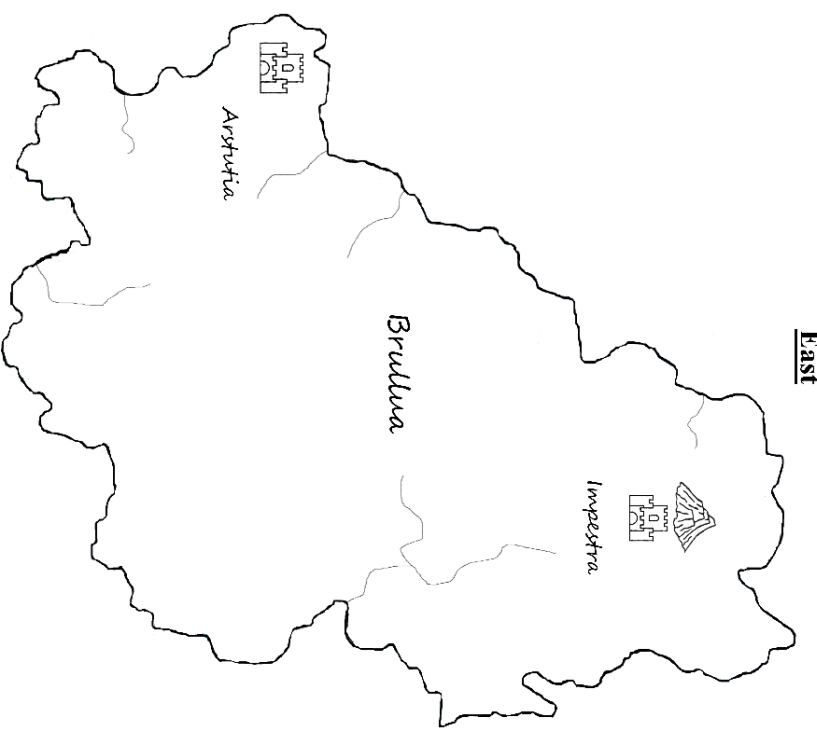
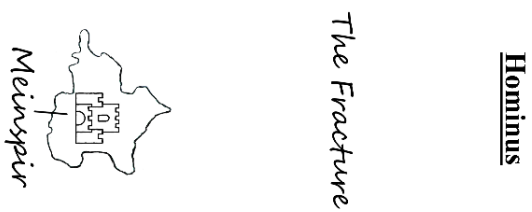
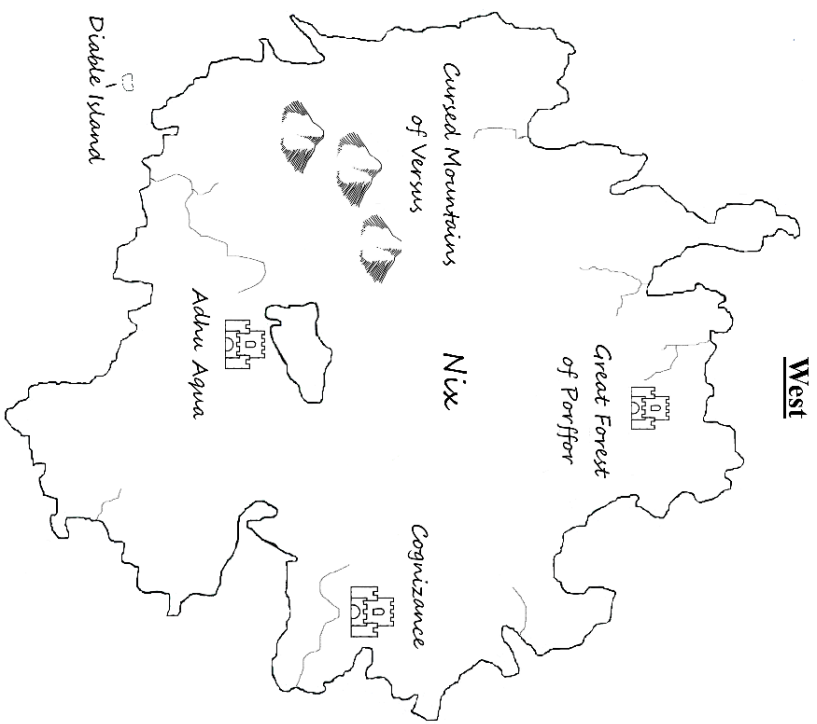


Three Kings: Hominus Saga - Book Two

Shadows

By

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ACT 1
Hiding in the Shadows

1.

Godric sat mounted on his stallion frowning as he stared at the army on the horizon. The farmland of Adhu Aqua surrounded him. He was dressed in his favourite suit of armour. The armour was silver and had the crest of the empire painted in blue on the front. He had two blades sheathed on his back and two blades sheathed hanging from his hip. Three figures broke off from the opposing warband and headed towards his direction. He lifted a closed fist into the air and took off himself. As he had gotten closer he got a clearer view of the now stationary figures. At their head stood a woman with short blond hair, a woman he was well acquainted with. Cressela was dressed in similar armour as him except the blue crest was painted green. A short sword hung at her hip. Two young men stood at her side. The one to her left had been tall, his face had been narrow as he scowled at Godric. He had long hair that reached his shoulders. He spun his spear a few times as he watched Godric. The other man was much shorter and plump. He was dark-skinned and his head was shaven. A large axe was strapped to his back. Both warriors seemed to not wear runic armour. He reined in his horse as he met the group. Godric smiled as he spoke.

"Ivo's puppet or should I say Great Lord Cressela?"

Godric watched as the expression on the two young men darkened.

"Are you not going to bow before your king?" He then added.

"I do not bow to a king who brought his entire warband to our doorstep." The tall warrior spoke.

"Hold your tongue, Commander Gregory!" Cressela warned, causing the tall man's jaw to drop in shock.

Godric whistled. "Commanders? These two are mere children. Has the 'still waters' fallen this far that their strongest warriors have not yet been able to let go of their mother's hand?"

The tall man's knuckles were whitening as he gripped his spear harder. The other stood calmly.

Smart lad

"This is your first visit to Adhu Aqua since your ascendancy, I believe Lord Godric. The Aquians often wondered why their beloved King had not come. The people will certainly rejoice to hear from their king, however, I am certain they are a little concerned by the warband you are leading to their home." Cressela said.

Godric looked up towards the sky. Grey clouds filled his vision as raindrops hit his face. He then looked back toward Cressela.

"I really hate this place. The slanted buildings, high walls, stupidly large unmoving lake and the pouring rain...but do you know what I hate most about this place?" Godric watched as Cressela's eyebrows furrowed.

"The people," Godric said with disgust. "Usually I can overlook the obnoxious...the arrogance. These people I cannot overlook. For these fools believe in another 'king'. One that does not sit on the throne. These are not *my* people, they will always be *his*. That is the reason I find it hard to believe that the Aquians would rejoice at the sight of their king."

The short warrior finally spoke.

"My mother once told me that only those with mercy and those who do not drown in their vanity should be allowed to lead. And do not forget that you lead through *his* mercy."

Godric frowned. "Do not speak of matters that you do not fully understand young man. Words spoken too soon may end in those being your final." Godric then looked back to Cressela. "Where is he?"

Cressela shrugged. "For whom are you looking for?"

Godric grunted. "Do not play dumb with me. I know Jerial is within those walls. He is the only one on this side of Hominus capable of slaying Ivo."

Cressela's face remained impassive as he spoke.

"You waste your time chasing ghosts and digging up old graves? The King of our Empire seems to have a lot of time to fool around." She smirked as she mocked him.

Adhu Aqua might need a new Great Lord once again.

Godric smirked. "How about I change my request then?" Godric rubbed his temples as if he were thinking hard.

"Alaric Burchard" Godric noted a small hint of surprise on Cressela's face before she sighed.

"You know of him then," Cressela said with defeat in her tone.

"The son of a despicable man. A man who uses his son as a tool. Where are they Cressela?"

"Jerial was dealt with...I watched it happen. I have exiled Alaric, but his current whereabouts are unknown. Please Godric just leave him alone...he is just a kid that was mistreated by his father. He committed no crime."

Godric raised a clenched fist in the air.

"Leave him alone? I will not rest until I put that nixumspawn child in his grave." Godric stretched his arm towards Cressela. "Join me and you can get revenge. He killed your husband."

Cressela shook her head. "Ivo would not wish me to do such an atrocity."

Godric slumped his shoulders in defeat. "Words of a dead man. *Adhu Aqua* has certainly fallen far."

The taller warrior attempted to strike Godric but was hastily held up by Cressela.

"I shall take your word that the boy is not here and withdraw my warband. If lies are revealed to me, the city of still waters will be levelled."

With the threat up in the air, Godric turned his horse and returned to his warband. Goric faced his warband, then took his place as the vanguard.

"We will storm Adhu Aqua! " He announced. "Fire the arrows!"

A third of the blue-robed warriors within the warband lifted their hands into the air. Their palms facing upwards as they mumbled a cast in union. The rain above the soldiers froze as if time stood still. The raindrops began merging, each becoming as big as Godric's fist. The raindrops' shape changed. Godric looked up and watched thousands of arrow-shaped water shoot across the sky towards Cressela's warband.

Not enough!

Godric yelled out a warcry as he unsheathed one sword from his hip and kicked his horse into action. His warband was riding behind him. He watched as a colossal pale yellow barrier shaped like a shield protected his enemy from the arrows.

Have to take out Cressela first.

Godric unsheathed the second blade hanging from his hip before the two warbands collided.

2.

Alaric held his hand out as he let the snow slowly drop onto it. It had been dark, the only lights had come from lanterns held by those who passed the alley. Alaric leaned against a wall and began poking the snow with a cane. A ritual he performed more often than not these days.

"Five approaching now, the target is amongst them. Two more moving suspiciously from the east." Ashe's voice rang in his head.

He let out the breath he had been unknowingly holding. He watched as the breath left his mouth visibly.

You are Edric Fenman, the secret bastard son of Ewen Fenman who is the leader of House Fenman. You currently work as an informant for House Linden.

He was not dressed in his usual attire, he wore a dark coat which ended at his knees. The coat he wore over a woollen sweater and thick trousers. His neck had been covered tightly with a scarf and he wore gloves over his hands. His outfit concluded with a pair of thick boots. He kept his hair longer than usual as the black strands were currently slicked back. The orange light to his left was his call to action. He hunched his back a little as he held a white-knuckled grip on his cane. He turned towards the light just as shadows emerged at the west end of the alley. He leaned on his cane as he walked toward the light.

Make sure they think you are vulnerable.

Three figures walked forward from their position at the end of the alley.

"You are looking just as miserable as when we found you about three months ago." The man in the middle said.

Brennan Linden had been the first son of Lothar Linden. He was seen as the obvious successor to lead House Linden much to the dismay of his father who had always been vocal about his preference for Talus, who was his second son. Brennan stood at a head below Alaric. He wore the finest garbs with most materials laced with gold and silver. He wore an abundance of rings on his fingers. Unfitting to his attire he had a scar on his chin. Despite his gaudy clothing Alaric found the man himself to be incredibly poor in personality and attitude.

"Does not seem you are putting that sentz we have given you to good use then."

Brennan continued.

A man and a woman stood next to Brennan. They were dressed in blue cloaks which was common for the Empire's casters. They both stared angrily at Alaric. He knew that Brennan's aides did not seem comfortable with their master working with him.

"Master Linden, I give you my assurance that what you have already given has been quite beneficial." Alaric smirked slightly at the two guards.

"I would hope so. And that is the last time you call me Master Linden" Brennan scowled.

"My apologies, Lord Brennan."

"Why have you called me here Edric? You must know that I do not always have the time to be dealing with sewer rats."

"I am well aware of that however I have...information."

The scowl on Brennan's face instantly vanished.

"Spit it out then"

Alaric shook his head.

"Why not?" Brennan's scowl returned.

"I do not feel safe, my lord." Alaric plainly stated.

"Safe? We will not harm you if that is what you meant."

"What of the two behind me? You plan to kill me as soon as I divulge my information."

Alaric explained.

Brennan clicked his tongue in response. Brennan then lifted a hand into the air. Alaric heard the crunch of snow behind him.

"The two behind have backed off. You are safe to proceed." Ashe's voice rang in his head.

Brennan lowered his hand and smirked at Alaric.

"For a crippled bastard, you have the awareness of a hawk."

Alaric shrugged. "You learn many things dealing in the shadows for as long as I have."

"You are safe. Now spill it." Brennan ordered.

"For the right price."

"You little-" The woman next to Brennan started but was swiftly stopped by Brennan himself. The woman Brennan called Kyra had tried on occasion to assault him only to be stopped continuously by her master. Brennan reached for a pouch that hung from his belt. He grabbed a handful of jade beads and threw them into the snow before Alaric.

Act desperate

Alaric let his cane fall away as he hastily grabbed the sentz that Brennan threw. He looked up at the nobleman who had looked at him with disgust.

Make them think you are below them.

Alaric wearily grabbed his cane and struggled to his feet again.

"Now-" Brennan started but was cut off by Alaric.

"House Dawne seems to be making their move," Alaric stated boldly.

Brennan rubbed the scar on his chin as he looked at Alaric.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I am uncertain however I have heard they have been plotting the collapse of House Salford."

Brennan's eyes gaped in shock. "And this is to be true?"

"As I have said, they are just rumours. Everyone knows the vulnerable state House Salford finds itself in. It is said that Lady Alene Dawne is the one behind the plotting."

Alaric explained.

Brennan began to laugh. "That old bitch is crazy. Without House Salford at the next governing meeting, that is one less vote against Alene's reformation plan." Brennan laughed once more. "This is great news!" Brennan scratched at his scar before throwing more sentz at Alaric. Alaric swiftly scooped up the extra sentz.

"Keep your ears to the ground, if you hear anything I wish to be alerted immediately," Brennan ordered.

"Of course my lord."

Brennan turned around and began to leave.

"There is one more thing, Lord Brennan."

Brennan paused and glanced at Alaric.

"The Grand Ball, there are rumours that a big event will occur on that evening," Alaric said.

Brennan raised an eyebrow. "Big event?"

"I am uncertain it is just a rumour once again."

Brennan nodded and walked away, the casters following him.

Alaric waited a few minutes.

"You are clear to return. No signs of anyone." Ashe said in his head.

Great, now it is up to Savia.

Savia stood under her balcony. The balcony had not belonged to her but it became her place of solitude in the last few months. A place where she could think clearly without...distractions, even if all she thought about was said distraction. The building had been abandoned and was the home to beggars. Perhaps that was the reason she came to like this place. It reminded her of less complicated times. She watched the snow fall in front of her as she shivered. She had dressed lightly. Wearing only a thin dark sweater and dark trousers. Her face was covered with a black cloth revealing only her eyes. She wore her trusty cloak and a pair of thick boots. She spotted the familiar figure in her peripheral vision and knew that it was time. She stepped out of the cover of the balcony and walked a few steps away. She then turned towards the balcony and began sprinting. Before she reached the balcony she leapt and grabbed the metal railing of the balcony and used her momentum to lift herself onto it. From the balcony, it was easy for her to reach the flat roof. Whilst on the roof she looked down at her hooded compatriot who watched her from the street below. She pulled her cloak tighter. She looked out into the horizon but could not see her target.

Need to get higher.

She searched for a taller building and her eyes locked onto a clock tower. She carefully made her way towards the clock tower by jumping from rooftop to rooftop, occasionally stumbling. A few citizens on the street watched her as she moved. When she reached the building next to the clock tower she glanced at the street. She was met with her hooded compatriot. The figure's hands were on their knees and was seemingly

exhausted. Savia waited a few minutes for her compatriot to make eye contact with her. She then pointed at the clock tower. She observed the tower before her. There was no way for her to climb to the top. She quietly cursed under her breath. She withdrew her twin daggers from their sheaths on her hip. She whispered her cast as she leapt towards the tower with her daggers pointing directly at it. The daggers sunk into the concrete of the tower as if they struck a pillow. Savia's body crashed into the tower, drawing a few curses from her as the crash dazed her a bit. She used her daggers as hooks as she climbed to the top of the tower. The higher she went the colder it got as she was trembling when she reached the top. From the top of the clock tower, the entire city could be seen. Cognizance was different to Adhu Aqua which was the only other 'Great City' Savia had seen. The 'City of Knowledge Seekers' as the citizens called it was not only built on the coast of the 'Fractal Sea' but also built on two different altitudes. The city was effectively split into two. The poorer citizens lived below the cliff while the more affluent citizens lived on top of the cliff. Another difference to Adhu Aqua was the presence of two castles. The first of these castles was 'Andron' which was an academy for young casters to learn new skills and gain knowledge. Andron was the biggest benefactor of this city. Scholars and ambitious casters all over Hominus sought to be taught at Andron. It was also the biggest form of income for the city. The second of these castles was the Great Lord's castle. The home of Great Lord Amos was situated below the cliff, this was so that he could 'monitor' the lives of the less fortunate. Savia did not have time to dwell on the politics of this city as she spotted her target. Her target was another high-rise building not too far from her location.

Any second now.

It was not long before she was forcibly tossed into the air by some invisible force. A force tugged at her chest as she moved through the sky as if she had grown wings. The force was pulling her directly to the roof of the high-rise building. Savia grew more and more nauseous as her body moved against her will. When she was nearly on top of the building she saw her compatriot. She floated inches above the roof of the building when she was dropped. Her compatriot was dressed similarly to her except wore a robe where she wore a cloak and had a sword with a golden hilt strapped to their back. Her compatriot withdrew their hood to reveal the familiar features of his face. Florian looked largely similar to the time when she met him for the first time. He had curly brown hair which he trimmed regularly and light brown eyes which were more downcast these days than before. The biggest difference in his appearance was a large scar that spanned from his right eyebrow to his jaw. Florian was covered in sweat and out of breath. "You know the plan," Florian said as he handed her an empty sack made of cloth and rope. She tied the sack to her waist as she nodded at Florian. "And do not get injured this time or *he* won't be happy," Florian said as she lowered herself to the edge of the roof. She smiled to herself as she remembered the last time she was injured. Strangely she enjoyed it when *he* was unhappy with her.

What is wrong with me?

She shook her head as she scaled down the building to the first window below her. The window was slightly open just as *he* predicted. She opened it further allowing her entire body to pass through the window. She appeared to be in a hallway. It was dark, the only light had been the moonlight shining through the windows. To her left was a door and to her right the hallway opened up to a landing. Savia could hear faint sounds emanating within the building. She grasped her daggers tighter and crouched as she headed to the landing. The room she was in was large and well-lit. The landing she was on overlooked the room. It was a lounging area with comfortable-looking seats. Tables were scattered across the room each having different parchments and books scattered across them. The windows were large and gave a great view of the Cognizance harbour. There was only one person occupying the room. From Savia's position, the only detail she could make out was that it was a woman and she was blond. She was sitting at one of the tables with her back towards the staircase which Savia was carefully descending. About halfway down the stairs the woman slightly moved her face to the side. Savia could see her face more clearly now. She was beautiful, she had pale skin and piercing blue eyes. Her blond hair was long and curled at the ends. She looked about the same age as Savia and she seemed familiar. Savia was transfixed when she remembered.

