matthew fell. Smacked into the blood, rolled, gasping. He heard hooves. Lots of them splashing through the water. A wave of Eldorian soldiers galloped into view, flags raised, armor drenched in blood.

Ludwig led them.

The General’s green cape billowed behind him as he fired rapid barrages of aetheris fire, each bolt killing a demon in fiery explosions.

“For ELDORIA!” the soldiers roared. Arrows rained over Matthew’s head, taking down skeletons closing in on him. The soldiers surrounded Matthew and then a soldier grabbed Matthew by the arm. “Lad—are you… rauk—it’s that drekking Elf!”

But another soldier shouted, “GENERAL! There’s no escape! The city is sealed! We are trapped in this neth’rose, by the flesh wall!”

Ludwig scanned the battlefield, rage, grief and duty boiling together, and his eyes locked on the black tower. “That tower!” he yelled. “Whatever this is, the source originally started there! Has anyone seen General Kael!?”

Matthew stood up, but more demons surged again and Ludwig’s soldiers formed a tight circle around him and Matthew, blades gleaming. Matthew held up the relic. It was glowing brighter now. Like it sensed its moment was coming.

“I can end this,” Matthew yelled. “But only if I reach the top of that tower!”

A soldier pointed accusingly. “That’s the Elf who murdered that young man in Eldoria! We cannot trust him!”

Another echoed him. “He murdered Pete! He’ll betray us again! He’s probably the one behind all of this!”

Matthew was shaking as the soldiers protected them from the demons. “Look around you! We don’t have time! Do you think any of that matters now!? Do you think arguing about your past grievances is worth the whole world dying!?”

The demons approached again. Ludwig’s beak jaw clenched. “Jump on,” he said, holding out his claw hand.

Matthew didn’t hesitate. He grabbed Ludwig’s feathery forearm and pulled himself onto the horse, clutching the relic.

Shock rippled through the soldiers.

Ludwig glared at them, voice cutting through the battlefield:

“NONE OF THAT MATTERS NOW. If these demons succeed—we ALL DIE. Your Sovereign Lu did NOT abandon you! If you haven’t realized, that dragon up there is proof! That is the dragon of winter, Sechera! One of the dragons of Korineth, that serve the Heliorens!” Ludwig looked around at the scared soldiers. “So if this is our last charge—if this is how we die—THEN WE DIE AS LUMANIANS! FOR THE SOVEREIGNS OF LIGHT!!!!” He raised his claw hand. “FOR ELDORIA!”

“FOR ELDORIAAAA!” The army thundered forward. Straight toward the center where the black tower was. The earth shook beneath them as Ludwig’s cavalry stormed through the drowned streets of Eldoria. Horse hooves splashed violently through the blood pool, sending waves of red

across shuttered doors, fallen bodies, broken crates, and shattered weapons. The demons reacted instantly. Swarms of red skeletons snapped their heads toward the sound. Flesh beasts erupted from beneath the surface, their shrieks rippling through the burning sky. Demon birds dove from above, talons extended.

But Ludwig did not slow. He did not flinch. He did not even blink. “SPEARS UP!” he roared. Soldiers behind him raised their arms, and the demon birds slammed into the spears and burst into black blood. Matthew clung to Ludwig’s shoulder, gripping the relic so tightly it felt like it would cut into his palm. The white light pulsed rhythmically. In front of them, Shil and Eero appeared racing along the rooftops while villagers were on other roofs protected by soldiers—with other soldiers, helping to clear a path. Shil’s emerald arrows rained down in streaks of light. Each arrow slicing and obliterating demons.

Eero jumped to another roof, shouting, “LEFT! THEY’RE FLANKING LEFT!” A wave of thin, serpentine flesh beasts slid down a collapsed balcony toward the cavalry.

Ludwig raised his hand. Another golden firebolt rushed forward, turning the creatures into vapor. Their screams dissolved into the air. But for every demon they killed. Three more crawled out of the blood. Matthew’s heart wouldn’t stop hammering. His ears rang with screams.

So many screams.

It tore and chipped at him. It burned something deep inside him that he didn’t even realize could ignite. They rounded a corner and a massive titan demon blocked the street. Easily three stories tall, its legs thick as twisted trunks, its mouth a wide crescent of bone-like teeth.

Soldiers gasped. Horses reared.

“KEEP GOING!” Ludwig commanded. The titan roared and swung its massive arm toward them. But something tore across the sky above.

Sechera.

The white dragon slammed into the titan’s head, claws ripping through the flesh, white fire blasting out of its maw. The titan toppled, collapsing into the pool of blood with a mountainous splash. Sechera circled, its wings beating so strongly they blew aside a group of low-flying demons. A soldier shouted in awe, “LU BLESS US—THE DRAGON OF WINTER FIGHTS FOR ELDORIA!”

And for a moment, just one, Matthew felt hope.

But then he looked up.

He saw the sky. And the hope cracked like glass. The swirling tornado above Eldoria was changing. The red mass churned, deepened, and the shadows inside were no longer vague shapes—they were becoming bodies. Six figures, colossal and horrifying, forming into flesh.

He recognized them. He had seen them in his visions. The Nihilkins. Four nearly complete, two still forming behind them. Their silhouettes shifted as if reality was struggling to contain them. One bore curved horns and a floating orb between them. One had a pyramid head with spear-like spikes erupting from its back. Another had a splattered, smear-like form, dripping and reforming constantly. One resembled a thorned tree twisted into Humanoid shape, its limbs coiling like tentacles. The middle. Still forming, was larger than all of them. The one behind. Still a whisper in the storm. Matthew's stomach churned.

This…this was beyond monsters.

Beyond aetheris.

Beyond war.

This was the crossing of realms. This was the end of mortal existence.

A soldier galloped alongside Ludwig. "GENERAL! TOWER AHEAD!" Matthew followed their gaze. The black tower rose like a spear through the center of Eldoria. Tall, jagged, unnatural. Every alley Matthew looked down was full of soldiers fighting off demons to protect people. Villagers were above on the roofs with Eldorian and some being Belfour soldiers, while the other villagers hid inside the buildings. Demons swarmed the black tower's sides, crawling up its walls in black clusters.

At its peak, the wind ripped violently in all directions. The air was distorted. Like heat waves, but wrong. "We're almost there!" Matthew shouted. And then—

Matthew saw it too late.

Three demon birds slammed into Sechera mid-air. Their talons buried into the dragon's wings, tearing chunks of flesh. Sechera roared and spiraled downward, spinning, screaming, forced to land atop a collapsed marketplace. It rolled, crushing several demons beneath its weight before rising again, blood dripping from its scales. The cavalry swerved around a fallen cart, demons lunging from the shadows. Soldiers sliced through them, horses trampling anything that crossed their path. But behind them—

A scream.