'Avoid Amira Dawne at all costs!'

Savia broke her stare and quietly made her way out of the room. The rest of her infiltration went smoothly. She had already memorised the layout of the building using *his* intel. Her target was on the basement level. She managed to avoid being seen as she made her way to the staircase to the basement. She knew this was going to be the toughest part.

'Two casters will be guarding the entrance to the basement. Deal with them swiftly and without a sound. If you are revealed the mission is done.' His orders rang in her head. She began softly casting. While she did this it felt as if every vein in her body seemed to be freezing over. At first, steam seemed to whirl around her fists and daggers before the steam seemed to dissipate and ice seemed to replace it. The ice started small but covered Savia's hands and enveloped her daggers. She then slowly made her way down the stairs where she was met with a narrow hallway which led to a door. Two casters stood guard. Savia rushed down the corridor and made the movement of throwing her daggers at the two casters. Her daggers did not leave her hands however as the ice that enveloped the daggers shot through the air hitting one of the casters in the face. The caster's face exploded in blood and ice as his headless body fell over backwards. The other caster noticed Savia in time and ducked the ice blast but did not have time to withdraw a weapon as Savia rushed towards him in a flash and stabbed one of her daggers straight into his eye. The man was about to scream but Savia used her other dagger to stab him in the throat. She watched as the man's head froze over with ice. She withdrew her daggers and entered the room they were guarding.

3.

Ashe stood in front of a gravestone. The name carved onto the stone was scratched out as usual. Thunder roared from the skies as the rain fell increasingly harder. At some point, her tears mixed with the raindrops. She could not stop her body from trembling. She crossed her arms and grabbed onto the skin of her arms tightly. The pain she felt was immense. She held her breath and counted to ten. As soon as she reached ten, like clockwork a lightning bolt struck the gravestone. She was aware of what was happening next however she was rooted to her spot. Her eyes were aimed at the patch of dirt between her and the gravestone. Slowly the dirt began to move as a dirtied hand escaped from the dirt. The hand was followed by another as a figure was lifting itself out of the dirt. Moments later the entire figure was out of the ground and staring at Ashe. The young boy in front of her was covered in dirt, his blond hair was matted to his skull but the most noticeable feature on his body was the wound on his chest. A vertical cut was carved from his skin and a dark puss bubbled out from it. The dirt-covered boy opened his mouth to speak.

"Why...why...did you...do...this to ...me?" His voice was hoarse.

The pain she felt overcame her as she closed her eyes.

"Everard...I'm sorry...so so so sorry. Please be alive!" She cried out.

The boy moved closer to her, leaned close to her ear and whispered.

"I...hate...you..."

Ashe opened her eyes and he was gone. The only thing in front of her was the gravestone and a clean patch of dirt. She twitched her fingers as she regained control of her body.

This never happened before.

Ashe turned away from the gravestone, only to be met by three figures. Alaric, Florian and Savia stood before her. Their eyes were lifeless and each of them had gaping holes in their chest.

Ashe screamed.

As usual, she awoke in terror. She was sweating and catching her breath as she looked around the small room.

None of it is real. It's been over three months. Get over it, Ashe.

She quietly slipped out of her bed. She glanced at her roommate in the adjacent bed. Savia was curled up into a little ball breathing softly, which indicated her sleeping nature.

Good, the last thing I need is Alaric worrying about me.

Ashe continued to get ready for the day. She hooked her bronze Andron emblem onto her light blue one shoulder cape before exiting the room. Her room exited onto a small hallway. The hallway was on the second floor of this small building, she reluctantly

called home. There were two other rooms on this floor, both doors had been closed when she passed them. She headed down the staircase at the end of the hallway. The ground floor was made up of a small kitchen and a dining area. As expected, sitting at the table in the dining area was an older woman. She was drinking a mysterious dark liquid out of a wooden mug. Ashe watched the amulet that dangled across the woman's neck and was reminded of her own. The woman's name was Jinny. She was tall but not overly tall as Alaric. She had shoulder-length brown hair and green eyes. She kept her body slim and she looked athletic. She was responsible for the house they currently resided in. Jinny was always nice and polite however Ashe never bought into it. Everything about her screamed 'suspicious'.

Jinny greeted her as she reached the ground floor. Ashe waved back and immediately exited through the front door.

"You are late." She heard and she rolled her eyes.

Ashe closed the door behind her and looked beside her. There Alaric stood, he was not facing her. He faced the street and eyed every person who walked past their house. His appearance was different from last night. His hair was not slicked back, instead, it framed his face as it went past his ears. He was dressed lightly, he had his sleeveless robe on. His well-toned muscles were on display but they were covered in goosebumps. He wore black gloves and had a black scarf wrapped around his neck. The golden bracelet on his wrist stood out from the rest of his attire. He kept his hood up. His attire ended with thick dark trousers and thick boots. She often wondered about the practicality of this outfit of his, especially in the constant cold temperatures of Cognizance. She recalled asking him about it once before but he just shrugged it off.

"I overs-" Ashe began.

"You purposefully overslept. Why are you avoiding this?" Alaric interrupted her.

You would not understand.

Ashe noted that he still was not facing her.

"Can we just get to Andron? I'll be late for my first lesson." Ashe walked forward.

"Just promise me that you will do weapons practise tomorrow?" Alaric sped up so that he was walking next to her.

She did not answer him, instead opting to just shake her head. She glanced at him and saw the frustration on his face.

I'm sorry. I can't Alaric. This is for your sake.

The path they walked was their daily trek to Andron. Their house was situated below the cliff and therefore had to make their way to the lifting contraption called a 'Climber'.

Climbers could be used to elevate yourself to the higher level or lower you to the undercity. These elevation contraptions were run by operators who poured their stria into the machines to make platforms levitate. These operators could move the contraption up or down at will. This was the easiest method to reach the top level of Cognizance.

Alaric and Ashe reached one of these Climbers and were slowly lifted into the air. "Listen out for any news of the incident at House Dawne. I will be on the inside today to find out if the plan has worked. Furthermore, if you can steal more 'Text' books. The stronger we get the easier it is to reach our goal." Alaric explained as they were lifted. *Your goal...not ours.*

Ashe wished she had courage to vocalise her thoughts instead of nodding along mindlessly to everything he said. When they reached the top, they casually stepped off the contraption. A few people stepped onto it as they left. Andron could be seen in all its glory despite being a few streets away. The incredibly tall tower was the marvel of Cognizance. The tower stood by itself, no other building reached it in height or majesty. The smaller buildings around it were conjoined to the tower, this was a place where foreign students resided.

"Hey, Ashe!"

Ashe turned to face a little to the right and saw her friend standing across the street smiling at her. She waved goodbye to Alaric as she rushed over to her friend. Beatrix Salford was a year younger than her but was still taller than her. Beatrix was energetic and an overly positive person despite her family's troubles.

Troubles that you are causing.

When Ashe first entered Andron she met up with Beatrix and they quickly became friends. Their friendship meant a lot to Ashe but that just made it more difficult knowing she was actively backstabbing her friend.

'Make connections but do not get attached.' Alaric's words echoed in her mind.

"Alaric has been dropping you off for *too* long," Beatrix said with a smirk on her face.

"You just want to see your favourite." Ashe laughed.

"There is nothing wrong with that. You are the one with two handsome brothers."

The two walked in tandem toward Andron.

"Wouldn't most prefer Alaric?" Ashe asked knowing Alaric always drew more attention wherever he went.

"I guess...but he always has this look. What would be the right term...I know...He has a stick up his ass."

Ashe burst out in laughter. Beatrix followed soon after. She felt lighter already, her friend had casted the darkness in her heart away in a split second.

"I can see that," Ashe added. "Also there is no point going after Alaric, he already has his heart placed on another."

"More reason to have my sights on Florian." Beatrix beamed.

Ashe could not help to smile back at her friend.

I'm sorry, Beatrix.

4.

Alaric sat on a bench in Linden Square. Linden Square was a large paved area that was filled with benches and various other sculptures. The sculptures were of the founding members of the city, in which they live on through the various House's. It was one of the most heavily trafficked locations within the city. Alaric sat hunched over with his elbows on his knees. His hands were folded under his chin. He closed his eyes and listened attentively. He could hear various footsteps of people walking close to his bench, the occasional chatter and even the faraway cry of a baby.

"No luck again? I am afraid you might never hear me approach."

Alaric nearly jumped from the bench as the voice of his friend spoke in his ear. He looked over at the man who now sat next to him and who was doubling back in laughter.

"You have a crude sense of humour, Yves," Alaric said.

Yves was the strangest man he had ever met. He was also the only man Alaric knew that was not from Hominus. Hominus was the continent where they currently resided. It was unusual for members of other continents to travel to Hominus due to border restrictions. Yves was a man from Ysgafyn, the 'Land of Light' as he called it. Yves stood out within any crowd. He was a dark-skinned man who was about ten years older than Alaric. He had no hair but on his head were white streaks of 'paint'. He was always dressed in a tight-fitting black suit with black dress shoes. Gold chains hung off of his suit's blazer. His eyes were unique as it was a dull grey making it difficult to identify his pupils. What made him different from regular people however was the presence of elongated fangs within his mouth. Alaric remembered that Yves mentioned that all Ysgafyn-borne have these fangs. Their function however was lost to Alaric.

"Are you ever going to tell how you do it then?" Alaric asked.

"Back home we have a saying, 'A magician never reveals his secrets,'" Yves spoke with a heavy accent. "Perhaps one day when you visit Ysgafyn I will show you."

"Perhaps..." Alaric replied.

"What seems to bother you, Rick?"

"Still calling me by that name?"

"I have told you about someone from my hometown that I adored very much named Rick. You remind me so much of him." Yves looked to the sky as he spoke.

"All the reason not to call me by that name. I am not as great as you think."

"Of this, you cannot change my opinion. You might view yourself as horrible but you cannot force me to view you as something other than what I perceive."

"I have not even done anything for you to have such a high opinion."

"Rick, for the last three months we have met here and spoken. That is already more than most." Yves began to gesture at the people who walked past. Some looked at him with disgust. "All these people avoid me, they view me as something unnatural. Just

because my appearance is different from theirs. The fact that you are not appalled by me is what makes you stand out from the rest."

"That does not make me better than any of these people. They have simply fallen under many years of indoctrination brought about by the empire." Alaric refuted.

"But that's exactly what the difference is." Yves smiled at him.

Alaric sighed. "So what do I do, Yves? I am lost. They are looking to me for guidance...but I can't even face them at this moment."

"Trust your senses. That's the only way to solve your problem."

"Huh?"

"You hear, you see, you smell, you taste and you feel the solution. If you are looking for a goal, always return to these senses and you will find the answer." Yves stood up from the bench. "Think about what we have spoken about today, Rick."

Yves began walking away.

My senses?

Alaric followed Yves' example and left Linden square.

Alaric arrived at his house and headed for his room. There he was met with Florian who sat cross-legged on his bed. The crimson blade was placed atop his legs. His eyes were tightly shut. He had a light sheen of sweat on his face. Alaric focused on the scar on his brother's face. Before the guilt returned he looked away.

At least someone is training.

Alaric changed into new clothes. His robe was now replaced with a thin grey cotton shirt and matching cotton trousers. His boots were replaced with a pair of old ones that had a few holes. He tied up his hair and left the room. He then knocked on the door of the room at the end of the hallway. Jinny opened up and looked at his clothes.

"Are you sure about this?" She asked.

"Yes, no matter the danger. It would be even stranger if 'Zevius' did not attend his job."

Alaric answered.

"That is true." Jinny then hovered her right hand over his face. She began chanting.

Alaric felt warmth wash over his face. After a few minutes, the warmth ended and Jinny removed her hand. She then brought over a mirror.

Alaric looked at himself in the mirror. He did not look like himself at all. The basic features remained the same however his face was riddled with small scars and his eyes were now brown instead of blue.

"Good?" Jinny asked.

Alaric nodded.

"Remember do..."

"Do not make direct eye contact with any caster," Alaric answered before leaving the house once again.

Alaric cleaned the table of dust and organised the books that were sprawled across the table. He was in House Dawne under his alter ego 'Zevius'. He was supposed to be a mysur slave who cleaned the 'Grand Study' or as he viewed it 'Amira's playground'. The house was busier than usual. Casters dressed in their blue robes were entering and exiting at a rapid pace.

What could have possibly occurred here?

Zevius smiled to himself. His smile was cut short when someone called out to him.

"You are late, Zevius."

Alaric kept his eyes on the ground as he turned toward the voice. He began to bow.

"I-i-i am v-v-very s-s-s-sorry L-L-L-Lady Amira. I-I-i had s-s-some t-t-t-trouble this m-m-morning." Zevius apologised.

Zevius, mysur servant belonging to House Dawne. You are a bundle of nerves who stutters when you believe you have done wrong.

The blonde beauty walked up to him and placed her hand on his shoulder.

"Make sure it never happens again. If my parents were to find out, you would be executed with haste. And I am sure you would not want anything bad to happen to your siblings." Amira stated.

Zevius has no parents and has looked after his five siblings by bouncing from owner to owner.

"I-i-i am s-s-sorry once again, L-L-Lady Amira."

Alaric did not dare to look at her face.

Amiria pressed his shoulder once before letting go.

"No need for all that. Just looking out for my favourite conversationalist." She then walked past him and took a seat at one of the other tables he had cleared already.

He did not hate Amira Dawne. Ever since he began 'working' at House Dawne she had strangely taken a liking to Zevius. There had been many rumours about the 'eccentric' Amira Dawne. Amira Dawne was a scholar as well as one of the most powerful casters in Cognizance. She had graduated from Andron as one of its greatest students in the same likeness as Alaric's father. The rumours started with her publishing her views on the downfalls of the current method of governing within Cognizance. Many viewed it as the beginning of her mother's reformation plan. This made people dislike Amira Dawne and House Dawne. To big families within Cognizance this was a big deal, to earn your right to sit in the governing body of Cognizance your popularity within the city was everything. So all families dance the dangerous game of fame and likability. No one was willing to take a stance that went against Great Lord Amos. House Dawne's reformation plan was bold and had become the beginning of their ostracization.

Alaric continued to clean but was interrupted when Amira called him over.

"Yes, my Lady?"

"I assume you have heard what has happened this morning." She said.

Of course, I had.

"I only heard a few murmurings from those below." Zevius lied.

"Two of our blues were killed and a boatload of treasure was stolen from the treasury."

"That is terrible, my lady."

"Do not act, Zevius. You are a mysur, you are meant to hate blues and wealthy casters like us."

"I am afraid I have grown accustomed to not saying what I mean, my lady."

"Hmmm, that is something we will have to fix." Amira rubbed her temples as she spoke.

"What do you think of the entire situation?"

Zevius thought for a moment before answering. "These past few months, robberies have grown more and more frequent. This is the cause of the current state of the city, my lady. Many small fish are trying to win big."

"Always the logical thinker. The observation you have made is a good one but a bit shallow. This was a calculated move...a small event in a much bigger play."

Zevius gulped. "What do you mean by that, my lady?"

"I fear there is another party that is steering this narrative. My mother has already pointed the finger at Richard Salford. That will surely be the demise of House Salford, no matter if they were behind this attack or not."

Yes, exactly as planned.

"That is surely a good outcome for Lady Alene," Zevius added.

"But it is the obvious outcome. Someone out there wants us to do exactly that. The real question is who and why?"

"Perhaps on this occasion, you are thinking too deeply, Lady Amira," Zevius added a bit too quickly.

"Perhaps..." Amira giggled before turning towards the window.

Zevius followed her and stared out toward the city. The snow never stopped in Cognizance. Mysurs could be seen shovelling snow throughout all hours of the day.

Zevius looked at the boats at the harbour, they were all kept in pristine condition.

How do the icy waters never freeze over?

"Do you love this city, Zevius?" Amira asked.

Alaric unconsciously shook his head. "Life below is dangerous...you never know if you might wake up the next day."

"I am assuming life above is not much better?"

"No, my lady." "Above you have to deal with abusive owners...n-n-not t-t-t-that y-y-y-you haven't b-b-b-been anything b-b-b-but g-g-g-great to m-me, my lady."

Amira giggled once more. "I take no offence to it, Zevius." She seemed transfixed by the view the window showcased.

"And you, Lady Amira? Do you love this city?" Zevius asked.

"I love this city. Despite the current civil war, and the House's that is claiming there is no such thing. Despite everything I will always love this city." Amira answered.

"That is lovely, Lady Amira."

Amira turned towards him. "Which is why I will be doing everything in my power to change it. This 'City of Potential' will be mine."

"That is a nice dream, Lady Amira."

Even those who have it all can dream, I guess.

"It is not a dream, just a reality that has not occurred yet. I sense it will happen soon."

Amira said with a smile as she left the room.

5.

"The casting system as we know it today was built on sacrifice. For thousands of years, our people have sacrificed parts of themselves to ensure the survival of our kind."

Professor Fenway began.

Ashe was in her final class of the day. The classroom consisted of twenty tables and chairs that were spaced evenly. There had been two countertops that ran parallel against walls. Placed on the countertops were all sorts of artefacts and objects that Ashe did not understand. Her class consisted only of about 13 members, including her. Most were younger than her. Professor Fenway was an elderly woman, she was tall and always had a grimace on her face. Despite her perpetual grimace, Ashe found her to be a quite nice person. She helped her on many occasions and overlooked her lack of understanding in the field of casting. When Jinny had gotten her enrolled into Andron, it was said that she had come from the 'Barren Lands Beyond Versus' with her family. Professor Fenway taught history, specifically the history of casts and the evolution of its power.

Professor Fenway gestured in front of the classroom as she spoke. "Much of the more advanced casts that we perform in this day and age can be accosted to the 'creation ritual'."

Ashe noted some of her classmates were taking notes while others just listened idly. Ashe was part of the latter.

"The now forbidden ritual was created by a pair of geniuses known as Val and Bemot a few thousand years ago. It was said that they had stumbled upon ancient texts written by Heinzidal himself and somehow deciphered them and made the ritual. Sadly they had passed shortly after the creation of the ritual but not before passing their work to their successor." Professor Fenway explained but was interrupted by a loud sound.

"CAW-CAW" The bird's sound reverberated around the room.

"Before you leave, I suggest brushing up your knowledge on this topic, there shall be a test later this week. I hope to see you all at the grand library and have a great day."

The room cleared out as Professor Fenway said her greeting. Ashe was about to leave when her professor gestured to her. She made her way to the professor.

"Lady Ashe, I have heard you spent a significant amount of time with Professor Burchard."

"Yes, Mrs. Fenway. Professor Burchard has been helping me with technique training. I am pretty far behind the others in that regard." Ashe replied.

"Hmmm, that is good then."

"Is there an issue, Mrs. Fenway?"

"Ah, I guess there is." "There has been a string of robberies all around Cognizance and this does not exclude Andron. There have been recent cases of academy text vanishing into thin air."

Is she suspecting me?

"Fret not, Lady Ashe. I am not suspecting you. If anything I am asking for your assistance."

"My assistance?"

"Yes...all I require from you is that you be vigilant when you are in Mr Burchard's classroom. And report back if you notice anything out of place. Can I ask you to do that?"

"Yes, Mrs. Fenway."

"Excellent, that is all."

Ashe nodded as she left the room. Beatrix caught her outside of the room.

Ashe noticed a hint of sadness in her expression.

"I can't walk with you today, something has occurred at home," Beatrix said.

"That is okay. I hope everything goes well, Beatrix."

Beatrix hugged her and left hurriedly down the hall.

Ashe walked through the halls of Andron, trying her best not to look suspicious as she greeted Professors and other students as she passed them. She walked towards the western wing of the tower which was meant for the more practical classes. Ysgafyn's Twin was just setting as day turned into twilight. Ashe hoped that not many students or professors would be around this time. Ashe found the classroom she needed to enter. She was about to slip inside when she accidentally bumped into someone exiting the room.

"Ah, Lady Ashe. What seems to be the issue?"

You are the issue. You shouldn't be here right now.

"Sorry Mr. Burchard. I have been instructed by Professor Fenway to keep an eye on your classroom for any suspicious activity."

"Oh, Fenway did mention something like that." Professor Burchard basically dragged her into the classroom. "It is good you are here, I wanted to hear of your progress."

Ashe felt the sudden change within her body as soon as she stepped into the room. Her body felt different, it was as if most of her energy was stripped away from her.

Professor Lloyd Burchard was a large burly man whose hair was thinning. He was not as old as Mrs Fenway but the years were catching up to him. Lloyd Burchard was a special case in Andron. Head of Techniques and Rune Specialist were the titles given to him. He was also the only Professor within Andron whose homeland was not Cognizance or anywhere within its territory. Lloyd Burchard was born and raised in Adhu Aqua and was the brother of a certain previous Great Lord.

A fact that Ashe struggled to accept.

Lloyd Burchard was her brother's, Alaric Burchard's uncle. The man that stood before her was the brother of Great Lord Jerial, the catalyst and core of all their issues.

Despite her original apprehension towards Professor Burchard, she has come to somewhat accept him. This was mostly due to his interest in each of his students'

capability to understand his teachings. Lloyd Burchard loved teaching and teaching came naturally to him.

"I have learned how to use the *whisper* cast to better effect now, Mr Burchard." Ashe proclaimed.

"That is great news but instead of saying it wouldn't you rather show me?"

The whisper cast is a three-part advanced cast, first, the 'connection' cast must be performed.

Ashe reached out and put a hand on Lloyd's arm. She then began chanting.

Secondly, perform the 'speak' cast and finally finish by performing the 'enhance' cast.

As she finished the advanced cast, her hand that was connected to Professor Burchard had a green tint that swiftly vanished as she removed her hand.

"Speak." Lloyd ordered.

"Did the cast work as intended, Mr Burchard?" Ashe asked.

As she spoke he nodded his head.

"I could hear you in my head. That was a perfect cast, Lady Ashe." "The key to that cast is the *connection* step, not only is it an incredibly difficult chant it also can sap a lot of stria if implemented incorrectly."

Lloyd looked out of the window and realised the time. "We should leave, it is getting quite late."

"I have a question, Mr Burchard."

"And perhaps I have an answer."

"Once, I am certain, a person had used the *whisper* cast on me. I am sure this person had not connected with me and not just that, he had broadcasted the cast to my entire town. Is such an event even possible?" She asked.

Lloyd rubbed his chin as he thought, a habit that Alaric displayed as well. *Perhaps it is a family habit?*

"That person must be very skilled. It is most definitely possible but I am not sure one person's stria pool would be large enough for an entire town."

Try an entire Great City.

"I did not know such powerful casters existed in the Barren Lands." Lloyd continued.

It was your brother.

"There do not exist many casters in the Barren Lands...in this case, it was a visitor,"

She answered

Lloyd nodded. They talked for a few minutes before they both departed the class. Lloyd locked the room behind him with a rune.

No text for you Alaric.

When she arrived home, no one had been on the ground floor. This was not unusual as she knew where everybody was. She made her way through the kitchen and out

through the backdoor. She was in a wide square that was walled off, the grass on the ground was enveloped in a thick layer of snow. Jinny stood next to the door and was looking toward the centre of the yard. Within the centre of the yard stood Alaric and Savia facing each other. They stood a few paces away from each other. They both were sweating heavily. This was a scene she witnessed every evening.

By some invisible trigger, they both moved at the same time. Savia stepped forward and kicked upward. At the same time, Alaric took one step back, making Savia's kick miss his chin by a hair. Savia then brought her foot down onto Alaric's foot, keeping him rooted. Alaric swung an elbow at Savia, which she ducked. He reversed his elbow strike but Savia predicted this and ducked once again. Savia then used both of her fists to punch Alaric in the solar plexus and simultaneously lifted her foot off of his. Alaric then began to fall backwards. Ashe expected him to fall on his back but instead, he moved his arms over his head and caught himself in an impressive handstand. In this position, the definition of Alaric's muscles could be clearly seen. Alaric pushed himself out of the handstand and landed back on his feet. Savia wasted no time and immediately dashed towards Alaric. Alaric had somehow grabbed snow in both hands. He tossed the snow from his right hand at the charging Savia who dodged. She couldn't dodge the second snowball as it hit her in the face. Her charge stopped for a second. That second was enough for Alaric to stride towards Savia, using his long legs he kicked her feet out from under her. Savia yelped as she fell on her tailbone. Alaric was on her in a flash. He grabbed her face and pushed it into the snow. He then placed his knees onto her arms, preventing Savia from moving.

Ashe watched as Savia huffed out of frustration.

Alaric smiled at her as he helped her get back to her feet.

"What is it now? Two-Two?" Alaric asked mockingly.

Savia rolled her eyes. "Three-Two, you are in the lead."

"I must have forgotten," Alaric replied with a grin.

Why are you so different with her than with us? Ashe thought as she retreated to her room.

6.

Florian looked out of the window in his room. The cold made him shiver slightly. He despised the cold. He was accustomed to living on an island where the only cold weather came in a four week period of rain. He and Alaric shared a room on the second floor of the house. This means he could watch Alaric and Savia spar in the backyard. He watched them attack each other relentlessly while seemingly enjoying every moment. He noticed Ashe had watched as well. He kept watching when he felt a jolt of pain in his left leg. A smoky creature that had the outline of a man appeared next to him. The creature had no features besides deep sunken eyes.

"Don't you just hate him?" A husky voice reverberated in his head.

"Get out of my head, Gaile," He exclaimed in return, turning back to watch the sparring.

"I am you and you are me, your head is my head." Gaile laughed.

Florian clicked his tongue ignoring the statement.

"Back to the matter at hand." Gaile pointed at Alaric moving through the snow below.

"Look at him, enjoying himself. Taking no accountability for his actions."

Florian's eyes were now fixated on Alaric.

"Without him, you could have a normal life." Gaile put a smoky arm around Florian's shoulder. "Picture it, life on Diable Island. Just you and Ashe, rebuilding what they took from you. No killing, no suffering, no foolish plans and no scar." Gaile ran a smoky finger down Florian's scar.

Florian felt his blood boil but shook himself out of it.

"He is my brother," Florian stated.

"Not by blood." "Listen, you do not owe him anything. Especially not your life, you are more than just his pawn." The shadow creature continued.

"I make my own decisions," Florian exclaimed. The words came out with less conviction than he would have preferred.

"If you truly believe that then you are nothing but naive. Remind me again whose plan are we following right now?"

Florian remained silent.

"A plan you do not fully understand yourself." Gaile laughed.

"We are robbing wealthy casters to build our supply of sentz. That way we can sustain ourselves and build a peaceful future." Florian explained.

"But is this the only way to achieve that future? Do you have to put yourselves in danger? Or is it just for him to have some satisfaction?"

Florian was about to argue when his door creaked open. Alaric walked in. He avoided eye contact with Florian as he entered. Florian had not realised that no one had occupied the backyard anymore.

"Who were you speaking to?" He asked.

"I was not speaking to anyone. What do you mean?"

Gaile still kept his arm around Florian. "You can end him right now, one swing of that blade." Gaile provoked.

"Oh? I thought I heard something. Must have misheard or something." Alaric shrugged. Alaric then discarded his sleeveless robe and tunic as well as his gloves. Florian stared at the Rixa Amulet that hung in the middle of Alaric's chest. It shone a pale yellow colour. Florian moved his hand to the inside of his robe where he felt the 'envelope'. He then glanced at the golden bracelet on Alaric's arm.

I could end it right now.

"Are you feeling okay, Florian?" Alaric asked.

The question shocked him as he withdrew his hand from the inside of his robe. "Ah, yes, just tired. Did not recover from last night as quickly as I thought." Florian answered.

Alaric nodded. "Get some rest, there will be no expeditions for a bit. The city is on high alert right now."

Florian took the advice. He disrobed and crawled into bed.

"You are just a pawn to him." Gaile's voice reverberated in his mind.

Perhaps I am.

When he woke up the following morning, Alaric's bed was already empty as usual. Florian rolled out of bed and put his robe back on. He then grabbed his crimson blade from underneath the bed. He sat with crossed legs on the bed as he placed the unsheathed blade across his lap. The blade at first began to drain his energy rapidly before slowing as he began controlling his stria output. He pictured himself walking on the shore of Diable Island alongside Old Dunstan. Both of them had fishing rods in their hands and they casually chatted as they walked. He had to purposefully walk very slowly to match Dunstan's pace.

Tears began rolling down his eyes as he controlled his stria.

You took it all from me.

7.

Alaric sat next to Savia in the dining area. It was late into the night. His wooden bowl was messy from the flatbread and fruit he had consumed earlier. He had his elbows on the wooden table and his face in his hands. It took all her power not to reach out and hold him.

"What if I just left? That would solve all their problems would it not?" Alaric's voice was just louder than a whisper.

"And what would that achieve?" She asked, matching his whisper.

"They'd be at ease, could do what they want, live peacefully. You could live without the struggle. We have amassed tons of sentz."

What do I want?

"You never changed. You are doing the exact same thing you have always done since I met you."

He turned to look at her quizzically.

"You run. You hide under this veil of protecting others. Do you ever think about yourself for even one moment? How quick were you to sacrifice yourself to Gwennlian back in Isern? You wanted us to leave Adhu Aqua so that you could die? And now you're running away 'cause you can't face Ashe and Florian, 'cause you hurt them too badly." He remained quiet during her outburst.

"People are not pieces you get to manipulate, Alaric. You either face them or you run. Personally, I am sick of running."

To her disbelief, he began to laugh.

"Where is the quiet thief I found in Isern's alleyways?" He said, causing her to blush and turn her head from him.

You have changed her.

"You are right. Nothing will change if I do not change. Ashe can barely speak to me and Florian is acting strange." He stated.

"And you can't look them in the eye." She added.

Alaric cursed under his breath.

"Do not forget you are a part of this. I have hurt you too. I dragged you into this. Got you involved. You had to save me." Alaric rambled as he touched the Seal of Habbeo on his wrist.

You are the one who saved me.

"Life in Isern was worse."

The night went on quietly, they spoke about trivial matters until they were left sitting in a comfortable silence. Their meetings at night became a habit. She knew he had trouble sleeping since they had left Adhu Aqua and the least she could do to shoulder his burden was to accompany him.

"I think I am going to head to bed." He said.

She nodded as he got up. Before he headed upstairs he turned towards her and whispered. She couldn't hear what he said. She asked him to repeat himself but he retreated up the stairs and she heard his door quietly click shut. She debated staying in the dining area until sunrise but decided against it as she headed to her room. Once in her room, she saw Ashe as she tossed and turned in her sleep. Savia walked over to her and softly shook Ashe's shoulder. She woke up in fright. She hyperventilated for a few moments before calming down and focusing on Savia.

"Bad dream?" Savia asked.

She nodded. "Sorry, did I wake you?"

"I was not sleeping yet...Is something worrying you?"

"It is nothing. Sorry once again." Ashe laid back down on the bed and turned so that her back was towards Savia.

Savia took a seat on Ashe's bed.

"You were one of the first who accepted me. Not even Alaric trusted me as easily."

Savia said.

Ashe remained quiet.

"I want to be a person you place your trust in. And I want to place my trust in you as well." She continued.

It was quiet for a few moments before she heard a sigh.

Ashe moved on the bed. She rolled over and looked towards Savia.

"Every night, I have this same dream." Ashe began. Savia listened as she relayed her nightmare.

"I can't fight anymore. As soon as I grip the spear, his image runs through my mind and I begin trembling." Tears began to run down her face. Savia leaned in and hugged her.

"I know I am disappointing Alaric but...but I can't fight anymore...I'm scared, Savia."

She added.

"You are not disappointing anyone. Especially not Alaric." Savia consoled her. "It is alright to be scared." "My mother once told me that fear is a power in itself. For if not for fear what power will protect the heart."

I am more afraid now than ever, Mother.

"You may not be strong enough now, by one day you will conquer this cloud of fear.

Perhaps the answer is to embrace it." Savia continued.

At some point, Ashe had composed herself and let go of her.

"Alaric has changed you," She whispered.

"No-no-no you all changed me." Savia blushed.

"You can keep denying it. Does not mean it untrue." Ashe continued

Denying what?

"Thank you, Savia. Your words mean a great deal." She paused before continuing.

"Ever since that day on the island, it has felt as if I am just sailing on a course that I did

not choose. I'm getting washed away without a chance to think of what I am actually doing or who I am."

Savia sympathised with her. "I felt the same way. When my mo...when I met Alaric it all happened so fast. He made my world feel so much bigger, that now as much as it is looking like I'm moving along his tide I can say that he does not control me. I am choosing to walk by his side. A choice you can still make, Ashe."

Ashe hugged her again. "I don't know if I can do that just yet." She whispered.

Savia yawned and Ashe let her go.

Savia probed Ashe to see if she was okay after many reaffirmations, she made the short step to her bed and fell asleep.

"Caw-Caw"

Savia immediately reached for her daggers and looked for the source of the sound. She noticed a small black bird at the window. The morning light surrounded the midnight black crow. She looked to Ashe who was sitting up and reading a small parchment. The bird cawed once and flew out of the window.

"What in Heinzidal's name was that?" She asked now wide awake from the shock.

Ashe still seemed tired, her short blonde hair was in disarray.

"Andron is closed today, an emergency meeting is occurring at the Great Lord's castle. That is all it says." Ashe mumbled before retreating into bed. Savia replicated her in her bed.

It was only minutes later before there were three rapt knocks at their door.

"Meeting! Downstairs! Now!" Alaric's voice came muffled through the door.

Ashe rolled over and gave her a frustrated look, to which she responded with a small smirk. Both got ready and dressed before heading downstairs. When they arrived, Both Florian and Jinny had already been seated. Alaric stood at the end of the table pacing. They took their seats, sitting next to Florian.

"Is this about Andron?" Ashe asked.

He stopped pacing. "What about Andron?"

"It is closed for today, something about a meeting with the Great Lord," Ashe responded.

Alaric rubbed his chin. "That means House Salford is getting renounced of its position in the High Board. They are moving faster than anticipated."

"There are other possibilities that a meeting was called. Such as the tension between Meinspir and Adhu Aqua since their previous battle. Perhaps Godric is asking for reinforcements. Or perhaps it is the civil war beginning in this very city. Not everything goes according to your plan." Jinny spoke. Savia noted with a little venom in her tone. Alaric ignored her which made the older woman scowl.

"That is not why I called this meeting." He started and for the first time looked at Florian and Ashe.

"This meeting was long overdue." Tears were welling up in his eyes. "I apologise for everything. I hid my true identity, I kept secrets, I...h-hurt you, I u-used you. You all deserved better and I am sorry." Tears ran down his face as he bowed before them. She noticed that Ashe was openly crying in response to her brother. Florian had a stern face but she noticed that underneath the table his hands were trembling. Jinny looked indifferent.

Alaric released his bow and wiped his tears away with his forearm.

"I do not expect you to forgive me but I ask only one thing from you. Assist me in reaching my goal." He continued.

Savia raised an eyebrow.

Goal?

He then acknowledged the expression of confusion and explained himself. "For all this time I have lived with the anticipation of death. The death that I foresaw would happen in Adhu Aqua. Once that fell through, I was lost, aimless. I thought I was only doing the best for you. So I envision this plan using all of our skillsets. We would infiltrate Cognizance and become thieves, enriching ourselves so that one day we could leave and live peaceful lives. I suggested we come to this city because I had a preconception of the politics of the city. I knew the people here were fixated on themselves that they could be easily manipulated. After three months of heists one would think that I would be fulfilled but just like before I felt no satisfaction, I was and am still lost."

He paused and seemingly examined the expression on each of their expressions.

"And what is your newfound goal?" Jinny asked.

Alaric placed his hands flat on the wooden table and leaned towards them.

"I am going to change the Empire." He boldly proclaimed.

Jinny scoffed. "You think others haven't tried, *Lord Alaric*?"

This time Alaric acknowledged her. "Others might have tried but perhaps the timing was not on their side." Jinny looked as if she wanted to cut him off but Alaric continued. "I have word that a rebellious force is gathering at The Great Forest of Porrfor, alongside them are reinforcements from Ysgafyn."

Jinny shook her head. "Ysgafyn? No-no that can't be. Our borders have been closed for thousands of years."

"Yves, a Ysgafyn-borne man, can testify himself. He had heard of Ysgafyn men entering the Empire through the port of Porrfor under Great Lord Damiana's surveillance." Alaric explained.

Jinny thought for a second before scoffing once again. "You want to form an alliance with a Great Lord?" She asked in disbelief before adding. "How do you intend to convince Damiana that *you* are not trying to betray *her*? Damiana, if what you are saying is true, is also vying for the throne and she will not be so easily manipulated."

"I am well aware that 'The Umbra' is much more conniving than any other Great Lord but once we leave Cognizance we will have the one thing she requires."