Shil.

Matthew whipped his head around. A wave of demons surged up the walls beneath her. She shot arrow after arrow, but she was being cornered from all sides. Eero shouted for her, leaping across the rooftops. Only to be snatched mid-air by a demon bird that ripped him off the roof and pulled him down into an alley.

Eero's scream cut short. Matthew's throat tightened painfully.

Eero. Shil. Kael. Hundreds of other soldiers and civilians gone.

The world tilted and blurred. Matthew felt the edges of panic closing in, making it hard to breathe. Ludwig snapped him out of it. "DON'T LOOK BACK! YOU LOOK FORWARD! DO YOU UNDERSTAND!?"

Matthew forced a breath. "Y—Yes!"

"HOLD TIGHT!"

The cavalry charged through a final street. This one choked with mutated corpses and flesh beasts, but Ludwig's men tore through them. They finally reached the base of the tower. Ludwig pulled to a stop and shouted, "MEN! FORM A WALL! CLEAR THE ENTRANCE!" The soldiers complied instantly, creating a shielded perimeter around the tower's base.

Shil stumbled into view, blood-soaked and exhausted, but alive. She joined the defensive line, arrows materializing in rapid succession. Ludwig grabbed Matthew's arm. "THIS IS IT! GET UP THERE! Do what you must Elf!"

Matthew nodded, jumped off the horse, and sprinted toward the tower's entrance.

But as soon as he crossed the threshold. A demon burst through a window. It lunged onto the stairs before him, two legs, one massive blade-like arm, a grin carved across its flesh. Matthew gritted his teeth and raised his sword.

The demon charged. They clashed. His blade met its blade with a clang that rattled. Pain shot up his forearm.

The demon was strong. He ducked under a slash—rolled—stabbed—but it deflected him easily. Matthew's lungs burned. His strength was failing. He had maybe one gale step left in him before his aetheris collapsed. The demon hissed and leapt at him.

Matthew braced, but it was stupid. It attacked predictably. Matthew shoved his sword upward. Straight through its chest. The demon froze,

trembled, and collapsed into a heap of flesh. He didn't stop to breathe.

He ran. Up the spiraling black staircase, higher and higher, until sweat poured down his face and blood soaked his clothes and armor. More demons burst through windows. He fought them. He killed them. But he kept going.

And then his arm with the relic got snagged.

He fell.

Something had him. Matthew looked down and felt his heart stop. A demon latched to his left arm, its teeth sinking into muscle and the relic trapped inside the beast's mouth.

It ripped his arm off. Matthew screamed, so loud the sound scraped his throat raw. He collapsed onto the stairs, vision flickering. Blood poured out of him in waves. He stabbed the demon again and again until it dissolved. His sword slipped from his fingers. Matthew reached for the relic with the other arm he abandoned the sword with. He stood up and pushed himself forward with his legs, leaving a trail of blood behind him. Tears blurred his vision.

He wasn't going to make it.

He couldn't even stand. He was—

"MATTHEW!" A voice, a hand, violet flames. Florencia.

She killed the demons swarming the staircase behind him, her eyes wide with terror and disbelief as she reached him. "Your arm—Matthew, what are you doing here? How are you here? Your arm—"

"Forget it!" he coughed up blood, voice tearing. "Get me to the top!"

Fear crossed her face, but she listened. She followed him up and together they climbed the final steps, Matthew gasping with every movement as blood dripped down each stair. They emerged onto the rooftop. The sky boiled above them. The Nihilkins were almost fully born.

Matthew raised the relic with his remaining arm. "With this relic…I summon, one of the great Angels of Light. The Luminarch of Death… EK'SHEERA!!!!"

The relic pulsed. The tower trembled. Florencia's eyes widened. A massive shadow fell over them. A demon bird dove from the sky. Florencia spun. Matthew turned and saw it at the last second. He pushed her. The demon bird missed her and slammed into him. Matthew pushed the relic into Florencia's hands and went flying over the edge.

The wind stole his scream.

Florencia tried to reach for him, her fingers inches from his—

But he fell.

And as he plummeted, he saw the relic on the rooftop glowing brighter in Florencia's hands. Glowing brighter and brighter. "I did it…" he thought.

Matthew understood then. That this was the end.

This is where it always ended…this was how he died. This is what his visions pointed toward. Wind howled past him as his body tumbled through the air. Eldoria stretched into a blur of red sky and black stone. Above him, the relic's white brilliance swelled until it swallowed the top of the tower, its glow burning like the sun. Faces flooded Matthew's mind, Finn's laugh, Elara's stubborn grin, the quiet evenings with his parents back in Liora. All the promises he made. All the hopes he carried. All slipping away with the hot air rushing past him.

He whispered through trembling lips, barely able to hear his own voice over the roar of the Crimson Night, "My life is now yours."

The visions had warned him. The curse didn't lie. This was the moment it had shown him over and over. He was meant to die here. At the heart of the Arkilal, fulfilling the will of the Heliorens. Below, soldiers, villagers, and demons alike turned upward. General Ludwig froze mid-strike, eyes widening as the tower erupted with a deafening shriek and a blast of white power.

The relic awakened.

Ek'sheera's relic unleashed. And a beam of pure light carved into the flesh ceiling.

The shockwave hit Matthew mid-fall. A violent pulse slammed through his body, stealing the breath from his lungs and painting his vision in red. The pool of blood beneath him surged upward. Demons paused, staring skyward, their many eyes reflecting the white beam as if the very light commanded their stillness.

Everything went silent.

And Matthew's sight dissolved into darkness.

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THE LUMINARCH OF DEATH

MEN WERE SCREAMING.

Some fought blindly, others still held the line, but every soldier, no matter how battle-hardened, froze at the same moment. A flash of light erupted at the top of the black tower, bright enough to bleach the blood-red haze from the world. Even the demons skidding across the blood-flooded streets halted mid-frenzy, their jaws slack, their many eyes reflecting the sudden brilliance.

The sky cracked with thunder.

A blinding white beam shot upward from the pinnacle of the tower, ripping apart the crimson clouds and flesh ceiling, turning the crimson gloom into a harsh imitation of dawn. Lightning forked across the clouds. Mist formed within the beam, then spilled downward like a falling ocean of pale, ghostly water.

Sechera descended with a roar that shook shattered rooftops. The dragon landed upon the tower summit where Florencia stood, trembling.

She gasped, stumbling back into a defensive posture. Because in any other moment of her life, a beast standing before her would have meant certain death. But Sechera only lowered his head, wings tilting downward like ramps. He was offering her a way out. Florencia blinked through the stinging white glow.