"Which is?" Ashe asked.

"Senz. The Great Forest of Porrfor is the least affluent Great City that exists on Hominus. There must be a reason she hasn't made her move already. The time would be perfect, the war between Meinspir and Adhu Aqua, presents an opportunity that is too large to ignore. The cost of holding and growing a war squadron would be insanely high, which is why she is biding her time. We would have a plethora of sentz once our Grand Ball plan is completed." He explained.

That cannot be the only issue.

Jinny raised that exact concern verbally.

"Of course not, that is why we are not only offering sentz. We are offering a second warband." He pointed at Jinny.

Working with the Scaev?

Jinny began laughing uncontrollably. "I like how you think, Lord Alaric. It is total madness. As long as you make it to Meinspir and use the cast within the 'envelope'. The Scaev warband will be alongside you."

Florian stood up, his chair scraping the floor as it was pushed back.

"You want to team with a Great Lord and the Scaev to take down King Godric and take the throne for yourself?" Florian asked, trying to figure the plan out.

Alaric nodded. "It is ridiculous, I understand but that is why I need you all to help me."

Florian shook his head. "I am tired of being roped along with your ridiculous plans. I am not helping" He then headed upstairs ignoring Alaric's protests. Alaric then turned to Ashe who shook her head as well. "I no longer want to fight, I am tired Alaric." She then headed upstairs as well.

Alaric sighed in defeat before finally turning to her. "You can go as well." He suggested. Savia said nothing as she remained seated.

8.

Amira Dawne stood in her perfect stance. Her left foot was facing forward and her right foot was perpendicular to her left. Her feet were about 90 centimetres apart. She had both knees bent. She held a rapier in her left hand, the rapier was bent at an angle in front of her. Her free arm was firmly placed behind her back. She closed her eyes. She had her long blonde hair tied up, A few golden locks stuck to the sweat on her forehead. She was dressed in her custom Runic armour. Her armour was unique. Unlike others, it bore no crest of The Empire. Her armour consisted of steel gauntlets that reached her elbows. Her chest piece was sleeveless and left her upper arm and shoulders exposed. She wore no armour below the waist sporting tight leggings and her fencing boots. She envisioned an opponent before her and burst into movement. She moved forward, her front foot dictating the move and her back foot following. She thrust her sword arm forward while doing so, moving her front foot forward and retaining balance by keeping her back foot planted behind her. After striking she moved backwards moving her back foot first then quickly followed by her front. She remained still as she envisioned her opponent trying to strike her. She evaded the attack by ducking below the imaginary attack. She placed her free hand on the ground and regained balance. Her opponent looked down at her as she used her sword arm to stab upwards into the opponent's chest. A sudden applause broke her from her trance. She stood up and opened her eyes. She had been in her training room. It was an empty room that contained a few wooden mannequins and a few weapons. She sheathed her rapier and turned to the origin of the applause. Her mother stood at the entrance. Her mother had similar features to her such as smooth pale skin and a beautiful figure. The main differences between them had to be her mother's brown hair as well as the presence of wrinkles that surrounded her eyes and mouth. She had seen paintings of her mother when she was younger, she had been a beautiful young lady who had surely been in no short supply of suitors. Throughout the ages, the Head of House Dawne was always a woman, her mother was the only option among her many brothers. There had been criticisms of her appointment but those were quickly wiped off by her reign. Lady Alene Dawne was an innovator, she led House Dawne in its most successful period. Her mother gained popularity using her trade knowledge. She helped local traders expand their business at a monetary exchange. With the growth of their trade, the more favour she had gained within the city. Unlike other Houses, House Dawne was not known to produce strong casters until the birth of Amira Dawne. While she had many sisters, she was confident she would be the heir to her House.

"That was some wonderful technique you showcased, Amira!" Her mother lauded her. She wiped her sweat away with her bicep.

"Thank you, Mother." She replied.

"I have come to inform you that Great Lord Amos called an 'emergency' High Board meeting. We shall be leaving soon." Her mother stated.

"It is happening then. Your plan seems to be working."

Her mother smiled brightly. "And I did not have to lift a finger as well."

"I still do not understand the thief's motives."

"Perhaps they heard of my plans and liked it. Whatever their reasons are, I can't wait to thank them enough."

"You will get that chance soon enough. I intend to catch them." Amira took off her gauntlets.

"Too bad for them, their little game will be coming to a rapid end."

I already have some ideas. Amira smiled.

"You better get ready, the meeting will start soon." Her mother said as she left with Amira soon following.

After changing into one of her many dresses she met her mother in front of the house. Both of them got into a carriage. She kept her rapier strapped to her waist. A handful of blues, the local term for caster soldiers, walked beside the carriage as they rode. The journey to the Great Lord's castle was slow, she spotted a few other carriages ahead of them. The delay was caused by the Climbers that took them to the underside of the city. Amira kept her gaze towards the outside. She spotted a familiar figure walking hunched over in the opposite direction. She leaned out of the carriage and yelled.

"Zevius!"

The man continued to walk away from the carriage. Despite her mother's complaints she continued to yell.

"ZEVIUS!"

The man turned around in shock and for the first time, their eyes met.

Huh

She quickly covered her shock and waved at him. The servant shyly waved back before turning his back to her and walking on.

She retreated into the carriage before laughing.

It was under my nose the entire time. Zevius, you sneaky bastard.

"What is with your obsession with that servant?" Her mother asked.

"I think he has just become the most interesting person I have ever met." She replied, unable to hide her smile.

Her mother continued to spit insults about Zevius until they arrived at the castle. They were escorted to the castle's strategy room. High Board meetings usually took place in this room. Once inside it was clear to her that they were the last to arrive. The room was not large but its emptiness made it seem far larger than it was. In the middle of the room was a large U-shaped table. On the left side of the table were four seats with three being occupied. At the curve of the table was an empty throne-like chair, the seat

usually reserved for the Great Lord. On the right side of the table were three seats all occupied. Amira followed her mother as she took a seat in the unoccupied seat on the left side of the table. Amira stood behind her mother. On the left seat closest to the head of the table was Lothar Linden, Head of House Linden. Behind him stood his two sons, Brennan and Talus. Amira did not know much about Talus other than that he was a promising caster and the probable heir to House Linden. Brennan on the other hand, she knew very well. They were of similar age and became acquainted in Andron. House Dawne and House Linden had quite a good relationship, this was how she had almost ended up in an arranged union with Brennan Linden. She had however hated Brennan. He was an arrogant, talentless person in her opinion. She asked her mother to call off the wedding, which she swiftly did despite the repercussions it had on the relationships between the two houses. Brennan looked over at her as they stood behind their parents and smirked. Amira paid him no attention, for despite the cancellation of the marriage it did not stop him from trying to court her. Sat next to Lothar Linden was the oldest person in the room so far, Ewen Fenman. Ewen Fenman was a man who always seemed closer to death than being alive. Behind him were three men, Amira assumed it was his sons. Ewen Fenman had a bit of a reputation when it came to his children. More so that he himself did not even know how much he had. House Fenman was the oldest member of the High Board and Ewen Fenman was said to be one of Great Lord Amos' oldest companions. Sat next to her mother was the latest addition to the High Board, Brook Weaver. House Weaver made a meteoric rise in the last five years due to the Houses' skill in fashion and sewing. It had become popular all over The Empire, therefore it was a simple decision to add House Weaver to the High Board. The first seat on the right closest to the head of the table was Stewart Hale, head of House Hale. His presence at this meeting was a surprise. House Hale dealt with all exports within Cognizance. Stewart Hale was the only member of the High Board who did not reside in the city, instead, he moved to live in Meinspir. He left all the decisions of his business to be run by his wives. Stewart Hale was accompanied by a woman. She was short in stature but she was beautiful. She had long brown hair and black eyes. She seemed to be around Amira's mother's age. She seemed quite timid and out of place standing behind Stewart. Sat next to Stewart was Pricilla Fenway, head of House Fenway. Pricilla Fenway was another of Great Lord Amos' companions. Pricilla Fenway was not only the head of her House but the head of Andron as well. Amira visited House Fenway on most days, Pricilla Fenway was her personal casting mentor and taught her everything she knew. The final seat was occupied by a rather large man, who was currently glaring at her mother. Richard Salford was the head of House Salford. House Salford was known for its knowledge of cuisine as food preparation techniques. Richard Salford was joined by his daughter, Beatrix Salford. Amira did not know much about Beatrix, only that she was currently performing well at Andron. Amira watched as her mother made eye contact with Richard Salford and began laughing. Her laughing ceased when the

door to the room opened slowly. The members of the High Board stood up and bowed, and Amira followed suit. A scarred old man dressed in a long white robe stood at the entrance. His eyes were sunken and the ridges of his cheekbones were well-defined against his thin wrinkled face. The only hair on his body was a bushy moustache. The white robe had gold patterns weaved into the material. The old man leaned against his cane as he slowly made his way to the throne-like chair. He was followed by two soldiers who wore similar white robes, theirs however did not have the gold patterns. "Great Lord Amos welcomes all members of the High Board to this meeting and apologises for the short notice. You may all be seated!" One of the soldiers proclaimed.

9.

Godric sat on his metal throne with an unfurled parchment in his hand. On the parchment was a drawing of a man who was supposed to be Alaric Burchard. The man had looked similar to Jerial, the thought caused the scar across his nose to tingle. He began to tear the parchment apart wildly and began to spout curses into the air. He heard a knock and looked toward the entrance to the throne room. There stood Anselm, his new advisor. Despite his terrible sense of fashion and terrible hairstyle, Anselm had been doing pretty well for himself so far. He swiftly became a man Godric trusted.

"You may come in, Anselm," He instructed.

Anselm slowly walked on the blue carpet that led from the entrance to the throne. When he was before Godric he bowed.

"Your Majesty, I have compiled the recent survey of the citizens of The Empire."

"And what are the results of your research?" Godric asked.

"Well...Your Majesty." Anselm started.

"Spit it out, Anselm!"

"The results are mixed, Your Majesty. Unsurprisingly, those in Adhu Aqua are calling for your dethroning. The surprising part is that those sentiments are shared by the citizens of Impestra."

"Impestra! Great Lord Ignatius is a fool! Why would Ignatius call for my dethroning?"

"The people of Impestra and specifically Great Lord Ignatius are disappointed that you have not allowed them to attack Adhu Aqua alongside you," Anselm explained.

Godric clicked his teeth. "Those warmongering fools, all they enjoy is fighting. They have no regard for the Empire itself."

"That does seem to be the case, Your Majesty. Following on with my report, you are being positively supported by the citizens of The Great Forest of Porffor as well as in Cognizance. Arstutia remains neutral on the subject."

"Getting support from Porffor? That does not mean much. Have you seen the state of those people?" He laughed. "They would probably worship a worm if it had sat on the throne."

"I have one other matter to report on, Your Majesty."

"Before you continue, Anselm. Remind me where you are from?" Godric watched as his advisor began fidgeting.

"Uhm...I am from Porffor, sir." Anselm answered.

"Did my previous statement not offend you?"

"No, sir. I am acutely aware of the state of Porffor."

"You are a good man, Anselm. Now, continue with the report."

Anselm cleared his throat before continuing. "The men we have sent to infiltrate Adhu Aqua have returned. They claim that the man we are looking for is not currently within the city."

Cressela was telling the truth. Where is the bastard then?

"Interesting. Send word to Amos and Damiana. They shall search within their territories for an Alaric Burchard. And if possible I want his head handed to me."

"Is that all, Your Majesty?"

22 Years Prior

Blood leaked from his legs, waist and from his face. He laid prone on the ground, his blood soaked into the soil as a pool began forming around him. He tried to grab his blades but could not generate enough strength.

Get up! Get Up! Not like this! I am the strongest! It is my right to rule! This cannot be allowed to happen!

Godric heard the *clink* of *his* armour as *he* slowly walked over to him. He used his remaining energy to look up at the man towering over him. The man was tall, he was dressed in black armour. Underneath his armour, he wore a black robe. His light brown eyes stared at Godric with malice while he wore a bright smile. Dirt mixed with blood covered him as his short hair was matted to his scalp. The man began laughing uncontrollably.

"Kill me...Jerial...end it." He pleaded.

Jerial's cackling ceased when he spoke. Jerial bent down before and placed a palm on Godric's head. He pushed Godric's head further into the dirt.

"Where is the fun in that, Godric?" His voice changed into a whisper. "Is it not fun to see your *subjects* get tortured as you stand by and watch? After all, that is what you preach to the people of Arstutia, is it not?"

"End it...you are...King." He mumbled.

Jerial began cackling once again. "The Lord of Metals is conceding to me. On another day that would be a blessed hearing. However, becoming King was never in my plans." Jerial let go of his head and laughed as he walked past him. The mocking laughter echoed in his mind as he lost consciousness.

Present Day

Godric rubbed at the scar across his nose as he walked through the halls of his castle known as 'Spearhead'. He stopped before a room that was guarded by two of his soldiers. At his arrival, they swiftly gave way and allowed him to enter. The room he had entered was dark and he struggled to see anything. He heard a faint growl.

"Yago! Stop!."

The growling stopped immediately as the light slowly returned to the room by the opening of a royal blue curtain. Godric immediately saw the freckled face of his son standing on the opposite side of him. His ocelot purred as it stood next to him, looking ready to pounce.

"What are you doing here, Father?"

"It is 'Your Majesty' to you, Everard, remember that."

Everard rolled his eyes. "You did not answer my question, *Your Majesty*?"

Godric made one step closer to him. Everard stretched his hand out to the ocelot to stop it.

"Do you think this is an appropriate way to talk to *your* King?"

"N-n-no, Your Majesty."

"As long as you understand that, I will not punish you any further."

Everard's eyes lit up. "Does this mean I am free to leave this room?"

"Yes...but only because I have a task for you." "Hunt down Alaric Burchard and his rebellious group."

"No, no, no, I cannot do that. I was lucky to escape death, no it is impossible."

"You have no reason to be scared, this time I will be sending your brother and sister alongside you. There will be no backing out of this." Godric walked back towards the door before stopping. "There will be no room for failure, Everard. Prove to me you are not weak." He exited the room and laughed as he roamed the halls.

10.

The snow crunched underneath Florian's feet as he walked aimlessly through the undercity. The shadow creature, Gaile, was walking alongside him. Florian found peace walking in the undercity, the people reminded him of a home he lost. Carefree and living just for the following day.

"Change the Empire? A lofty goal for a delusional man?" Gaile spoke. "Look at these people." His shadowy hand pointed at the locals walking around on the street. Most of them looked downcast.

"If they truly wanted change, they would have done something by now, they would have died for their cause. Cowards do not deserve change." He continued.

Cowards, just like me.

"Still...they resemble you. A coward...with the potential to be so much more with the right guidance...my guidance." Gaile mimicked his thoughts.

"And who will guide you? Since you claim we are of the same mind. Alaric?" Florian asked.

Gaile huffed. "Alaric? That immature man cannot guide a 'Spliefil' to a waterspout. You need someone like me."

A what to a what?

"A figment of my imagination is going to guide me?" At this point, he noticed a few people looking at him strangely.

"Exactly, I am you, who knows you better than me? The obvious answer is me." "Do you know what makes Alaric so successful but yet insufferable at the same time?"

"His...intellect?" Florian asked.

Gaile wagged a dark finger in front of his face.

"Now, Alaric may be smart but that is an attribute found in many people...just not you."

Gaile laughed, the laugh sounding more like a wheezing pot of tea than an actual laugh.

"What makes Alaric insufferable is his ideals. He lives his life to his own set of standards and rules. He is able to make decisions based on those standards. You on the other hand have always lived within his set of rules, the same as Ashe and Savia. But Savia is an outlier."

Florian stopped being bothered by the strange glances he received and continued to speak to Gaile freely.

"And how do I escape?" He asked.

"It is quite simple. Make your own set of standards. How do you want to live your life? Ask yourself that question each day and the answer will be revealed."

How do I want to live my life?

"Let's take that man over there as an example." Gaile pointed down the road at a frail-looking man. The man had some sort of disease that affected his skin. Large patches of dark blue could be seen spotted all over his bare chest. The man was sitting

on a wooden stool in front of an alleyway and was waving a tin can at anyone who passed him by.

"What about him?"

"Where does he fit within your standards?" Gaile asked.

"It is unfortunate for him but we all go through our own struggles," Florian said flatly.

"Oooooo very direct I like it." Gaile placed his shadowy arm around Florian and leaned close to his ear. "But wouldn't it be better if *you* put him out of his misery?"

What?

"He is going to die anyway. You can be the one who decides his fate." Gaile continued whispering in his ear.

He doesn't deserve it!

"Do not get all scared now. Was this not the standard you set when you killed that young soldier in Isern? And who can forget when you chopped Chapman into two? Chapman was a terrible man but can you say the same about that soldier?"

The scene replayed in his mind. He had backstabbed the young soldier, he remembered how the blood oozed out of his mouth and chest. His hands began to shake violently.

"Did that not feel good?" Gaile asked.

No, no, no, no!

"You see, killing the innocent fits within the standards you have created for yourself."

I will not kill. No more. Please!

"Are you ok, sir?"

Florian did not realise he stood directly in front of the diseased man.

"Do it..." Gaile whispered into his ear.

The diseased man looked up at Florian and waved his tin can.

"Do it...NOW!" Gaile persisted in his ear.

His hands moved automatically as if out of his control and withdrew his crimson blade. The control of his body returned to him as his blade pierced through the diseased man's throat. The man gurgled a few protests as his hands travelled towards his neck but within a matter of seconds the man's body went limp. Florian withdrew his blade hastily as tears streamed down his face.

"Did that not feel soooooo goooooood." The shadow encouraged.

Florian did not have time to refute when an ear-piercing scream was heard from behind him. He turned around and made eye contact with a young kid. He immediately put his hood up and sheathed his blade before breaking out into a sprint.

What have I done?

11.

Serenity was found in the oasis. The burbling of the waterfall was the only sound heard. The waterfall spilt its water into a wide pool of water. The pool was shallow with the rocks below it being visible. The pool was surrounded by a variety of yellow and green trees, shrubs and a multitude of flowers. A true paradise. A wave of water flew horizontally out of the waterfall and flew through the air across the pond. The water struck a nearby tree. The splash of water scarred the tree as a deep cut was bored into the tree. More waves of water shot through the air from the waterfall, and the water struck various foliage around the pool. The last wave split the water of the pool and made a deep cut into the ground as it crashed into the bank of the pool. Water splashed against his skin as Able slowly walked through the waterfall and into the pool. The pool almost reached his knees. He wiped the water from his face using his right hand. His thin grey hair was matted to his scalp and was slicked backwards. Able was muscular but lean, a Rixa amulet hung from his neck and sat in the middle of his chest. Scars riddled his torso. The Rixa amulet had a green glow. In his left arm, he held a spear. The polearm of the spear was a mix of gold and brown. A golden snake was carved into the pole as it spiralled around the pole. The blade of the spear was crimson, gold symbols appeared across the red blade.

"Why have you interrupted me, Cessair?" He said sternly. He looked up and a large black bird descended towards the pool. On closer inspection, the bird was not a bird at all but a large gooey creature shaped like a bird. A young girl hopped off the nixum as it landed. Cessair had dark skin with braided hair. She had a youthful face that exacerbated energy in pure contrast to his own wrinkled and lethargic face. She lifted the bottom of her crimson robe as she landed in the water. The water reached her waist as she stood before him.

"My apologies, Master Able," She spoke with a soft tone.

"I am not your master. We are equals within this faith. Our only master is 'The Angh'." He reprimanded.

Cessair flushed as she nodded.

"Now, what business do you have with me?" He asked.

"Sister Jinny requests an audience with you." Cessair proclaimed.

"Very well then. Took her long enough." He ruffled the young girl's hair as he passed her. He climbed onto the goo-like bird, and she followed him.

"Fly, Spliefil." He ordered. The nixum suddenly took flight.

"Her name is Thana." Cessair pouted.

Gold specks flew past them as they soared across the sky. The sky was clear and bright, far above them sat a small ball that blazed with light. He looked towards the land that they soared over. They flew over a forest. What made this forest unique was the ever-changing colour of the trees. As they flew the trees changed from green to blue to

a bright yellow before ending in green again. The forest opened up to reveal two large rivers which crossed over each other in the shape of an 'X'. On the banks of these rivers were wooden houses. Piers could be seen built on the banks of the river. If he focused he could see people walking along the banks. Ahead of them breaking through the foliage was a huge temple. The temple was built with cobblestone, even from this distance large cracks could be seen on the infrastructure of the temple. The temple had gold streaks painted across its walls. The temple had three tiers that got smaller the higher it went. As they got closer to the temple, two large statues could be seen. Thana landed in front of the two statues. Able jumped off the large nixum.

"Cessair, send word to Eros and Anteros, they need to return to the temple." He ordered.

Cessair nodded and Thana took off immediately.

He glanced at the statues. The statue on his right was of a large snake. The snake's fangs were protruding as it posed menacingly. On the snake's scales were runes. The runes were similar to the symbols found on his spear. The statue that partnered the snake was broken. The head of the statue was broken off and laid cracked next to it. The rest of the statue was of a person dressed in a robe that was in tatters. In one hand the statue held a sword and in the other a shield. The decapitated head was of a man who had long flowing hair that was broken off at the neck. A halo went across the statue's forehead. He walked past the statue and towards the entrance of the temple. The temple was surrounded by a large gate, which he opened as he passed through. Leading up to the entrance was a crimson-tiled pathway. Paralleling this pathway on both sides were spears. Hundreds of spears were stabbed into the ground. Positioned on the blunt end of the spears were decapitated skulls. The skulls formed an ominous welcome towards the temple. Waiting for him at the entrance was the temple keeper who held a fire torch. He grabbed the torch from the keeper and made his way into the temple. Inside the temple was dark, he could only see a few feet in front of him despite the torch. Able ran his fingertips alongside the temple's walls as he walked, feeling all the ridges and grooves of the carvings that covered the walls. Eventually, he made it to a staircase that led downwards. The staircase got narrower as he descended. At the bottom of the staircase was a narrow cave that he just barely fit into. The flame on his torch went out. His Rixa Amulet shone even brighter as an invisible force pulled him along deeper into the cave. He entered a small circular room, in the middle of it stood a small altar on top of which swirled a dark sphere of liquid in mid-air. He stood before the liquid and used his spear to cut a thin line into the skin of his forearm. His blood did not run down his arm instead it flowed out of his forearm and into the swirling dark liquid. Then came the familiar feeling.

He was submerged in a dark abyss, slowly sinking as if underwater. In the silence he heard the sound, he smiled and manoeuvred his body to face the opposite direction. Behind him, he was faced with three larger-than-life eyeballs, Each iris being a deep

red. He was a mere speck as he marvelled at the sight. He spread his arms out, and a dark tendril moved through the abyss and touched the amulet on his chest. Immediately the world around him shifted. He was in a decently sized room with a large bed and a few wooden dressers. Before him stood Jinny with her arms folded. His body did not feel the same, he analysed his new body. He was still in the shape of himself however every part of him was made of a black liquid. To any outsider, he would resemble a nixum.

"It has been a long time, Father." Jinny greeted him.

He moved his semi-solid body toward her and cupped her cheek with his hand.

"My dear dear daughter, it has been too long. How are my boys doing?" He asked.

"I...don't know. They are staying with their father. I couldn't risk bringing them to Cognizance."

Jinny hugged her father's undulating body. Able had to focus to ensure she did not split him into two.

"I know it is hard for you, Jin. But the mission is more important than anything. We need to get them to Meinspir at all costs."

Jinny nodded into his chest.

"I understand Jerial's host but what of the other three?"

"I have specific plans for Florian and Ashe. The other needs to be eliminated, she does not fit in our plans. An anomaly must be erased, can you do that for me, Jin?"

"Yes, I will do it."

"Now, how long until they reach Meinspir."

Jinny let go of her father. "I give it a few months, Alaric is keen on heading to Meinspir but he has failed to convince the others as of now."

"Leave it to Alaric to convince them, they are nothing without him. How do they intend to reach Meinspir?"

"This is where it gets interesting, Alaric intends to form an alliance with Great Lord Damiana and storm Meinspir. He intends to take the throne for himself."

He began to laugh. "Absurd idea, how does he intend to get 'The Umbra' to agree to an alliance?"

Jinny outlined Alaric's plan as he felt his connection suddenly snap.

He looked around and he was back in the circular room with the altar. His body seemed to return to normal. He picked up his spear and exited the room. He made his way back out of the temple. On the crimson path stood his companions. The muscular twins, Anteros and Eros, were bruised and battered as they limped towards him.

"What in the world happened to you two?" He asked.

"There is an intruder within Elisium. A man dressed in all black. We attempted to kill him but he got the best of us. His current location is unknown." Anteros explained.

"How'd he get in? You'd have to have a Rixa to enter!"

"I am afraid we have no clue," Eros said.

"I don't know how but you will deal with it. We cannot be revealed, not this close to the 'Reckoning'. "

The twins nodded and hobbled back down the crimson path.

12.

Alaric stood hunched over his cane as he waited for the arrival of Brennan Linden. He was in the guise of Edric Fenman once again. Nighttime was eerily quiet in Cognizance. This city was unlike Isern as it showcased little to no nightlife. He currently stood between two houses. There had been a balcony above him, where he told Savia to hide. He did not have Ashe to back him up tonight. He felt awkward talking to both her and Florian after their last conversation did not end well. He heard the crunch of snow and knew that they arrived.

Brennan seemed to be in a good mood as he smiled brightly at him.

"If it ain't my loyal informant, Edric Fenman," Brennan said.

He had a few to drink it seems.

Brennan was framed by his usual companions, Kyra and the silent male caster, as he made his entrance on Alaric's left. Two casters He has never seen covered Alaric's right side leaving him pincerred. The two unknown casters had white stripes woven into their blue robes.

Amos' guard?

"Master Brennan, why have you summoned me here?" Alaric made sure to look terrified.

"To laud you of course. The information you have fed me thus far has turned out to be accurate. Quite surprising indeed." Brennan announced.

Alaric kept his eyes on the unknown casters.

"Do not worry about them, if you play your cards right they won't hurt you." Brennan continued.

This bastard. What is he playing at?

"Of course, Master Brennan."

"Let's get on with it. As you have told me, House Dawne seemed to have made its move. House Salford has been ejected from the High Board and will be fined a hefty amount. All of this will be announced at the Grand Ball. I am assuming you have found out that the Grand Ball has been moved up and will occur in ten days?"

Ten days! We have no time to prepare.

Alaric tried his best to hide his shock. "Yes...I am aware."

"Good, now you have mentioned the Grand Ball before. I need to know what will be happening on that day."

"For that information, I will require compensation, Master Brennan."

"Just who do you think-" Kyra spat before Brennan stopped her.

"He is an informant, he gives out information for a price. It is only fair." Brennan threw a few jade pieces into the snow. Alaric hastily picked it up before looking at Brennan, who scoffed and threw more sentz.

Alaric used his cane to get back up to his feet and wiped away the snow that clung to his coat.

"I am sure you have heard of the recent string of robberies?" He began.

"I must have been deaf to not have heard about it," Brennan added sarcastically.

"The criminals intend to rob all the House's of the High Board on the night of the Grand Ball."

He watched as Brennan digested the information. "Every member of the High Board would attend the Ball alongside their entire families. It does make plausible sense for the street rats to use the Ball as a distraction."

"I am afraid that is all the information I have on that matter, Master Brennan."

"I did not expect anything more, however, your information was not the only reason I have summoned you here today." Brennan began.

What is this bastard planning?

"You see, at the Ball my father will be announcing his successor and as I will be the head of House Linden, I no longer require an informant. I do have a proposition for you, however."

Alaric raised an eyebrow. "What kind of proposition?"

"It is simple, you have to sneak into the Grand Ball and assassinate my despicable brother, Talus Linden, and I will gift you any riches you desire," Brennan explained.

You are the despicable one here.

"And if I refuse?"

Brennan began laughing. The four casters began their incantations. The air alongside each caster froze as a sharp icicle formed floating above each caster's head.

"You still refuse, Edric?"

What is the right option? Think Alaric. What would He do? What would they want me to do?

"Make your decision, Edric. I do not have all night."

This bastard.

"I refuse!" He proclaimed. As soon as the words left his mouth, the four icicles shot at him. Two from the front and two from the back. Alaric crossed four of his fingers on each hand. He felt his body become incorporeal as the four icicles travelled through his body. The male caster that stood next to Brennan got caught by the trick as an icicle pierced through his chest. His scream was short-lived as his body went limp almost immediately. The other three casters dodged.

"What do you think you are doing? Attacking a member of the High Board? You deserve to be executed!" Brennan yelled.

Got to take care of the White Stripes.

"I have been waiting for this for a long time!" Kyra yelled as she drew a short sword. Alaric turned away from her and faced the White Stripes. The White Stripes chanted and five ice-like blades began swirling through the air around both of them. He heard

the crunch of snow behind him. Kyra yelled as she charged him. Her yell immediately turned into a scream as something crashed into her from above. Two ice blades flew in his direction at great velocity. He did not have time to cast as he opted to drop his body into the snow. As soon as the blades passed him Savia hopped over him and charged the two casters.

"Keep them occupied!" He yelled. He glanced at Brennan who was watching the action unfold, his jaw nearly reaching the snow. He then turned back to Savia who was swatting away ice-blades with her daggers. She could not block every attack as an ice-blade cut her cheek.

He bit hard on his thumb until it drew blood. He began drawing runes of blood on both of his wrists, the shoulders on his coat, his chest and his boots. After he drew the runes he placed his hands into the snow. He watched as his hands froze over with ice. Despite the thin layer of ice that shaped his hand, he was just as dexterous as before. The ice spread further granting a protective layer over his chest, shoulders, feet and legs. The ice spread over his cane resulting in a rather jagged blade. Instead of dashing towards Savia, his body simply glided across the snow. One of the white stripes noticed him and shot an ice blade towards him. He simply Lifted his cane-blade as the ice blade seemingly got absorbed into the cane. He lifted his free hand and opened his palm. An ice blade formed from the ice around his hand and was shot back towards the caster. The caster used his other ice blades to parry the attack.

"Took you long enough." Savia smiled at him while breathing heavily.

"The hero always arrives late." He returned her smile while absorbing and counter-attacking the White Stripes.

"Which is why you have to buy time for me," Savia said.

"With pleasure!" He winked.

Savia took a few steps backwards, hiding herself behind Alaric's frame. One of the casters stopped their ice-blade cast and charged at Alaric. Alaric dodged the initial right hook by leaning backwards. He did not see the ice blade careering towards his face until the last possible moment. He swiftly blocked his face with his hand as the blade got absorbed into it. He felt a pain in his gut as he got kicked hard. He took a few steps back, nearly crashing into Savia.

They are good.

He glanced at Savia who could be seen hard chanting. Balls of snow began rising from the ground and floated around her. Her daggers were floating midair in front of her as she had her hands clasped and her eyes closed.

Alaric threw his cane-blade at the ice-blade caster, he then glided across the snow towards his opponent. He baited an attack as the man attempted to punch him. Alaric simply ducked low avoiding the strikes and punched the man hard on the side of his gut. The thin layer of ice on his hands began to crack as he struck.

I cannot hold 'Frost Armour' any longer. Come on, Savia.

An ice-blade struck his shoulder as he attempted to strike the man in the face. His opponent stepped on his foot and headbutted him. Leaving him dazed for a few seconds. The man directly in front of him sidestepped as three ice blades struck Alaric's chest. His armour of ice immediately shattered leaving him out of breath. Another ice blade was about to take him out before Savia's dagger shot through the air and collided with it. The collision resulted in a small burst of snow and ice. Alaric glanced backwards and saw Savia holding both her daggers in her hands. Encompassing the space between Savia and him were roughly fifty daggers floating ominously. He gripped two daggers out of the air. The daggers had no weight. He smiled as he threw one dagger at the man in front of him. The man dodged but he could not dodge the one that followed. The man yelled as the dagger collided with his face. As the dagger reached his face it morphed back into its original shape as the man's face was covered in snow. Alaric used the moment to charge at the confused man. He noticed the other daggers flying through the air and covered the other caster in snow as Savia dashed towards him. Alaric kept his body low as he dashed. He grabbed underneath the confused man's thighs and used all his strength to lift the man into the air. The man screamed in protest. Alaric lifted him as high as possible before slamming him hard onto the snow-covered ground. The man yelled out in pain. Alaric then moved towards his face and used his boots to stamp on the man's face repeatedly, only stopping once he heard a crack below his foot. He moved his foot away to reveal the bloody mess that was the man's face as the man lay unconscious on the snow. He looked towards Savia who was overwhelming her opponent with her speed and explosiveness. Occasionally a floating dagger would strike the caster, throwing the caster off balance. She caught the caster with a swipe across the chest, drawing blood. The caster fainted Savia with a left jab and was about to kick her in the ribs. Alaric saw this and twisted both his index fingers across his middle fingers. A pale yellow barrier surrounded Savia, the caster's kick bounced off the barrier allowing Savia to stab the man in the chest, killing him. Savia turned towards Alaric.

"I did not ask for your help." She said, smirking.

"Think of it as a gift- " He was cut off as he felt a sharp pain in his left shoulder. He clutched his shoulder and turned around. Brennan stood at the end of the alleyway with two ice-blades in his hands. Brennan immediately ran away. Savia tried to follow.

"Leave him! It would be worse if we hurt him!" Alaric yelled.

He saw the annoyance on Savia's face but she listened to him and ran towards him. The pain in his shoulder seemed to be forgotten as a sharp pain could be felt in his head. Alaric held his head as he screamed his pain.

Blue skies. White Sparkles. White Pillar.

13.

Ashe was sleeping soundly when she heard a loud crash downstairs. She glanced to the other bed and noticed Savia was not present. She jumped out of bed and reached under her bed. She felt around for a moment before her hand touched it. She grabbed it and pulled it out from underneath her bed. The sight of her spear immediately spurred bad memories. Her hands began to shake as she gripped the polearm tightly.

You have to be brave, Ashe.

She steeled herself and tiptoed her way out of her room. She stared down the hallway. At the end of the hall, Jinny's room door was wide open. She could not see anyone within the room. She stealthily moved to Florian and Alaric's room. The door had still been closed. She grabbed the handle and slowly opened the door. As soon as the door was opened wide enough she poked her head into the room. Alaric's bed was empty. Florian was curled up in a ball facing the wall on his bed.

Just like before. What happened?

She then decided to back out of the room and slowly make her way downstairs. She heard a hushed conversation as she reached the bottom of the stairs. She looked towards the origin of the sounds. Savia was staring right back at her. She gave up sneaking and walked toward the dining area in which Savia and Jinny were standing. As she got closer she noticed Alaric lying on the large wooden table, unconscious. He was shirtless, and a once white cloth now stained red was wrapped around his left shoulder. She rushed forward to get a closer look.

"He will be fine," Jinny said in a hushed tone.

"What happened?" She spat at Jinny.

"The meeting with Brennan did not go well. We fought Amos' White Stripes, it was going well until Brennan caught Alaric by surprise." Savia explained.

"You had a meeting with Brennan? Why did you not mention it to me? I am usually his overwatch." She was angry, her words came out with more venom than she intended.

"He did not want to tell you." Savia gestured at Alaric. "After the last meeting we had, he felt..."

Ashe sighed as she nodded in agreement. "We all agreed to the Grand Ball mission. He should have told me."

She looked at his face, he did not look to be in pain.

"About the Grand Ball..." Savia started. Ashe turned towards her.

"The Grand Ball has been moved up, it will take place in ten days."

"I thought we'd have more time. We will have to revamp our plan." She bunched her eyebrows together.

"We can figure it out after Alaric wakes up," Jinny added. "It makes no sense for him to lose consciousness after such a wound. Are you sure that is all that happened?" Jinny asked Savia.

"He got hit a few times but that was the only attack that had a big effect on him," Savia explained.

"Hmm...I will research Brennan Linden tomorrow. Perhaps he has a type of cast we are not aware of. We should all get some rest, there is a lot we have to prepare for." Jinny said as she retreated out of the room.

"Has Florian been made aware of the situation?" Ashe asked.

"He has been behaving strangely, I tried to speak to him but he kept ignoring me," Savia answered.

"I will try to talk to him." She was about to leave when Savia grabbed her arm.

"There's more," Savia whispered. Ashe instantly became more concerned.

"The wound on Alaric's shoulder was not what put him in this state." Ashe watched as Savia fidgeted with her cloak.

"Tell me. He is my brother, I need to know." Ashe grabbed Savia's arm in concern.

Savia nodded. "Before he fell unconscious, he held his head tightly. White...white sparks began appearing around his forehead."

White sparks?

"There is more...he began speaking in a foreign language. It was almost like...like he was not himself." Savia continued.

Ashe's hands began to shake again. "D-do you think i-it's h-him?"

Savia shook her head, which brought some relief to Ashe.

"It can't be. Alaric has never taken the Seal of Habbeo off, not even for a second. Ivo gave up his life in the hopes that it would work."

"Then what is happening to him?" She asked.

"I was hoping you could tell me that. You have known him far longer than I have. Has something similar occurred when you were younger?" Savia asked.