Why? Dragons did not serve mortals, at least that’s what every child grew up hearing and what her mother taught her during her studies. Dragons were myths, warnings, creators, and omens…not allies. Yet this

one huffed impatiently and nodded at her again, the massive scales of his neck rippling like armor plates coming alive.

The sky above convulsed.

The black clouds that formed from the relic were knitting themselves into a monstrous shape, long snout, arched spine, towering ears, and a wolfish silhouette of impossible size. In the hollow sockets of the cloud-creature's forming head, white light burned like two moons.

Florencia didn't think. She sprinted across the black obsidian ground, climbed the lowered wing, gripped the ridge of horns and spikes embedded in Sechera's spine, and held on as the dragon thrust himself from the tower.

The air shrieked.

And the cloud-shaped beast finished forming, not of mist, but of shadow and white fire.

Ek'sheera. The Luminarch of Death.

The werewolf-angel slammed onto the ground with both hind legs, its landing shaking the ruined city like an earthquake. Shadow-mist poured off its fur, rising like black steam. Demons scattered in every direction, their confidence smashed by the arrival of something far older and infinitely more terrifying.

An angel.

General Ludwig, still covered in dried blood and soot, rallied the surviving soldiers and civilians, leading them away from the tower as Ek'sheera unleashed a deafening roar. Florencia clutched Sechera's scales as the dragon carried her to a safer rooftop.

The Luminarch tore apart the remnants of the black tower with one swipe of his massive claw.

Then he attacked again.

A beam of white light burst from the Luminarch's throat, sweeping across the horde of demons. Every abomination that the beam touched disintegrated, melting, folding inward, then exploding into clouds of crimson blood and melting flesh. Ek'sheera turned its gaze upwards toward the Nihilkins and unleashed another beam of white light. The four Nihilkins scattered. The two unfinished shadows disintegrated on impact. Ek'sheera's strike was never meant to hit them. The light slammed into the red moon behind them within the tornado. Cracks split the moon's surface as it shattered.

The red flesh barrier peeled downward from the edges of the city like the shedding of a monstrous serpent. It dissolved into the blood ground. While the lake of blood stayed—revealing a graveyard of countless skeletal remains. Horses, hippogriffs, mothers, fathers, and children.

Then—

Florencia's breath stopped. She looked up. High in the sky hovered the four colossal Nihilkins, no longer made of shadow, but of flesh, bone, and nightmare. Krex—shrouded in robes of darkness, faceless except for a black void crowned in metallic thorns. Molcaris—a writhing gray mass of thorned vines and spines, each movement like a garden of spears being born. Naxus, a gigantic floating eye encased in rotating plates of armor. And Sereniel—a skeletal titan infused with a furnace of orange flame, crowned with horns that curved outward into a ritual circle. They stared down at the Luminarch…then shot off into four different directions across the sky like living meteors. Free upon the world.

The Crimson Night ended with their departure. The demons all vanishing into the blood water or black mist. Ek'sheera stood amidst the ruins, shadowed and silent, surveying the dead city with something almost mournful. Florencia watched from the rooftop.

But the Luminarch looked down at the broken remnants of the tower. At the corpses. At the place where Matthew had fallen. Matthew's body lay half-buried beneath rubble that had fallen from the shattered tower, his right leg crushed beneath a stone block, his left arm torn off by the demon. His face was pale, lips blue, eyes shut.

Florencia pressed a hand to her mouth. She didn't even know him. Not really. And yet the sight of him, broken and discarded like a forgotten toy. Something painful twisted within her chest.

He deserved better than to die alone on a pile of ruins. She turned away, but then heard it.

A deep rumbling, stone shifting, and wind swirling.

She whipped her head back. Ek'sheera unraveled into a cyclone of shadow and white light. The vortex shrank as it descended, closing in around Matthew. She felt the hair on her arms rise as the Luminarch dissolved fully into the spiral…and then entered Matthew, disappearing entirely.

His chest rose. Fell. Rose again.

She froze. No—that's impossible.

Florencia slid down from the rooftop and staggered forward. “Gravon’s love…” she whispered. She broke into a run, splashing through the blood, and dropped beside him. She leaned closer, hand hovering inches above his chest, afraid to touch him—as if the slightest movement might undo whatever miracle had just taken place. Then pressed down.

A heartbeat. Weak, faint, but there. Alive.

Then she saw his arm. His left arm was whole again, but it was no longer flesh. Obsidian-black, smooth as polished glass, faint light moving beneath the surface. His right leg had reformed the same way. Sleek, dark, strange.

Florencia swallowed hard.

She hooked his arm over her shoulder and began dragging him through the blood-soaked ground. “Drekk…” she cursed under her breath. “You’re heavy…” Around her, the survivors moved like ghosts. Soldiers gathered the wounded. Others knelt beside the dead.

A man’s voice broke through the noise, trembling. “I’m sorry, Shil…I’m so sorry. I’ll tell your family. I promise…”

Florencia’s thoughts collapsed in on themselves. Nothing made sense, none of it—and then her stomach lurched violently and she vomited. She tasted iron, blood, the memory of screams. Of bodies being torn apart. Tears streamed down her face. “I can’t…” she choked. “I can’t…” She had trained. She had endured the Interstice. But this—this was not that. “Drekk…” she cursed, wiping her mouth with shaking fingers. She looked down. Her reflection stared back from the blood pooling at her feet. Distorted. Red.

She forced herself to stand and looked out across Eldoria.

Families huddled on rooftops. Soldiers limped toward the southern gates. The dragon that had saved her had vanished into the north.

Eldoria was gone…

The city drowned. Bodies floated in the red water. Horses, hippogriffs, men, women, and children. Her stomach twisted again, but nothing came. The Interstice had never denied her entry. Why hadn’t she been able to leave on the roof? The Maverâck stone—it hadn’t worked. Why?

Her gaze dropped back to Matthew.

For a moment—just a moment—the thought came.

Leave him.

The mission mattered more. The shard mattered. Newport.

No, her jaw tightened. “I’ll get you to safety,” she muttered. “That’s all. Then I’m gone.”

Newport. That’s where she needed to be. She needed to regroup with the others. If any of this was tied to the Shards…it had to be.

“Get the people back to the castle!” a voice shouted in the distance. “Move! We regroup there!”

Florencia glanced over.

A Zanari was leading the remaining soldiers, his white feathers streaked with soot, voice cutting through the chaos.

Nearby, a man clutched a woman’s body to his chest, rocking as he wept.

Florencia looked away. “Rauk…” She bent down, hauled Matthew up again, and began dragging him through the blood. “I’ve got you,” she muttered. “You’ll live. You hear me? You’ll live.”