Ashe thought back to the days she had spent with her siblings on Diable Island. Her mind wandered to Priest Able and the kind smile he always had on his face.

He can't be Scaev.

"I have never seen or heard anything like it. All Alaric done on the island was read and occasionally tutor the other children."

Savia looked at Alaric with concern. Ashe grabbed her hand and held it tightly.

"I am sure he will be alright. Let's ask him about it when he wakes up."

Savia gave her a small smile.

"We should both get some rest," She said as she dragged Savia with her towards the stairs. Savia stopped in her tracks.

"I think we need to move him back to his bed," Savia suggested.

Ashe giggled at her simplicity as she helped Savia move Alaric.

The following morning, She woke up and began to get ready for her usual day at Andron. When she exited their home, she was met with Savia and Alaric arguing. They stopped once they saw her. Ashe ran to hug Alaric who returned the hug affectionately. "You are awake! How are you feeling? You should be resting." Ashe said in quick succession.

"You and Savia worry too much. I feel great." Alaric gestured to his shoulder, the bandages around his shoulder were visible due to the sleeveless nature of his robe. She looked towards Savia who was visibly frustrated at Alaric.

"Still...you should rest up." She insisted.

"Yes, I will escort Ashe to Andron," Savia added.

"Savia you are the one who needs rest. You did not get a wink of sleep last night due to me and you used a draining cast. I feel great."

Savia was about to argue when Alaric grabbed Ashe's arm and dragged her down the street with him. Leaving an angry Savia behind. After a few steps, Alaric stopped dragging her and walked calmly next to her.

"Be honest, how do you truly feel?" She asked.

"I was not lying...I feel great. I understand it is strange, I do not quite understand it as well. There is no longer any pain in my shoulder." He explained.

"That is strange...do you remember anything 'out of the ordinary' from last night?"

"Not particularly. I remember fighting Brennan and his goons, I remember getting hit by his attack and then I woke up this morning."

"So...nothing between when you got stabbed in the shoulder and when you woke up?"

"Savia asked a similar question...did something happen last night?" He asked.

"Uhhmm...nothing happened. We just worried about you."

She knew he did not buy her lie but he acted as if he had.

"And I forgot...I am angry at you." She pouted.

"How does one forget something like that?" Alaric smirked. "What have I done this time?"

"I know things are weird, the last time we spoke Florian and I denied helping you reach your goal. That was one thing, however, both of us agreed to the Grand Ball mission. It is quite unfair to not inform me about your meeting with Brennan Linden."

He rubbed his chin as he thought of her words. "I made a realisation after our last meeting. I do not want to drag you into my business anymore, it just harms our already existing relationships. I decided that whether or not you and Florian want to help me, I will strive for my goal regardless. I never meant to offend you."

A world where the three of us are separated.

"I understand." She looked at the snow falling from the sky. "In nine days it will be all over."

"You'll have to take care of Florian in my absence."

"Hey...I'm still the youngest, he should take care of me."

Alaric laughed as they made their way towards Andron.

She did not see Beatrix on the way to Andron and assumed the worst.

Our plan must have worked.

Her classes went smoothly, however, throughout the day, she was becoming more and more anxious about the Grand Ball. After her final class ended she decided to sneak into Professor Burchard's classroom. She found the classroom empty when she arrived and silently entered. She snuck towards his desk. She crouched until she was at eye level with the cabinet below his desk where she knew he kept all his tomes and materials for his cast lectures. She was about to open it when her hand struck an invisible force that slightly burned her hand. She hissed as she tried it again but with the same result. This was when she heard footsteps behind her. She panicked and turned around, Lloyd was towering over her. The expression on his face was not one of anger but a neutral one.

She was about to start making excuses when he stopped her. He motioned her to get up which she immediately did.

"Lady Ashe, when Fenway asked you to monitor for any suspicious behaviour around here. I had already known it to be you."

"Then why..." She began.

"Not stop you?" Lloyd finished her sentence.

Ashe nodded.

"At first, I was outraged that a student would do this, however as time went on I found it more exciting to leave it be rather than stop it." He explained.

"More exciting?"

"Yes...you should know, life as a foreigner within Cognizance can get a bit bland. No one here acknowledges you, in fact, it took me five years of groveling just to be allowed to teach at Andron. Allowing you to steal those 'texts' was just my way of helping another foreigner."

"I see...I apologise for stealing the 'texts', it will not happen again. I promise."

"Lady Ashe, why did you steal the 'texts'?"

"Uhh...I wanted to...help, yeah help my family. I knew if I got stronger at a faster pace I could make them proud."

She was not sure he bought her lie but he seemed rather invested in her story.

"You enrolled into Andron rather late, Lady Ashe. You are older than most students, I can understand your frustration with being left behind. You must understand that not every caster is the same, we all begin at different places and our limits might be different. I can already tell you are a talented caster therefore there is no need for you to try and evolve faster than you are intended to. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mr. Burchard."

"You remind me of myself when I was rather young. You see my brother, you should know him. His name was Jerial the Merciless." Lloyd began.

I know him all too well.

"He was brilliant, possibly the most talented and influential caster of our generation. When growing up alongside this phenomenon, I became rather jealous. I tried everything in my power to catch up, but using all my knowledge of casting, I could not catch up. Then I gave up, I conceded that I would probably never be as strong as him. I then realised I was acting purely on emotion and felt stupid about myself. I then did what I truly wanted for myself. I researched different cast techniques and runes to be one of the world's leading scholars on the subject. The lesson here is, Lady Ashe, do not act on such emotions rather focus on what you really want out of Andron."

"From the stories I had heard of your brother, he sounds like a rather...ruthless man. You do not seem anything like him." Ashe said.

Lloyd began laughing. "Jerial was ruthless, but I can be too. Do not get on my bad side, Lady Ashe."

"I would not dream of doing that."

The conversation turned to a lecture with Lloyd giving a few tips on casting techniques. That evening when she got home, she had heard a ruckus from within the house. She immediately dashed to the door and swung it wide open.

Savia stood closest to her with both daggers in her hands. Savia had her back towards Ashe. Ahead of Savia stood Alaric with a look of anger, his fists had been clenched.

Facing her direction, ahead of Alaric, stood Florian. He had a bloodied lip. The expression on his face was one of anger. He held Heinzidal's blade before him, pointing it at Alaric.

14.

Alaric found himself back in Linden Square, he found an empty bench and took a seat. He felt different, lighter. Every movement he made felt easier. He felt a strange aura emanating from him. Even his injured shoulder felt healed. He placed his elbows on his knees and placed his hands under his chin. He then closed his eyes and listened. He heard a faint *swish*. He immediately looked towards the origin of the sound. He found himself facing a shocked Yves. Yves' impression changed from one of shock to one of content.

"You have figured out my technique," Yves said as he sat next to Alaric.

He shook his head. "I...I do not think I figured anything out. I just heard you."

"Heard me? No, no, that should be impossible. Are you certain, Rick?"

"What do you mean impossible?" He asked.

Yves began fidgeting. "I will explain, however, you will have to promise to never tell another soul."

"I promise, Yves."

"To mask my presence from you, I used a 'High Light ability'." Yves opened his suit and showed Alaric a glass vial that had a white substance within. "This is what we would call 'Condensed Light', it gives my kind the ability to manipulate light. Essentially, no one should have been able to hear me with the ability I used." He explained.

Alaric began rubbing his chin. "Are you certain you have used the ability?"

Yves stared at him, inching closer until they were face to face. "You are different! I sense something has changed."

"I do feel...different. Although nothing significant has happened to me." He explained.

Alaric thought back to the questions Savia and Ashe asked him.

They know something.

"That is quite strange... Perhaps this is a case of 'Heshdon'."

"Heshdon?"

"Ahhh, Heshdon is a tale from my land. He was born with a very weak, sickly body that left him bedridden for most of his life. One day, Heshdon's village was attacked by awful creatures. Nobody in the village was strong enough to fight back against the creatures. That is when Heshdon got out of his bed, he joined the fight against the creatures, showcasing miraculous strength and 'light' ability. Heshdon single-handedly protected his village. What was even more bizarre was that after the battle he returned to being the sickly man he always was." Yves explained.

"Did Heshdon truly exist?"

"No one is certain. I would like to believe that the tale would not exist if the man had not."

"I see...then this feeling is temporary."

"That might not be the case, Rick. I have another hypothesis for your current situation."

"It may be possible that you have found your resolve and feel empowered because of it. Rick, have you found your goal?"

He smirked. "I took your advice and trusted my senses. I found something I truly want to achieve."

"And what might that be?" Yves asked.

Alaric looked around if anybody could hear them, he then proceeded to tell Yves about his plan.

He made his way up to the Grand Study within House Dawne. He was in his Zevius disguise. When he reached the study, he predicted to find Amira within but that was not the case. Sat at a table reading a book was a different woman, she was dressed in an eloquent dress. She looked much older than him and some part of her was familiar. He kept his face down as he began to clean, he kept glancing at the woman. He did not know where he knew her from. Whilst cleaning he came across a parchment. On it was a drawn image of himself below the image were the words 'King's Orders: Capture!'. Alaric cursed silently.

I knew this was going to happen sooner or later. Stay calm, Alaric. You just have to lay low. Godric, you bastard!

Amira's voice broke him out of his trance.

"Zevius, it is wonderful to see you once again. I see Lady Hale has joined us as well."

Lady Hale? Is she from House Hale?

The lady stood up from her seat and faced Amira. "I apologise if I have entered without permission, Lady Dawne."

"There is no need to apologise, I assume your husband is meeting with my mother?" Amira asked.

"Ahh yes he is, and please call me 'Soren'. This formality is rather new to me."

"Alright, Soren, then you shall call me Amira. What were you reading?"

"I was reading a book titled 'Perditus'," Soren answered.

"I quite enjoyed that one, if I am not mistaken it is about a caster mother who searches for her lost daughter."

Alaric cleaned as the two women conversed with each other.

"Where are you from?" Amira asked.

Soren hesitated. "I am originally from...Isern."

He raised an eyebrow.

"That rat-infested, slimy town. Ahh, I am sorry that probably offended you."

"You are quite correct on the state of Isern, which is why I am glad that I have met Lord Hale."

Amira and Soren continued their conversation until Soren was called to leave. Alaric was about to leave as well when Amira stopped him.

"Trying to leave without having a discussion with me? How devious, Zevius." Amira chuckled at her wordplay.

"I have f-f-finished cleaning this area, Lady Amira," He answered.

Amira grabbed his arm and dragged him to a chair, she pushed him to sit. She then grabbed her own chair and sat opposite him. He kept his gaze on the floor.

"In our last discussion, we spoke of the reality that I seek for this city." She began.

"I do recall s-s-s-something of that sort."

"It seems the city is changing at a much faster pace than I expected. This has not been publicly announced yet but as anticipated House Salford has been abolished."

Brennan was not lying, I guess.

"That is not all. Great Lord Amos has accepted my mother's Reformation plan. She intends to begin development at the turn of the year."

"W-w-w-what are your t-t-t-thoughts on this plan, Lady Amira?"

"In all honesty, I find it to be a bad plan. I agree that something has to be done with the undercity. It cannot be left the way it is. The methods my mother has planned to implement will not make the situation better, it is just meant to aggravate the mysurs that live there." "One false move and it could turn into a civil war between members of the High Board. What do you think of it, Zevius?"

"I-i-i Have no grounds to stand on here as I am a mysur."

"Nonsense, I asked you for your opinion."

"I-i-i do not t-t-think much w-w-w-will change. The m-m-mysurs of the undercity has n-n-n-nowhere to go. This will always be their h-h-h-home and they will adapt to the new s-s-s-state of governing. Before they had Great Lord Amos m-m-m-monitoring them, now they will have members of the H-h-h-h-high Board owning territory down there. As for your matter with the c-c-c-civil war, I do not think it is much different from what we have now. Members of the High Board are always trying to c-c-c-compete and sabotage one another. It does not matter in this case whether the war is happening." Alaric explained.

I may have said too much.

"That was a great answer, Zevius. You always know what to say. Your answer right there is the politically correct one. Alas, it is one I cannot believe. My mother's plan to turn the undercity into some sort of turf war will ultimately prove to be the end of Cognizance. Do you have any dreams, Zevius?"

"N-n-no, Lady Amira. We a-a-are not allowed to d-d-dream." He answered.

Amira got up from her chair and walked toward the large windows that showcased the city.

"That is a shame. Perhaps if you were born under different circumstances, we could have become great friends, comrades even." She stated.

I am afraid we are too different.

"I-i-i hope one d-d-day, you f-f-find s-s-someone like that."

"I fear I do not have to look very far," She said ominously.
He watched as Amira silently stared out of the window. He used the moment to slip out of the room.

Amira Dawne, perhaps we could yet become comrades.

He completed his tasks at House Dawne and returned home for the evening.

When he arrived home, Jinny was waiting for him.

"We have to talk. It is serious." She had an angry expression on her face.

"I do not want to hear that we need to get to Meinspir as soon as possible. You've told me that a thousand times already." He tried to brush it off and walk past her.

"It is about Florian."

This made him pause and turn around. "What about him?"

"Blues arrived here this morning. They were looking for someone that matched his description." She explained.

"Why were they looking for him?"

"They believe he murdered a man in cold blood within the undercity," She stated.

"No, no, no, no. It can't be. There is no way he would do anything of the sort. He must have been attacked. Where is he? FLORIAN!" Alaric yelled.

For a while, no one came down the stairs. Alaric kept yelling. Eventually, Savia descended the stairs with her daggers in her hands. She looked at Alaric with confusion.

"What is happening?" She asked.

He ignored her and decided to ascend the stairs and go into his room. He found Florian lying on his bed. He kept his body small by curling into a little ball. He faced the wall so that his back was turned to Alaric. Alaric grabbed Florian's shoulder. His hand burned slightly as he touched Florian causing him to withdraw his hand.

"What do you want?" Florian asked. He kept his voice low.

"We have a matter to discuss, let's go downstairs," Alaric said.

Florian nodded and got up from the bed. Alaric noticed that his eyes had been red.

Florian grabbed his crimson blade and was about to head out.

"There is no need to bring a weapon," Alaric said.

Florian ignored him and exited the room. Once they met up with Jinny and Savia, Alaric began the discussion.

"What have you been doing roaming the undercity?" He asked.

"I haven't been doing anything. You can ask her." Florian pointed at Savia. "She keeps poking her head into our room."

Alaric looked toward Savia.

"Recently he spent most of his time sleeping or whatever he does in his bed," She explained.

He nodded at her then faced Florian who was not meeting his gaze.

He is guilty of something.

"Why are there blues looking for you?" Jinny asked.

Her question made him look towards her in shock.

"What...have you...done? I want the truth, Florian." He asked more sternly.

"The truth? You...you want the truth. Why should I give it to you? It seems to me that you have already condemned me. And did we not deserve the truth when you were the one with the most secrets." Florian angrily spat.

Alaric clenched his fists. He was about to bite back when Savia cut him off.

"That has nothing to do with what is happening now! You are trying to evade the topic at hand."

Florian turned to her. "Nothing to do with what is happening? Really? Why are we in this situation? If not for him!" He gestured wildly to Alaric. He then ran his fingers over the scar on his face. "Why are we here? Why do we have to steal? All these grand plans...why? It is him! He ruined our lives! And you are just his little bitch that he controls!"

Alaric took two quick steps forward and punched Florian in the face. The blow split Florian's lip and left his mouth bloodied.

"DID YOU DO IT?" He yelled.

Florian began chuckling as he grabbed his crimson blade and pointed it at Alaric.

"And what if I had?" Florian spat blood onto the floor.

"What in Heinzidal's name is going on!?" Ashe's voice rang through the room.

Alaric relaxed his fists but continued glaring at Florian.

"Why? That is all I need." Alaric growled at him.

"I needed to do it. That is all!" Florian said as ice formed around his blade. Florian swung the blade in Alaric's direction, and a large chunk of ice flew at him with incredible speed. He managed to cast a pale yellow barrier but as the ice hit his barrier, he was flung off of his feet and into a nearby wall. The force of the ice and the wall broke his barrier. The wind was knocked out of him and a wave of exhaustion ran through his body. He glanced at Savia who was preparing to charge at Florian. He watched as Florian shot another ice blast, this time aiming towards Savia. He yelled out but it was too late. The blast was too fast for Savia to dodge, that was his first thought however her body moved unnaturally to the side as the blast missed her and crashed against the wall. The wall next to the front door was destroyed by the blast. The chill of the evening could immediately be felt. He looked toward Ashe who had been casting. A bright green rune floated around her forehead. She had a hand pointed out toward Savia, who had a matching green rune around her head. Florian put one hand to his head and began groaning in pain.

"GET OUT OF MY HEAD! ASHE!" He yelled.

I did not want to use this yet. Alaric quietly crawled into the kitchen and grabbed a small knife. He pointed the blade at his left forearm. The gold bracelet on his wrist shone

mockingly at him. He clenched his teeth hard as he used the knife to carve into the skin on the outside of his forearm. Blood dripped around his arm as he carved the rune into his skin. *Thank you, Cressela.*

He glanced at Florian who was readying a piercing attack towards Ashe. Alaric cursed as he dashed toward Ashe. He raised his arm in front of him and clenched his left fist as he stepped in front of Ashe intercepting the attack. From his forearm formed a large shield made of ice. The ice shield was blood-red in colour. Florian's crimson blade struck his blood shield. Large chunks of red ice splattered everywhere. The shield managed to block Florian's attack. Alaric's left arm was numb and he was losing consciousness fast. He dropped to one knee and glared at Florian who looked in similar shape as him.

"Enough!" Two light brown rope-like objects wrapped around Florian's blade and dragged it out of his hands. The ropes were held by Jinny who looked at them furiously. Alaric unclenched his fist and the shield dissipated into red particles.

"We are done with this! Whatever he has done, we can't change anything about it. We will continue our plan and after it is complete you can go your separate ways." Jinny instructed.

He was in no position to argue so he reluctantly nodded. Savia walked toward him and helped him to his feet. She silently guided him towards her room, she let him lay down on Ashe's bed as the evening finally took its toll on him.

15.

The snow fell particularly hard this evening as Savia stood perched on a rooftop in the undercity. She was dressed in a blue robe that had white stripes woven into it. The robe was quite large on her, as the man who lay unconscious behind her was much larger than her. The heavy snowfall made it hard for her to see her target clearly. She had been watching Great Lord Amos' Castle for the past hour.

Where are you, old man?