He didn’t respond. Her thoughts turned again, unraveling, circling back. The thing above the tower. The wolf-shaped shadow, the angel. The way it had entered him. Her grip tightened. What was that? And the beings in the sky…

The Nihilkins.

The Solvaran spoke of them. Her mother had spoken of them, but those were stories. Weren’t they? “One Eye Gorin…” she whispered. “One Eye Gorin would know…”

But even as she said it, she knew. No one would believe what she had seen. No one.

“General Ludwig! We found Eero Aras!”

Florencia turned.

“And?” Ludwig called back.

“Dead, sir!”

Ludwig’s expression hardened, grief flickering beneath command. “Bring him. When Lord Benedict returns with the others, his son will not be left here.”

A woman rushed forward weeping, grabbing Ludwig’s arm. “My son—please—I can’t find him—”

Ludwig steadied her. “Take two of my men.” The soldiers moved without hesitation.

Florencia clenched her teeth. Then—

Wind thundered overhead, and she looked up.

Sechera. The dragon returned and descended. He landed heavily upon a broken platform, setting a black-armored knight onto the broken platform below. The surrounding soldiers recoiled, pulling back in fear. The dragon turned his head. His gaze found Florencia. Then he lowered his wing. Again, an invitation.

Florencia stared. “Why?” she breathed, more to herself than the dragon.

The dragon huffed, impatient, and tilted his head toward his back. She stepped backward, dragging Matthew with her. “I can’t. I need to get him to the castle—”

The dragon roared. The sound shook her bones. He lowered his wing further. Closer. More insistent.

Florencia hesitated. Then, cautiously—“Can I bring him?”

The dragon stilled and then nodded once. That was enough.

Florencia dragged Matthew forward and laid him carefully across the broken stone. Then she climbed onto the dragon’s back, gripping the ridges along his spine.

Sechera reached down, lifting Matthew in one claw, the black knight in the other. Then he launched. The city fell away beneath them. Florencia clung tightly, breath stolen from her lungs as the wind tore past her. But below—

Eldoria was gone. Collapsed towers. Burning streets. Fields of bone beneath a sea of blood. And as they rose higher—

Snow began to fall. Soft and silent. Drifting over a city that had just drowned in death.

Florencia stared. She couldn’t speak. Her mind refused to settle. The stories were real, everything her mother had taught her—it was all real.

And worse than she had ever imagined. She let out a slow, shaking breath. “I don’t understand this world at all…” she whispered.

Below them, the ruin stretched endlessly. Something ancient had been released. Something beyond her.

And Florencia finally understood she had been pulled into something no mortal was meant to survive.

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WITNESSES OF THE KINGS

THE LAST LINGERING TRACES OF THE CRIMSON NIGHT COILED AWAY INTO the clouds, leaving behind a red lake of its horrors. The gathered Oathrackis stood in silence, watching the devastation as if observing the aftermath of a grand performance.

"The festival is over," the red-cloaked figure Malbronne murmured, his voice muffled behind the smooth white mask. Malbronne's staff tapped once against the stone, sending a ripple of red lightning through the air at his feet. "Four of the six kings have been born."

A few of the Oathrackis shifted uncomfortably. One of them spoke. "But Malbronne…there are seven kings. Why do we only speak of six?"

Malbronne inhaled slowly, as though the question pained him. "The last Nihilkin you speak of is Rava'thun," he said. "And he is already in the mortal world, hidden in the depths, fleeing from Lord Zareth. He is a traitor." The group fell silent. No one dared ask more. Even among the Oathrackis, the name Rava'thun stirred something uneasy.

But another voice broke the hush. "Then what now? What are the next orders?"

Malbronne paused on the upper step, glancing over the faces. "Return to whatever your tasks were before," he said simply. "Wait. In time, the Barn'bedens will reach out to you with your next directives when the time is right." He lifted his staff. "But as for me…I must return to Serakos. There is much to judge." A shimmering field of transparent red energy unfurled beneath his boots, lifting him effortlessly from the ground. Then with a

flash of crimson light, he shot eastward through the sky, vanishing into the distance. The remaining Oathrackis lingered at the cliff's edge, speaking in hushed tones while others argued. In the distance, the ruined city steamed.

One of them turned to Arameth. "And you, Arameth? What do you intend to do now?"

Arameth grinned looking away.

The Oathracki chuckled lightly. "If you do not wish to say, then do not. I was merely curious about what your…group intends next."

Arameth looked back out over Eldoria's mangled remains, hands clasped behind his back in mock contemplation. Far below on the snow-dusted ground waited the rest of his followers. His pack. "Sadly," Arameth said, "as much as I would enjoy telling you or someone…it's a secret that must wait. If I told you now, it may not happen." He patted the man's shoulder. "In time, you will see." And with a flick of his cloak, he descended the carved stone steps. But halfway down, a figure stood blocking the narrow path.

A white-robed, blue-withered skeleton, and a large satchel hung lazily over his shoulders. "Marriott," Arameth greeted, his voice lowering. "I should bow," Arameth said waving his hand, "but seeing that you are no longer the king of Highmoor. I shall not."

Marriott raised his chin staring at him, "Your humor is noted, Arameth. But in time, you will be in my position. You may have received power, but you are an Oathracki. Do not forget what happens to you, ignorant mortal."

Arameth grinned, "Yes…it is a tragic ending for us isn't? But we will see." Arameth turned toward the valley overlooking the cliff, "You missed the festival, it was…quite the experience. I don't think I've ever seen that much blood."

Marriott's jawbone creaked faintly as it moved. "I saw. I would not miss a day as significant as this."

Arameth turned and walked past him without slowing, boots crunching through the thin crust of dirt. He knew Marriott would follow with words he didn't want to hear.

"I know what you seek, Arameth," the skeleton murmured. Arameth froze. The cold between them thickened, the wind growing still.

"Do you, Kordas?"

"What you seek is impossible. I would know." Marriott said. "But if you insist on continuing…then do as you will."

Arameth did not turn. “Impossible for you,” he muttered.

Marriott said nothing and Arameth’s jaw tightened. He resumed walking, boots pounding the stone steps with renewed irritation. And just below the cliff of the mountain, his companions of mismatched shapes and ominous talents, stood waiting. Among them towered Beckton, the black-feathered Zanari.

“Arameth,” Beckton rasped, tilting his eagle-shaped head. “So?”

Arameth’s expression calmed. “We continue the path Kaegin spoke of.”

“So…Drearth, still?”

“Yes Beckton. We all need to be ready.” His group stirred, some looking anxious, and others nodding their heads while gripping their weapons with anticipation. And the mountain wind howled again.



“No…no!” Torm’s voice cracked as he grabbed fistfuls of his white hair. “This was not supposed to happen!” He staggered forward onto the balcony of the king’s chambers, knuckles white against the railing as he stared down at Eldoria, broken, smoking, snow beginning to drift softly over the ruins like a blanket trying to hide the horror beneath it.

“They were all supposed to die today!” he shouted, the words echoing into the empty courtyard below.

Torm shoved away from the balcony in a wild turn, kicking a wooden chair so hard it splintered against the floor. He swept the king’s desk aside, ink and parchment scattering like startled birds, then hurled his sword across the chamber. It clanged violently against the far wall.

He collapsed against the bedframe, sliding down to the floor with a hollow thud. “Every last one. For Sylith. For mother. My justice!” his shoulders trembled. “But instead,” he choked, “The royal family escaped, and the kingdom still lives. They were all supposed to die.”

His breathing became uneven, rage and grief fighting for dominance. “I’m sorry, Sylith. I’m sorry, mother,” he whispered, voice cracking. “I couldn’t stop Kordas’ reign…I couldn’t undo what he did. I couldn’t do anything.” He wiped his eyes angrily. “He lied to me. They all lied to me! Bastion lied. Marriott lied! I was used, just a pawn in their ritual!” Torm slammed a fist into the bedpost. “Everything they promised was a varn lie! Drekk!”

He rose abruptly, stumbling over broken furniture and General Vince who lay on the ground, until he found a tall mirror mounted on the wall. Torm stared into it, into the half of his face that remained charred, melted, twisted by fire.

“That general ruined my darling face…” Torm whispered, touching the burned flesh with trembling fingers. “Half my beauty, gone.” He didn’t even notice his tears until they pattered onto the desk.

Then he heard voices. Coming through the halls beyond the chamber and Torm froze. He stepped lightly over General Vince’s lifeless body, picking up his sword and gripping it, though he knew, he had no aetheris left to use. It had burned out of him completely.

He crept down the hall and down the stairwell and peered down. A stream of exhausted Eldorian soldiers and ragged refugees poured into the castle halls. Bloodied, limping, grieving—yet alive. A Zanari led them, tall and steady.

“General Ludwig, what do you want us to do?” one soldier called.

“Get everyone inside,” Ludwig ordered, voice steady despite everything. “Tend to their wounds. We will rest. Then…then we talk.” The general looked shaken. Horrified.

A hushed chorus of “Yes, general,” echoed.

Torm ducked back into the shadows before anyone could look up and see him. His heart raced, then hollowed. “What do I do now? What do I do?” he whispered to himself, sinking back against the cold stone wall. His mission was clear and easy once.

Avenge the Aeralyn race.

But now? He had no army, no power, no allies, and no clear path forward. Not even a clue where another path to Noctenheim was. He slid down until he sat crumpled on the stairs, sword limp across his lap. For the first time since he started his quest, the fire inside him felt…gone. No vengeance or purpose. No direction.

Only loss.

He lowered his head, breath fogging in the cold air. He had failed the Aeralynian people. He had failed his sister Sylith. He had failed himself.

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SANCTUARY OF ELMIRA

4 Days Later
Tharndusk the 23rd, Year 11,219
(The last month)

Children screamed, raw, cracking cries that bounced between the colossal mushroom stalks. The sound tangled with the wet slap of dragging vines and the clicking, chittering voices of the creatures hauling the metal cages. Everything was damp, humid, and strange. The ground squished beneath Matthew's bare feet as if he stood on drenched moss and pulsing veins. He wasn't sure how he had arrived here or when. One moment there was only darkness and blood.

Then this.

A jungle of fungal giants and overgrown plants, colors blending into each other: glowing blues beneath the mushroom caps, sickly greens oozing across tangled roots, drifting silver spores that shimmered like falling snow. But none of it was beautiful to Matthew.

It was suffocating.

The cages rattled loudly as a particularly frantic child kicked the bars. "Mommy! Mommy!" another child begged, tiny fingers stretching through the cage's netting of iron vines.

Matthew's heart seized.

Tina.

He spotted her immediately among the children. Her small hands gripping the bars, her hair damp with tears, her voice hoarse. Even from a distance he knew that expression: terror blooming into hopelessness. Matthew crouched instinctively, panic surging through him. He wanted to call her name, but the sound was stuck in his throat.

The creatures dragging the cages, tall, insectoid things with angular bodies and stiff movements, clicked and clattered to one another in a language he could not grasp. They looked like crickets fused with walking roots, their limbs splitting and rejoining with each step. Their glossy carapaces shone beneath the mushroom light. Matthew slid down a slope of damp grass, landing silently behind a wall of foliage. His heart hammered so violently he feared even that would give him away.

“What is this place…?” Matthew whispered to himself. The mist overhead formed a ceiling, thick and pearly. Matthew strained to see beyond it.

Nothing.

Only distant booms, distant sounds, like something huge shifting over faraway lands.

Then he saw the tree. It towered above the others, ancient and hollowed, carved by nature or by some unknown ritual into the shape of a face. An enormous face with a gaping mouth that formed a tunnel leading downward. The opening breathed faint vapor, as if the tree itself exhaled. Roots curled like fingers around the entrance.

And the children were being taken straight into it. “No…” Matthew whispered. “No, no, no—” But the words were swallowed by the jungle.

Then Matthew’s blood ran cold. A figure stepped from the mist near the tree.

The mask. The wooden skeletal frame. The hanging curls that resembled rooted vines. Flames of orange glowing eyes. The creature that had taken Tina with the goblins. Matthew felt the ground shift under him as dread washed through his body. Not again. Not here. Not another place where he was too slow, too far, too powerless—

But even from this distance…the masked figure looked different.

Still terrifying, yes—still inhuman, but Matthew sensed something unusual in the way it stood. Its chest rose and fell with something that resembled sorrow. It watched the caged children with a kind of stillness Matthew did not expect, as if the creature were grieving even while

participating in their capture. Matthew tightened his grip on the grass to steady himself. He scanned desperately for Elara and Finn, but they were nowhere. Not in the cages, not near the tree. If they were here, they were already inside that horrific tree. Then the masked creature's head twitched. Slow as if on rusted hinges, and turned toward Matthew.

Its burning eyes locked onto the bushes where he hid. "Crask…" Matthew mouthed silently. He ducked lower, breath trapped in his lungs. For a heartbeat, the entire jungle went still. But—

Voices. Distant. Echoing. Calling his name. The world around him turned white within seconds. The jungle dissolved into a blinding haze, the screams fading, the chittering fading, the heartbeat of the massive forest fading until—

Matthew gasped awake.