She watched as in front of the castle was a large number of blues and mixed in between them were Amos' guard. There were three large carriages parked in front of the castle with two horses attached to them each. The gathering in front of the castle was for the Grand Ball that was occurring tonight. Or that was currently occurring. *You are late to your party, old man?* Thinking about the ball made Savia nervous. *Everything has to go perfectly.* Her mind went back to the night, eight days ago, when they fought Florian. *He will not stand in the way of mine or Alaric's plans.* Florian was the reason she was nervous, she could not trust him. Despite Alaric reducing Florian's role in the heist, she still thought that he might try and ruin the plan. The dynamic within the house had reverted to what it was after Adhu Aqua. No one spoke to each other. Florian kept his distance from everyone. Ashe attempted to get everyone to speak but to no avail. Alaric would not even speak to her anymore. It made her frustrated. *Did he believe what Florian said about me?* She shook her head as she noticed movement in front of the castle. *Can't get distracted now.* She focused as three figures emerged from the entrance of the castle. She could not make out any distinct features from any of them, only that they wore white robes that mirrored the snow that fell. She waited as eventually the figures climbed into separate carriages. The carriages left, along with the soldiers that had gathered in front of the castle. Only a few soldiers were left guarding the castle. *It is time!* She had spent the last eight days staking out the castle for any easy access points. She had found none. Great Lord Amos had been very meticulous with his structure and strict with his followers, according to Alaric at least. The Grand Ball was the only reason this plan would work. *Amos cannot be in two places at once.* She stood on the edge of the rooftop and turned her back to the view. She then jumped backwards slightly allowing her body to freefall off of the roof. She mentally counted to two before her hands grabbed the metal railing of a balcony. She let go of the railing and crashed into the pile of snow she piled up beforehand. She cursed as the iciness of the snow encased her, she climbed out of the snow and dusted herself off. The streets were not particularly busy, there were a few mysurs who saw her crash into the snow but as soon as they saw her robe they immediately ignored her and continued to roam. One thing she had noticed was that there were no blues roaming the streets, this made her job particularly easier. Alaric's false report to Brennan had them spooked and most ran security for the House's. Instead of heading directly toward the castle, she made her

way to the harbour. She did not bother to hide who she was, most ignored her as they spotted her robe. Cognizance harbour was humongous, it spanned the entire eastern coast of the city. Along the harbour stood all sorts of boats and ships. She spotted a few men sleeping on some of the boats. The harbour was split into two by a large stone pathway that crossed the Fractal sea. The path began on the shore of the harbour and reached far into the ocean where it spread into a large platform. She squinted and spotted a four-sided stone archway placed on the platform. *One of three transporters to Meinspir, according to Alaric. It is right there, Savia. You can go, you don't need to do all of this.* She immediately thought of Alaric and those thoughts vanished. She walked towards the north end of the harbour. This side of the harbour was paralleled by the southernmost castle wall. Savia walked up to the wall, she withdrew her daggers. She chanted under her breath, her daggers began to glow red slightly. She then stabbed her daggers into the castle wall, the daggers sunk into the wall as if the wall were a soft substance. She then began scaling the tall wall. Once she reached the top she had been exhausted, and she decided to lie on the top of the wall to catch her breath. Once she regained a bit of energy she looked out toward the castle. The wall overlooked some sort of courtyard, the courtyard was filled with large wooden figures. Some of the figures looked more worn than others. She spotted a few weapon racks that were spread across the courtyard. She continued to look around until she found a conveniently placed ladder that leaned against the castle wall. She moved to the ladder and began her descent. She pulled the hood of her robe over her head, masking her appearance. She left the courtyard and delved deeper into the castle. The castle's layout was completely different to the one in Adhu Aqua. Whilst Jerial's castle was tall, this castle was wider with more wings and fewer floors. This castle was not empty either, a few soldiers patrolled the halls. Most of the soldiers were part of Amos' guard showcased by the white stripes in their blue robes. She snuck past them easily as she slowly and carefully searched the castle rooms for her goal.

16.

Florian lay on a haystack staring up at the wooden ceiling of the stable. Next to him on another haystack was the shadow Gaile who positioned himself in a similar manner as him.

"They got you placed in this dung-infested place, while they go out and enjoy themselves. Don't you just hate them!" Exclaimed Gaile.

"It is my fault, I deserve this. I almost killed them..." He replied solemnly.

"They pushed you to do that. If they did not act all crazy over one dead man, that never would have happened." Gaile chuckled. "And who are they to lecture you about who you can kill? Alaric killed hundreds and claims it to be 'Jerial's' fault, Savia has killed before too. They are not as innocent as they want you to believe."

"They had reason to kill...I did not." He began shivering. Gaile was beside him in a second.

"No, no, no, you are reverting to the coward you were before. Perhaps you need to find some satisfaction once again." Florian watched as Gaile pointed towards one of the four horses present.

He tried to physically push Gaile away but his hands just went straight through him.

"No more! I cannot deal with this anymore. Get away from me!" He yelled as he hopped up onto his feet. Gaile mirrored him and they faced each other.

"I don't think you understand yet," Gaile said menacingly. Florian felt a slight pain in his left leg. Gaile's shadowy eyes lit up in a strange red tint.

"I am you! Your inner thoughts. This is who you truly are underneath it all!" Gaile gestured wildly.

I must be going insane.

"You are not insane. Everyone has sides they would rather not show." Gaile answered his thoughts.

Florian decided he had heard enough and walked toward the exit of the stables. Outside of the stable he ran into a short chubby man. *He heard everything.* Florian's mind flashed back to the man he slaughtered. *The blood trickled from his neck. The cold lifeless look as his body was swept away.* He shook his head as the man looked at him curiously. He continued to walk away from the stable. The stable was located on the westernmost part of Cognizance close to the city's exit. This part of the city was busy, many carriages were dragged along the road heading towards Andron. Blues roamed the streets, no mysur was in sight. *I can't be spotted.* Florian did not stray far from his spot next to the stable, he watched as people dressed in wealthy-looking garms passed him. He continued to watch before he spotted a familiar figure that was bordered by two unfamiliar armoured people. The young boy with short blond hair and blue eyes looked exactly as the last time Florian had seen him. *You live, Everard.* A woman around Florian's age stood to Everard's right. She had blond hair that was tied tightly in a bun.

Her eyes were not blue but black and she had a menacing expression on her face. She was dressed in armour that somewhat resembled the runic armour worn by the Commanders in Adhu Aqua. Except for green accents, this armour was replaced by blue accents. The man to Everard's left had been tall and muscular. He did not have blonde hair but a dark brown, his hair was kept rather short and spiky. He seemed to be a few years older than Florian. His eyes were similar to Everard's. He had a large bushy beard and attached to his back was a rather large broadsword.

He was about to call Everard when a hand covered his mouth. He was being dragged back towards the stable. He began to struggle. *They found me.* The person who grabbed him was stronger than him and he could not break the hold. Florian stopped struggling as he was brought into the room he was in earlier with the horses. He was tossed into a haystack. He turned around and unsheathed his crimson blade. He felt the blade begin sapping his energy. The man before him did not look like anyone he had ever seen before, The man was dark-skinned with white paint that swirled on his hairless head. The man was dressed in a bizarre charcoal suit with silver chains hanging from the blazer. The man smiled at him showcasing a pair of fangs.

"Who...are you?" Florian asked.

"Rick asked me to keep an eye on you, I thought it would be a simple task. Not once did I expect you to try and get yourself killed." The man spoke in a strange accent.

"You did not answer my question!" Florian exclaimed.

"Oh my, have Rick not told you about me? I am Yves, just your average Ysgafyn-man." *Ysgafyn? Is this the man Alaric spoke about?*

Gaile suddenly appeared next to him.

"Look they do not trust you with simple tasks, they sent a babysitter," Gaile said.

He ignored his shadowy friend and instead focused on Yves.

"Who is this 'Rick' you keep referring to?" He asked.

Yves began to chuckle. "I forgot, you must call him by his given name, Alaric."

Florian relaxed after hearing that and sheathed his blade.

"If you are wondering, Rick told me to keep you here until the plan is done. No hard feelings, okay?" Yves said.

Florian nodded. "I understand his concerns,"

"An interesting fellow," Gaile said while glaring at Yves, his eyes shining red once again.

Florian felt his left leg tighten up.

17.

Alaric stood calmly on the darkened balcony overlooking the impressive ballroom hall below him. The patio he currently stood on was on the third floor of the hall. The hall was a four-story building. The ground floor had been a large open area with a large stage and two staircases that opposed one another leading up to the following stories. All the other floors were made to view the ballroom hall, leaving them rather empty with only a few rooms each. The main floor was lit by a gigantic chandelier and multiple lanterns leaving the rest of the floors darkened. He watched as a group of rather talented musicians played instruments on the main stage. He then turned his attention to the people that were situated on the ballroom floor. Tables were set out on two sides of the hall leaving the middle of the hall empty. Men and women dressed in the most fancy garms he has ever seen. A few danced to the music, while others were in intense conversations at their respective tables. He saw a few familiar faces. Brennan Linden sat next to his brother, Talus, and his father, Lothar. Brennan had an expression of dissatisfaction as his brother was seemingly a popular figure. People surrounded Talus as he engaged with them happily. Alaric briefly chuckled before spotting Stewart Hale and his new wife Soren, who still looked familiar to him. *Where have I seen her?* He did not have time to dwell on it as Alene Dawne made her entrance. She was followed by the various members of House Dawne. People looked at her with awe as she casually strolled to an empty table seemingly ignoring everyone. He heard Richard Salford curse loudly which brought the entire ballroom to laugh. He then scanned the ballroom for Amira but he did not see her. *Strange, she has to be here.* He checked his clothes once again while waiting. He was dressed in a black suit that Yves lent to him. He had a white dress shirt, a black tie and black dress shoes. Like Yves, he had a gold chain hanging off the front of his blazer. His hair had been trimmed short and he had shaved his stubble. *Where are you, Amos?*

A sound behind him made him jump. He turned swiftly around. Before him stood Amira Dawne dressed in a tight-fitting emerald dress that showcased her assets well. Her blonde hair was styled and bordered her pale face. *How is she here?*

Amira seemingly analysed him from foot to face.

"I must say you clean up nicely, Zevius," She said mockingly.

He composed himself.

"So you knew this entire time. Impressive." He responded,

Amira took a few steps forward until she was right next to him and began to watch the events occurring below. He followed suit and turned towards the balcony.

"You had me fooled for a long time, Zevius. Or should I call you Alaric Burchard?

Nevertheless, I only caught onto you by accident, a very small mistake on your part." She explained.

He remained quiet, Amira noted this and continued to speak.

"You are probably the most wanted man in all of Hominus at the moment. Why risk exposure by pitting Houses against each other in Cognizance? Your motive is one I still struggle to understand."

He chuckled. "It was never about Cognizance or the specific Houses I destroyed along the way. It began simply, I needed to accumulate sentz. Causing all the chaos was what allowed tonight to exist. The reason I am wanted by King Godric however has nothing to do with me or what I have done. My mere existence is a threat to him."

"You did all this for sentz? I find that hard to believe."

"It is the truth or it was the truth. Like Zevius, I do have a family to take care of. After tonight I will accomplish that and push toward my real goal." He explained.

"I find it surprising that you are open to discussing all this with me."

He shrugged. "It is too late to change anything. You said something last time we met. 'If we met under different circumstances we could become comrades.' How about we make that a reality? You wish to make this city yours, ally yourself with me and I can make it happen."

Amira stayed quiet. Alaric stayed silent as well. After a few moments, she turned to him.

"What is your dream, Alaric?"

He stared at her and said calmly. "The throne. I will be the next king of Hominus."

"An even loftier goal than mine... You were born with the blood of the 'Merciless'. It will not be enough, you will not achieve your dream." She replied.

He was about to retort when an announcement rang through the room.

"Great Lord Amos, Welcomes you all to Andron! The Grand Ball has been a tradition served in the city of Cognizance for hundreds of years! We wish all attendees to have a magnificent evening!" The announcer said as three men dressed in white robes entered. The man walking in front was immensely old, and scars riddled his face. The bushy grey moustache was the only other feature of his wrinkled face. His white robe had gold patterns woven into it. He walked slowly and leaned on his cane as he walked. The two men behind him were old as well but not as old as Amos.

"The old bastard has finally arrived," He stated.

"Amos the Untouchable and his two white knights. Amos has been a Great Lord for well over fifty years. This is one of those you would be competing against." Amira countered.

"I am well aware I am not on the required level yet. He is not only my competition but yours as well." He retorted.

Amira chuckled. "I do not have to compete, the old man is bound to die soon. I shall just wait, the 'Great Lord' title is sure to precede my name."

Alaric began climbing on the wooden railing of the balcony carefully balancing himself.

"What are you doing?" Amira asked. He was surprised by a hint of panic in her voice.

"I am not one to wait. I will take my chances. Try and stop me, Amira." He smiled before leaping off of the railing.

He crossed his fingers. A pale yellow barrier formed around him. A thin layer of frost began covering the yellow barrier turning it blue. Alaric, encased in an ice ball, crashed into a table closer to the centre of the ballroom. The people who sat around the table screamed as they were flung in separate directions. He reverted his fingers back to normal and the barrier dissipated. A green rune appeared on his forehead. He began smiling as he saw everyone look at him with shock. Blues along with Amos' White stripes had already withdrawn their weapons and were inching towards them. Alaric then turned to Amos whose expression did not change. His sunken eyes did not reveal any hint of surprise. *Time to put on a show.* He placed both hands on his hips.

"No announcement for me! What kind of party is this?" He asked mockingly.

"Edric, you bastard! I will kill you!" Brennan spat. Alaric glanced at him who was walking towards him. He noted that soldiers were about to surround him.

"STOP!!!" Amos' voice boomed through the hall. Every soldier as well as Brennan paused immediately. Amos' voice did not have a soft tone like Ivo's, his voice was rather deep and did not fit his skinny exterior.

Alaric turned to Brennan. "I have fooled you, Brennan, have you not realised it yet?

'Edric Fenman' never existed. You were fed false information."

He watched as Brennan got red in the face. *He won't do anything in front of his Great Lord.*

"Talus, I shall warn you. Your dear brother offered me riches to assassinate you."

Talus turned to Brennan and looked at him angrily.

"Do not believe a thing this madman says." Brennan spat.

Alaric began laughing maniacally.

"I have played this entire city. House Salford's destruction as well as the rise of House Dawne. Everything was orchestrated by me!" He exclaimed flamboyantly.

He heard gasps of shock throughout the ballroom. He glanced at Richard Salford who was spewing curses. He then glanced at Alene Dawne who had a scowl on her face.

The soldiers looked toward Amos for permission to attack. Amos gave no order. Alaric looked upwards to try and spot Amira but could not see her.

Amos began walking towards him. He leaned on his cane as he slowly made his way toward Alaric. *Anytime now, Ashe.* Amos stopped a few steps in front of him.

"Son of Jerial...It seems King Godric's message was true." Amos said as he eyed up him. Alaric heard a few gasps and some murmurings, he heard many mention his father.

"It does seem I have garnered attention in recent days," Alaric said. "You are correct, I am Alaric Burchard, Son of Jerial Burchard, previous Great Lord of Adhu Aqua."

Amos made a deep growling sound, it took Alaric a second to realise he had been chuckling.

"The resemblance is uncanny. You are as devious as him it seems too." Amos paused. "Alas, you are not quite as strong as him. You are but a fledgling. A small sliver of your father."

Alaric smirked at Amos. "You may have intended to insult me with the comparisons to my father however I find that to be quite the compliment. I do not wish to be anything like my father. As for strength, whom do you think dealt with Great Lord Ivo." Alaric felt a wave of grief run through him as he said the last sentence. *I...I am sorry Ivo.*

"Spare me the lies, Ivo's death was not dealt by a weakling such as yourself. Still...I could not avenge the embarrassment given to me by your father during the 'King's Rite'. The bastard had to die before I could face him again. I would not mind tearing his son limb from limb, scraping the skin from your body as you scream in agony." Amos threatened ominously, his words were followed by deep laughter. Alaric glanced around and saw he was not the only one uncomfortable by the Great Lord's words.

After his laughter, Amos pointed his cane towards Alaric's face. Moving with an agility that should not exist within a man his age, Amos charged at him. Alaric panicked and stumbled backwards. He did not have time to dodge the incoming blow, he lifted his arms in front of his face to block the blow. He closed his eyes in anticipation however the blow did not come. Instead, the air around him felt colder. He opened his eyes and found that he was outside. Andron towered before him. He looked to his right and saw Ashe leaning heavily on her spear. She had been sweating profusely. *You did great, Ashe.* The green rune on his forehead swiftly disappeared, and the matching one on Ashe disappeared as well. Alaric looked to his feet and found the rune he had drawn here previously. The area around the rune had been cleared of snow. The rune was carved into the cobblestone. He rushed toward Ashe and cut his hand open with the blade of her spear. He then returned to the rune and placed his bloodied hand on it. He felt his energy drawing fast. The rune shone a bright red that shot out towards the sky. Alaric saw more spots around Andron light up in red before a large half-dome of blood-red ice began forming around the tall tower. Once the ice dome formed, his energy stopped draining. He felt slightly tired. *This is only the beginning. This will only hold them for a while.* He went over to Ashe and allowed her to climb onto his back. He began walking away from Andron when he heard his name being called from behind him. He glanced back to see Amira and another large burly man. Their figures were distorted by the ice. He ignored the calls and continued briskly walking away from Andron. A few moments later a carriage drove up to them. He swiftly placed Ashe into the carriage and hopped in himself.

"Savia successfully infiltrated Amos' castle, it should be a straight shot to victory now," Jinny said. She had been the one leading the carriage. She was dressed as a blue.

"Getting to the castle is the easy part. The worst will arrive when we decide to leave this place." He said as he tried to relax. Also within the carriage had been a large sack that seemed filled to the brim.

18.

Amira watched as he fell from the balcony, a blue barrier appearing around him and breaking his fall. She had been experiencing mixed emotions about the entire situation. She had not wanted him to lose his life just yet. She stared at the man as he was speaking. *What are you planning?* She then recalled his intention to gather sentz. *That is where you are headed! But how are you going to escape from here?* Instead of leaving she instead focused on the scene below her. Alaric and Amos had been speaking about Jerial. *How did the son of a Great Lord end up like this?* She watched as Amos aimed a fast strike towards Alaric. She watched Alaric stumble as he tried to guard the attack. She was about to yell out at him when he suddenly vanished from her sight. *What?* She immediately dashed down the large staircase until she reached the ballroom floor. She sprinted out of the two large doors that made up the entrance. A large man followed her. She glanced towards him and recognised him as Lloyd Burchard, her previous instructor. Once they reached the courtyard of Andron, they witnessed a few red lights originating from the ground shoot towards the sky. They watched as crimson ice formed a half-dome around Andron. *He has to buy time.* She began sprinting towards the edge of the dome. She saw him walking away, he carried another woman away on his back. She called his name, he glanced back at her. He had a slight smirk on his face.