His entire body jerked upward, lungs burning, heart pounding like a drum inside his chest. The nightmare clung to him, mushrooms, cages, children, the tree, Tina.

"Matthew. Matthew." Florencia's voice cut through the haze, steady and worried. She was kneeling beside him, her hands on his shoulders, shaking him lightly. "It's okay. You're awake. It was just a nightmare."

"Tina—no, Tina—" Matthew breathed out, his voice cracking. He looked around frantically, expecting blood or vines or demons, but instead he saw stone walls, faint sunlight filtering through cracks, and torches flickering in sconces.

A ruined sanctuary or an old temple.

"Matthew, stop." Florencia gently pressed a hand to his chest to keep him from bolting upright again. "You're safe. Here, at least."

Matthew's vision steadied. The scent of old incense lingered faintly beneath the smell of snow drifting in from outside. A fire crackled softly in a pit at the center of the chamber, a weak flame, but warm. "Where are we?" Matthew whispered, voice trembling. "What happened? The relic—Eldoria—the…the demons!? Where are they?! Did we save them? What happened to the people?"

Florencia exhaled slowly, lowering herself into a broken wooden chair near the fire. She looked petrified and exhausted. Pale, scraped, scared, her hair loose from its tie. "It's been…a few days," she said. "You've been unconscious the whole time."

"A few days?" Matthew repeated, staring at her.

Florencia nodded. “We’re in the Sanctuary of Elmira. According to the apostle, this place used to be a Lumanian church centuries ago. It’s forgotten now. Buried within Hazelwood.”

Matthew pushed the blanket off himself, trying to sit up, but froze as soon as he saw his arm.

Black, smooth, and glossy. Not metal, but not flesh either. It looked almost carved, sculpted from wet glass, catching the firelight in clean reflections. “What…what happened to me?” Matthew whispered in horror.

Florencia grimaced. “I don’t fully know. All I saw was the Luminarch dissipate into light and shadow and…sink into you. Or merged…in some way.” She lifted her hands helplessly. “I know what I saw, even if I don’t understand any of it. That’s what the apostle explained to me at least.”

Matthew’s heart sped. He reached down with his left hand and yanked the blanket fully aside. His right leg. Was now black like his arm.

Not his.

Before he could get a word out, heavy footsteps echoed through the sanctuary entrance.

Silvanus.

He entered wearing his battered black armor streaked with dried blood, his cape torn to threads. He carried a handful of firewood, dropped it unceremoniously beside the fire, and slid down against the far wall, closing his eyes with frustration, as if exhausted beyond measure.

Matthew swallowed.

Seeing Silvanus alive should have been relieving. Instead it twisted an ache deep inside his ribs.

Florencia moved to stoke the fire, then looked back at Matthew. “The knight was alive when Sechera found him. Some sort of healing aetheris he has. I’m not sure.”

Matthew gave her a confused look, “Why? Why would Sechera help him? He wants me dead and he’s a demon.” Matthew growled.

Florencia eyed Matthew for a long moment, but then turned back to the fire with a sigh. “I don’t know. Maybe the Heliorens are showing him mercy like they did for you.”

Matthew growled, “Just keep him away from me.” He slowly stood, unsteady, unfamiliar with his new leg as he stumbled up.

“Careful.” she warned. “You haven’t stood in days.”

“I have to…I need to know what’s happened.” Matthew said, bracing himself on the doorway as he hobbled forward. His new leg felt like a stranger attached to him. Strong yet weightless, as if it didn’t belong.

Florencia hurried after him. “Slow down.”

But he pushed forward anyway. He walked into the bright snowlight outside and saw Frey’kro standing, speaking softly to Zeen. Zeen was blindfolded, face turned toward the wind. Snow glittered across the clearing, soft flakes drifting like silent ash over pine branches and the collapsed ruins of stone walls peeking through the winter haze. The Sanctuary of Elmira stood half-buried beneath great roots, a forgotten chapel preserved only by the stubbornness of time. The light was gentle, too gentle compared to the horrors Matthew had left in Eldoria city. It felt wrong to see beauty after what he’d witnessed.

Frey’kro stood with his back toward Matthew, his tall, robed figure remarkably still. Zeen stood beside him. Blindfolded, hunched slightly, as if unsure whether he belonged anywhere at all.

Matthew limped forward. Snow crunched beneath his bare, blackened foot, though he felt no cold.

“Zeen,” Matthew called quietly. Zeen’s head lifted at once. His face. He looked hollow now compared to back then in the soldier camp when they first met, carved by exhaustion and grief. Without his eyes, his expressions were strange, like echoes of what they used to be.

Matthew swallowed. “I—I’m glad you’re okay.”

But Zeen didn’t smile. He didn’t mutter a dry joke as he once might have. He simply lowered his head again. Frey’kro turned toward Matthew, the sunlight catching along the ridge of his feathered face. His presence felt heavier than usual. Like he carried knowledge he didn’t want to speak aloud.

“Do you wish to speak to me?” Matthew said, breath fogging in the air.

Frey’kro nodded. “Sechera has returned to his domain,” he began gently. “Your task in Eldoria is complete.”

Matthew looked down at his blackened hand. “Complete?” Then he remembered, he would be reborn according to Frey’kro. This is what he meant. “And what of Eldoria? The people…the city…the tower…what happened?”

“You cannot bear the weight of every destiny, oh mortal.” Frey’kro said.

Matthew stared hollowly.

“Four kings have manifested in the mortal world. But Zareth, the eldest of the three siblings, did not enter. That alone prevented a complete undoing of Korineth. There is still time and hope left.”

Matthew exhaled shakily. He wasn’t sure whether to feel relieved or defeated. “But what of Eldoria?” Matthew asked. “What happens…to the world? My home? Those people?”

Frey’kro lifted his robe arm slowly across the horizon. “Men will rebuild what they can. The son helps in ways beyond mortal sight. But the world will not return to what it was. The Nihilkins will now reshape the next era, and the Heliorens will answer them.”

Matthew’s chest tightened. “And me? What happened to me? Florencia said something merged with me, that Ek’sheera—”

“You walked willingly into death,” Frey’kro said softly. “And Ek’sheera, the Luminarch of Death, answered that sacrifice. You are no longer an Aetherian. You are no longer of the old world. You have been bought at a price, with your body made a living sacrifice. You are something new. Untouched by the Oblivion’s curse that once marked you. You have been remade. Given a second chance at life.”

Matthew stared at his black arm, the sunlight reflecting off it.

Remade.

Florencia approached from behind him, crossing her arms over her chest for warmth.

But Matthew barely heard her. His mind spun. Matthew’s throat constricted. He didn’t know what to believe anymore. Not about destiny, not about the sovereigns, not even about himself. What is happening?

Zeen shifted slightly, tightening his grip on the wooden staff Frey’kro had given him. Then the angel turned to the blinded soldier. “The hour is now, Zeen Northspire. Come, our time is leaving us.”

Zeen hesitated, just a heartbeat, before turning slightly toward Matthew. Matthew’s chest tightened painfully. Then Zeen turned back and together they began walking into the snowy forest. The apostle tall and steady, Zeen small and stumbling beside him, leaving footprints that would soon be swallowed by winter.

Matthew’s voice caught in his throat, but no words followed.

Where were they going? What did the Heliorens have planned for him? What does he do now? Frey’kro didn’t give him instructions.

Then the apostle and Zeen disappeared into the white forest.

Snow muffled the sound of everything except Matthew's breathing. He stood motionless long after Frey'kro and Zeen had vanished between the frosted branches of Hazelwood, staring after them, hoping for one last glimpse, one last word. Anything.

But the only movement was the gentle swirl of snow—and suddenly, a heavy hand seized the collar of his shirt. Silvanus yanked Matthew backward so abruptly his heel scraped across packed snow. "Enough staring. We're leaving."

Matthew stumbled, half choking as Silvanus shoved him forward. "What? To where?"

"To Worrin. We have a long way," Silvanus growled. His eyes were dark, tired. "We have a child to save. You can weep later."

Matthew clenched his jaw. But Matthew wasn't crying. At least not in any way he'd admit. His chest still felt hollowed out.

Florencia watched from behind rolling her eyes. Keeping her arms around herself for warmth—she turned and went back to grab her things.

Silvanus on the other hand, did not care if the world burned or if anyone needed a moment to breathe. The man had one speed: furious.

Florencia jogged back to them carrying her satchel, "We should go to Newport. Not Worrin. If you need a ship, that's where I would get one."

Silvanus's entire face soured instantly as he turned back, "Newport?" he hissed. "A thieves den? Are you rauking stupid? We are going to Worrin."

Matthew leaned slightly toward Florencia as he stared at Silvanus. "What's wrong with Newport?"

Silvanus gave him a look that suggested he'd just asked what was wrong with stabbing yourself in the leg.

"It's a rauking den of thieves," he hissed. "Pickpockets. Bandits. Con artists. Half the city was built on stolen crowns and the other half was built by the thieves who stole them," he groaned.

"That's encouraging," Matthew muttered, more to himself than to anyone.

"Encouraging?" Silvanus scoffed again, his voice brittle. "I'm stating reality. I don't know what that girl is thinking. But we're not going there."

Florencia sighed, rubbing the back of her neck. "Worrin has Serakos soldiers all over. And besides, Newport is closer, we need to rescue Tina quickly right? Worrin would only make this harder. They're strict there."

Silvanus ground his teeth and spun away marching east toward Newport. “Fine, let’s go.” he growled trampling through the snow.

Matthew turned toward him, frowning slightly.

Florencia was quieter now and ahead Silvanus didn’t turn, didn’t slow. Silvanus walked faster, his torn cloak catching the wind.

Matthew softened his voice, stepping closer to Florencia. “Let’s not poke him, he’s…not all there.”

“I can tell,” she whispered, but her voice had lost its edge. She looked ahead at Silvanus, then past him, toward the forest. Her hand had found the inside of her satchel, gripping something too tightly.

Matthew saw the change in her eyes. He lowered his voice further. “Are you okay?”

She didn’t answer right away. Her mouth parted, but nothing came.

Then—finally—a quiet, “No. How could I be, after what we experienced. Nobody just moves on after what we witnessed.”

“Yeah,” Matthew sighed. “It still feels like a distant dream.”

But she said nothing. Her face remained turned from him, and the silence between them only grew louder.

Florencia’s gaze dropped to the ground. She walked slower now in the snow, as if every step dragged something heavier than her body. She was hiding something. Matthew felt it. There was a weight behind her eyes she hadn’t given voice to, and whatever it was, he could tell, it bore weight. He didn’t press. Not yet. His thoughts drifted instead to Tina…his siblings… and then to Greg. Had the pirates survived the storm that night? The questions piled like dead weight. Drearth waited ahead, sharp and inevitable.

He thought of the sovereigns and that strange moment when Frey’kro had said he was “bought with a price.” The words hadn’t left him. What did that mean? Was he bound now? Leashed to them? Or was it something deeper, chosen? They gave him life. They pulled him back from death. He trusted them more now, he did. But even in the light, shadows moved.

And somewhere out there, the Nihilkins now stirred. Darkness had come into the world, and whatever was coming…

It would change everything.

Silvanus paused at a split in the path, glancing back just long enough to glare. “Elf,” he said, voice low. “Keep those thoughts to yourself.”

Matthew blinked. “What thoughts?”

“I can hear it in your breath,” Silvanus said. “Judgment.”

“I’m not judging anyone.”

Silvanus growled walking back toward him, grabbing Matthew by the front of his shirt. Not enough to injure him, but enough to make his teeth click. “Remember. Tina was taken because of you.”

Matthew’s eyes ignited with anger pushing Silvanus’s arm away. “Don’t act like you’re the only one who lost someone! My siblings are in Drearth right now as well. And we are wasting time arguing. If it weren’t for me, you wouldn’t have even known they were taken there!”

“Wasting time?” Silvanus snarled. “If you were a better swordsman, you wouldn’t have lost her in the first place.” Then Silvanus chuckled, “Honestly, that is probably why your rauking siblings were taken.”

Matthew barked back. “Right. Everything is my fault, isn’t it? Never yours. Not the way you abandoned me during that ritual for that Arameth. Not the way you treat everyone like dirt. Not the way you nearly admitted to killing me over a hundred times!”

Silvanus’s fist coiled. Florencia stepped back far, far away.

But Matthew wasn’t done. “And just so we’re clear,” Matthew snapped, “I walked straight into the Neth’rose. I watched Eldoria burn. I fought demons that tore people apart right in front of me as they were eaten alive. I saw children die. And you were too busy chasing Arameth on that mountain!”

Silvanus’s eyes widened in shock, Matthew had hit a nerve and he knew it.

“You don’t understand anything, you varn Elf.” Silvanus cursed. He glared down at Matthew, breathing hard. For a moment they stood chest-to-chest in the cold, surrounded only by falling snow and a silent forest. Then Silvanus shoved Matthew aside and stalked ahead. Matthew brushed snow off his shirt, muttering Silvanus’s name like a curse.

Then Florencia stepped beside him, eyebrows raised high. “I thought you were going to die again. We’d have to find another relic to bring you back—if there even was another one,” she chuckled darkly.

Matthew grumbled and stared at her. “I don’t know whether to thank you or be offended.”

Florencia shrugged. “Both are correct.”

They continued after Silvanus, following the narrow forest trail that wound between frost-covered evergreens. Their breath fogged in the winter

air, their footsteps crunching in steady rhythm. The world seemed quieter here.

Peaceful even.

But still, it felt wrong after so much evil.

Florencia walked a little closer to him. “Matthew,” she said softly. He glanced at her, surprised by the gentleness in her tone. “I wanted to say…” She hesitated, cheeks warming. “I’m glad you’re alive. Truly. You aren’t like the Elves people warned me about.”

“Thanks…I’m glad I’m alive too,” he said. “But I should say thank you also.”

She gave a puzzled look.

“For watching over me,” Matthew said. His voice softened, embarrassingly so. “You didn’t have to. You could’ve left me in the city. But you rescued me. You watched over me while I was unconscious. Thank you.”

Florencia blinked at him. “Well someone had to watch over you,” she said quickly.

Matthew grinned.

They walked again, the quiet between them warmer now.

Matthew glanced at her once more. At her determined eyes, her wind-bitten cheeks, her strength despite everything they’d both endured. Something turned in his chest. A warmth stirred within him, and he buried it quickly.

Ahead of them, Silvanus marched.

The road to Newport awaited them. Whatever waited there.

And behind them, in the quiet snow-dusted woods, the last footprints of Zeen and Frey’kro were already disappearing beneath the winter wind.

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PERSONS OF INTEREST

Highmoor Kingdom (Year 10,689)

Valenhart Family

King Edward, ruler of Highmoor, slain by his son Kordas
Artus, heir to the throne
Kordas, youngest son, who rises to power through blood

Orwin Family

Orx, father of Torm
Rinala, mother of Torm
Torm, an Aeralynian driven by revenge for his people
Sylith, Torm's younger sister

Liora Village

Peregryn Family

Elder Meriden, Matthew's grandfather
Arthur, Chief of Liora and Matthew's father
Lila, Matthew's mother
Matthew, a young Elf marked by a forbidden flame
Elara, Matthew's younger sister
Finn, Matthew's younger brother

Villager Elders & People

Elder Rowan, an elder of the Lumanian Church

Taren, Matthew’s closest companion

Others

Fêtina, a spirited Elven girl
Iwa, a bold and provocative Elven girl
Sôna, a gentle and kind Elven girl
Kilâh, an older Elven woman

Eldoria Kingdom

Darkmore Family

King Ronan, ruler of Eldoria
Queen Orkora, Aurora’s mother
Nere, heir to Eldoria
Aurora, a princess struggling between love and duty

The Masters

Kael, Master of War
Barnobus, Master of Ravens
Carter, Master of Law
Arcius, Master of Crown
Tamber, Master of Guidance

Aetherian Soldiers

Ludwig, a Zanari and the captain of the Aetherians
Vince Ortega, general and Aurora’s forbidden love
Zeen Northspire, a young Aetherian soldier
Baron, an older Aetherian soldier
Iris, a bold fighter
Shil, a quiet Aetherian soldier
Pete, youngest Aetherian soldier

Noble Houses of Eldoria

Verlain Family - Keensin Village

Lord Baeryn, a lord of Eldoria
Ellarie, Aurora’s rival

Corven Family - Mire Village
- **Sera,** lady of Mire Village
- **Serette,** sister of Sera

Aras Family - Rohland Village
- **Lord Benedict,** a lord of Eldoria
- **Eero,** an Aetherian and cousin to Aurora
- **Maelyn,** ally of Ellarie
- **Rhiadel,** youngest of the Aras family

Within The Capitol of Eldoria

Belfour Kingdom
- **King Althren Titus,** ruler of Belfour
- **John Titus,** heir to Belfour

Others
- **Puruna,** Aurora's attendant
- **Bork,** a Dwarven blacksmith from Khazadryn
- **Marriott,** a mysterious shopkeeper of strange wares

Further Players Across Korineth

Black Sail Pirates
- **Greg,** a pirate captain and mentor to Matthew
- **Azeel,** an Incarni and right hand of Greg
- **Don,** a member of the crew

Hartman Family
- **Silvanus,** a black knight bound to a dark and violent power
- **Erika,** wife
- **Kira,** daughter
- **Sith,** infant daughter

Grimrave Kingdom
- **Ruthford,** a commanding general
- **Vortax,** secondary general

Olric, a mercenary

Drakhar Kingdom

Lord Kaegin, a Drakhar lord of Abbottstown
Daryle Worelin, a thug and thief of Kaegin

Legion

Arameth, Silvanus's old friend
Beckton, a Zanari and Arameth's right hand

Others

Anna, a girl from Berks Village
Eb, an old man with knowledge and love for shal'kors
Tina, a young girl who is Eb's granddaughter
Florencia, a mysterious woman with hidden purpose
Wick, a jester bandit
Daruke, a brute who serves Wick
Malbronne, leader of the Oathrackis

Myth, Faith, and Powers Beyond

Nihilkins - Sovereigns of Darkness

Zareth, the son of Oryneth, Father of Lies, Son of Darkness
Sereniel, a sovereign of Darkness
Jinn, a sovereign of Darkness
Krex, a sovereign of Darkness
Molcaris, a sovereign of Darkness
Naxus, a sovereign of Darkness
Rava'thun, a sovereign of Darkness

Servants of the Nihilkins

The Dog, a Salrot demon haunting Matthew
Bastion, a Harbringer of the Nihilkins
Stellto, the Sunseer and a Barn'beden

Heliorens - Sovereigns of Light

Oryneth, the Father of the Sovereigns
Lu, the Great Whale, Son of Oryneth

Elmira, the Daughter of Oryneth

Servants of the Heliorens

Apostle Frey'kro, a guide of the Light

Ek'sheera, Luminarch of Death

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This is only the beginning.

— T.M. Mercer

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



T.M. Mercer has always loved storytelling and finding creative ways to bring imagined worlds to life. For years, the world of *Korineth* lived quietly in his mind, its history, its sovereigns, its conflicts, and its hope, until he decided to make it real on the page.

Mercer writes dark epic fantasy where light clashes with shadow, where good men and women fight for meaning in broken worlds, and where hope refuses to die even in the deepest night. His stories explore power, sacrifice, sovereignty, and the unknown vastness of creation, reminding readers that the world is always bigger, deeper, and more mysterious than it first appears.

The Crimson Night is the first installment in the War Eternal series.

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