"Lady Ashe!" Lloyd yelled from behind her.

"Who is 'Lady Ashe'?" Amira asked him.

"The girl on his back, she was a student here at Andron," Lloyd replied.

She turned to the professor and scowled at him. "Are you in on this?"

"No Lady Amira, I am just as clueless as you are."

"Your family is troublesome," She said.

"It does seem that way." Lloyd chuckled. "You know where they are headed?"

"They will be after treasure within Amos' castle,"

Lloyd thought for a moment. "I can get us out of this barrier, I just need to grab *it* from my class."

"Let's hurry!" She ordered. More and more people were outside now. They had been looking at the giant ice dome. Amongst them had been her mother whom she locked eyes with. Her mother nodded at her. *I must deal with it, she says.* Lloyd and Amira sprinted through the halls of Andron. They eventually reached Lloyd's office, the professor swiftly unlocked a cabinet and withdrew a large ring. The ring was big enough to go around two of the professor's fingers.

"A disenchantment ring?" She asked.

"Correct, rings made by the crafters in Arstutia, specifically made to disenchant large casts," Lloyd answered.

Amira and Lloyd were about to leave the room when they ran into Great Lord Amos. Both Amira and Lloyd bowed before him.

"We've no time for that. I've come here to issue both of you a mission." Amos said. "The Grand Ball will continue as planned, there is no need to send the city into a panic over a small inconvenience. Amira Dawne and Lloyd Burchard, I order you to capture Alaric Burchard. If successful, Amira you will become one of my white knights, Lloyd you will be cleared of the crimes committed by your family. Understood?"

"Yes, Lord Amos!" Amira and Lloyd exclaimed.

Amos left and the pair returned to the edge of the ice-dome. Lloyd opened his ringed palm against the barrier and began chanting. It took a few moments but eventually, cracks began appearing within the ice. After the cracks appeared it was only a blink of an eye before the ice dome began dissipating. Amira began running but noticed Lloyd was not following.

"Go ahead! I'll catch up. Age doesn't do wonders for casting." The professor said as he panted. She followed his instruction and left, instead of heading directly to Amos' castle she went to her own home and disrobed. *Become one of Amos' white knights? That would be a dream for anyone. So why am I doubting it?* Amira changed into her runic armour, strapping her rapier to her waist. She then exited, mounted a horse and headed for the castle.

19.

Savia's infiltration into the castle was going much smoother than she initially thought it would. To this point, no one had spotted her just yet. To make things even better she had located the treasury. The treasury was located on the floor directly below the throne room. The throne room was located on the highest floor within the north wing of the castle. Strangely no one was guarding the entrance to the treasury. The entrance to the treasury had two large wooden doors. On the frame of the doors were rune symbols. She grabbed the door handles and attempted to push them open. The door did not budge. The runes on the door glowed a pale yellow. *It is similar to the cast Alaric did back then.* She tried to brute force her way into the room but nothing worked. She blurted a curse.

"What have we got here?"

She froze. She heard the clink-clank of metal hitting the floor. She turned to the origin of the sound. Ahead of her in the hallway had been a large man with a bushy beard. The man was dressed in blue-accented armour, and on the chest piece had been the insignia of the Zidal Empire. He inched closer toward her, she immediately withdrew her dagger.

"Long brown hair, black eyes, short and wields daggers. You fit the description perfectly." He said.

Savia did not engage in the conversation, choosing rather to charge the man with her daggers. She feinted a strike with her left and struck with her right aiming for the man's lower torso. He was rather nimble as he read her attack and jumped backwards avoiding her blow. She was ready to charge again when he withdrew a large broadsword. He held it with both hands and swung it downwards towards her. She sidestepped the blow, she expected the sword to crash into the floor but instead, the man held firm and adjusted his swing to the side, aiming at her head. She crouched just in time and rolled away to create distance between them. The large sword crashed into the wall leaving a scar on the stone wall. *He is good.*

"Lyll Adalbert, First son of King Godric, future King and today your killer." He said haughtily.

Son of the king?

Lyll began slowly walking towards her, he dragged his sword along the floor. *What is he planning?* In a flash, the gauntlets of his armour shone red as Lyll swung his blade upwards. A mixture of stone shards and ice shards flew towards her. She dodged as best she could but a stone shard scraped her left arm drawing blood. *Two can play that game.* She began chanting but was interrupted as she had to dodge a strike that almost took her head off. She looked at Lyll and saw what was happening. Lyll's gauntlets continued to glow red however he no longer held his large sword. The sword instead

floated between Lyall and Savia. The sword glowed red as well. *Runic armour gives him an advantage.*

"Did I forget one of my titles?" He burst out in laughter. "They call me Lyall the Bloodhunter." He smiled at her ominously.

I can't cast, I can't run. This is bad. Have to stall until Alaric gets here.

Savia cursed. She then tried to dash past the floating sword. She held her daggers as if ready to strike as she came bearing down on Lyall. Lyall pulled his arms close to his chest. In a second Savia felt an object crash into her back. She fell face-first into the floor as the pain in her back pulsed. She glanced up and saw the sword spinning rapidly in the air above her. The blade was about to impale her. *This is the end. I am sorry...Alaric...Mother.*

The blade was about to hit when an object collided with it in midair causing it to spin away from her. She used the brief period to get to her feet. She noticed Lyall had his back facing her. Oddly to his left was a rapidly shirking spear. Savia glanced past him to notice a weary-looking Ashe.

"Oooo...another victim!" Lyall said as he reached out his right arm. His arm was still glowing red. A red claw formed around his hand and shot through the air. Ashe could not dodge as the claw gripped her neck. Ashe was pulled through the air towards Lyall. The claw rejoined with Lyall's arm as he held Ashe by the throat. Savia yelled as she charged him. Lyall turned around and tried to use Ashe as a human shield. She slid on her knees between Lyall's legs and stabbed both daggers into his left calf. Lyall fell to one knee and she swiftly withdrew her daggers from his leg. She attempted to strike him again but noticed the sword heading towards her. She hopped backwards but the sword struck the ground causing rubble to shoot towards her. She got flung backwards as the debris hit her. She struggled to her feet.

"You have done well but it is time to finish this," Lyall said. He lifted Ashe into the air. The red glow on his gauntlet got brighter as he slammed Ashe down into the ground with great force causing Ashe to scream in agony.

"Noooo!" Savia yelled as she threw one of her daggers at him. Lyall casually blocked the dagger using his broadsword. He then dashed towards her and swung his sword. With a flash of green, Lyall began moving as if in slow motion. She was about to strike him when someone yelled from behind her.

"Leave him, take Lady Ashe and whatever you wanted from here and go!"

She glanced at the large burly man who had one palm open facing Lyall. His palm had a green rune which mirrored the one now found on the slow-moving Lyall. She rushed to Ashe. Ashe was still softly breathing but she had not been conscious. Blood poured out of her mouth and her ears. The burly man walked towards the large wooden doors to the treasury, he kept an open palm at Lyall. The man then began chanting. She noticed the runes around the treasury doors began dissipating.

"Who are you?" She asked.

"Just a professor." The burly man answered. The man had been sweating profusely. *I have no time.*

Savia moved Ashe to lean against the wall. She then took out the large sack which she hid in her robe. She entered the treasury and stuffed the sack as fast as possible. She placed any trinket or sentz into the sack until it was full. She then tied the heavy sack to her waist and exited the treasury. She picked up Ashe between her arms.

"You should have an easy time leaving, I took out all of the blues." The burly man said. She nodded at him and headed towards the castle exit.

Where are you Alaric?

20.

Once the carriage stopped in front of the castle, Alaric and Ashe hopped out. Ashe recovered enough to stand on her own. Alaric, still dressed in his suit, sprinted through the castle gates. He glanced back to check if Ashe had been keeping up with him. She looked exhausted but kept up with him and nearly passed him. He did not worry about the blues that they passed. They had been yelling and would surely follow them. The castle doors loomed before them. A blue barrier formed around Alaric as he threw himself at the castle doors. The crash forced the doors to break open. He did not waste time as the barrier dissipated and he continued the sprint. The inside of the castle had been much larger than he anticipated. *Have to get to Savia.* They ran aimlessly with a horde of blues chasing them. He cast a barrier around Ashe as they ran, dodging projectiles that were cast at them. He accidentally led them to a dead-end which left them surrounded by blues. He spat a curse. He got in front of Ashe and faced the horde of casters. *This is going to get messy.*

A high-pitched shrill sound echoed from behind the horde as the soldiers in front of him were propelled into the air and toward the pair. As fast as he could he placed his hands on the stone floor and chanted. The floor in front of him lifted from the ground and formed a cover which the screaming soldiers crashed into. A pile of blues was stacked against the stone cover.

"Watch out!" Ashe yelled as a figure jumped on the pile of blues and aimed a strike at him. He lifted his hands from the ground, causing the floor to return to normal. He then twisted his fingers. The figure's strike bounced off of the barrier that formed around him. The figure landed behind him. He turned to strike but was interrupted by a loud high pitch screech that caused him to cover his ears. He opened his eyes to see Ashe holding her ears as well, blood began pouring out of her ears. The screech ended and he released his ears. He then glanced at the figure that was now facing him.

Amira Dawne stood before him dressed in armour, she held a rapier in her left hand and what seemed like a helmet in her right. Her blond hair was tied up as she scowled at him.

"Ashe, go find Savia!" He yelled. Ashe looked at him with confusion. *She can't hear.* Amira turned to strike at Ashe but was interrupted by Alaric grabbing her under her arms.

"Go!" He yelled once again. This time Ashe understood his intent and ran past the pair.

"We don't have to fight, Amira," He whispered to her.

Amira's chest plate began glowing red. He let her go and leapt backwards. Spikes protruded from the back of her chest piece, before dissipating once again. She turned to him in an instant and burst forward. He watched her left hand waiting for the strike with her rapier but had not anticipated her kick. She swung her right leg toward his waist, he did not have time to move as he stood firm. The kick was stronger than he expected

and he crashed into a window. The window shattered by the impact. He briefly glanced out the window. Amira was aiming to strike him with her rapier when he climbed on the window railing. Before Amira said anything he leaped out of the window. He crossed his fingers. Snow began swirling around him in a spherical fashion. The snow formed a protective sphere around him, turning him into a free-falling snowball. He felt the collision with the ground via a large wave of exhaustion passing through him. Another force struck him from above. He uncrossed his fingers and the giant snowball disappeared. He was on his hands and knees, he impressively kicked his legs out and did a handstand. From his inverted perspective, he saw Amira towering over him on one knee. He then bent his elbows and flipped onto his feet. His suit was dirtied with the white of the snowfall.

"You asked me to try and stop you, here I am Alaric," Amira said. He turned to face her. "What a stupid thing for me to say." He chuckled. The pair stood in the middle of a large square courtyard. He could hear the rustling of the waves and knew he was near the harbour. He had a foreign tingling feeling in his chest.

"It is not too late to switch sides, Amira," He said.

"I would if your methods were more righteous than a few petty crimes."

"No need for righteous acts when the Empire itself is wicked." He shrugged. "We are pretty similar, you and I. Which is why I have always respected you."

"I do not understand the point you are making," Amira replied.

"Born in different circumstances perhaps both of us could have been future Great Lords." He reached for the amulet he hid under his shirt. "You have been born privileged...You think you are entitled to this city. I suffered to just be on the same playing level as you. I was born a mysur...and forced to wear this." Alaric pulled the Rixa amulet out and showed Amira, who gasped.

"You...are Scaev?" She asked.

He shook his head. "No, it does not matter what I am. I will not be my father, I will not be a caster, I will not be a mysur. I am simply who I am...Alaric, the man who will become King of the Zidal Empire."

Amira placed the helmet she kept in her right hand over her head. The helmet was simple in design, it covered her entire face leaving a horizontal line at eye level.

"Let's dance, future King," Amira said. She placed her left foot forward, she moved her right foot to the back at an angle to her point foot. Her feet were about three feet apart. She bent her knees slightly. She pointed her rapier strangely, it was surprisingly low and pointed upwards towards him. Her right arm was firmly placed behind her back. Amira moved forward by leading with her left foot, she attempted to strike Alaric. Her strike aimed toward the area between his chest and shoulder. The strike was quite fast as he quickly dodged out of the way. Her rapier began glowing red and a loud screech resonated in the air. He was parallel to Amira but the sound was not as bad as earlier. He heard a crash as a piece of the castle wall behind him got demolished. He aimed a

kick at Amira's legs but she swiftly moved backwards avoiding the kick. She then jumped forward pushing her rapier towards him. He crossed all his fingers and watched as she passed through him as if he was a ghost. He uncrossed his fingers and turned to counter Amira when the screech could be heard again. This time it was loud enough that it forced him to cover his ears. He felt an invisible force on his torso as he was flung backwards. He crashed into a wooden mannequin. He coughed up blood as he got up to his feet. He heard a wave crash nearby. *I can still hear, good.* Amira did not give him any respite as she came charging once again. He grabbed the wooden mannequin and used it to block Amira's incoming attack. Amira's rapier pierced the mannequin. The rapier glowed red and the familiar screech was heard. The mannequin exploded. He was flung backwards again as a blast of splinters struck him. *Troublesome ability.* He kickflipped back to his feet only to see Amira charging at him. She kept her body low and stabbed upwards towards his chest. He had no time to evade, instead, he lifted his left arm forward and faced his forearm towards the strike. A large frost shield formed on his left arm. Amira's rapier collided with his shield. A second passed and the now familiar screech was heard. He felt a strong force hit his shield. He had to push forwards to stop him from being pushed over. The force disappeared and He bashed his shield forwards. His shield collided with Amira, who stumbled backwards. He dropped his left arm, the shield dissipated, and he took large steps towards Amira who brought up her rapier to defend herself. He placed his left foot forward, planting it into the ground and swung his right leg. His right foot connected with Amira's helmet as he roundhouse kicked. Amira lost her balance as she stumbled to the side. He did not waste a second as he closed the space between them. He got under her flailing rapier and put his right arm across her body. He then lifted her into the air and slammed her into the ground. Snow crunched under Amira as she collided with the ground. He jumped away from her, expecting a counterattack. Amira's chest piece glowed red. The screech was heard. Amira's body was pushed up into the air by an invisible force. The screech never stopped however it was less piercing than before. He watched as her body was being controlled by some force keeping her afloat. Her body was corrected to face him. He conjured his shield. Amira's helmet began to glow red as well. He saw the air before him blur as the horizon would on a hot day. Piercing shrieks attacked him from all angles. He screamed out his pain as blood began pouring out from his ears, mouth, nose and eyes. The snow around his feet had completely disintegrated. His frost shield began dissipating as he watched Amira through bloodied eyes slowly walk towards him. She became more blurry as she got closer. His eyes closed as he fell forward onto the ground, losing consciousness.

The sky was a bright blue. White sparkles dotted the sky. A large white pillar pierced the sky. The pillar was larger than anything he had ever seen. *Where am I? Cognizance? Where is Amira?*

He realised he felt no pain in fact his body felt foreign to him. He was laying on his back on some sort of white marble floor. He tried to touch his chest but his hand went through it as if it had not existed. It was silent. He felt no wind. He was neither cold nor warm. He got to his feet and analysed his surroundings. He was in the middle of a large circular platform. The platform was extremely large and it made Alaric look like an ant. Twelve white pillars surrounded the circular platform and reached past the blue sky. Eleven of the white pillars were in pristine condition while the twelfth pillar was broken into many stone pieces, the stone pieces of the pillar floated in the air. He heard a hissing sound and began looking around. Out of thin air before Alaric appeared eleven figures. The figures were much larger than him, forcing him to crane his neck upwards to look at them. The eleven figures were formless. They were translucent. The air around them was distorted allowing him to view them. The figures moved, forming a circle around Alaric. Each figure was perfectly lined up with a pillar. The figures had no eyes but he could somehow feel their gazes. His head began to pound.

You were not meant to win this day's fight. Your path has been laid out for you by you. First King, do not falter and look forward. As the chosen do not become lax. As the unchosen will look to you. We shall grant you a sliver of power, Alas only if the chosen reaches out. As the chosen you are not all-powerful, you are not invincible, and you have only gained a small advantage. Your fate may have been written. The text of fate cannot be changed by the gods. The text of fate can be changed by the Kings. Should you falter off the path, a new King shall be chosen. The hands of fate are safely in your own grasp. The Twelve Pillars are only watchers, nothing less, nothing more. Go on, First King. May we not regret our fated scribes.

21.

Savia made her way through the castle. It had seemed the burly man had not been lying. Every soldier she had come across had been unconscious. They did not seem to have any wounds, however. Progress was slow, the combination of Ashe and the treasure had been heavier than she could handle. The pain from Lyall's blows was also reminding her of their existence. She occasionally heard a screech in the distance. *Where are you Alaric?* She eventually made it to the castle entrance where Jinny stood next to their carriage.

"Where is Alaric?" Jinny asked.

Savia shrugged as she entered the carriage and softly placed Ashe down. She then untied the large sack hanging from her waist and placed it next to the other large sack. She was about to exit the carriage when it began moving. She poked her out of the carriage. Jinny was leading the horses as they dragged the carriage away from the castle.

"What are you doing!" Savia yelled.

"We wasted too much time already, I am just following the plan!" Jinny yelled back.

"Alaric is still in there! Turn back!"

"He will find his way back! If he releases the Seal of Habbeo, Jerial is the strongest person in this city!" Jinny replied.

"We need to go back!"

Jinny continued to lead the horses. Savia cursed. She contemplated jumping out of the carriage but hesitated when she saw the state Ashe was in. She cursed as she sat in the carriage in silence.

Savia twirled her dagger as she thought. *We are not strong enough. Our enemies can cast on a moment's notice, we cannot compete with that.*

She felt the carriage being lifted as they reached the upper city. *Is all this worth it?* An image of her mother popped into her head, and following that was a memory of Alaric and herself in the alleyways of Isern. *I have to do everything...for them.*

After a long trip, she heard Jinny call her name. Savia popped her head out of the carriage to see a small crowd gathered at the entrance of the city.

"What is happening?" Savia yelled.

The crowd made way for the carriage to pass. The situation revealed itself after they passed the crowd. Florian stood hunched over, breathing heavily. His robe had been torn as if ripped through by claws. He had scratches on his face that drew blood. He held his crimson blade firmly in his hands. He had been facing an unknown woman. The woman wore the same runic armour as Lyall. She wore a black cowl. The cowl did not seem to be made of any material, it seemed to be made of pure energy. The snow that fell upon it evaporated instantly. She had blue glowing claws that protruded from her armour gauntlets. "Charna, daughter of King Godric. Why in Heinzidal's name is she

here?" She heard Jinny grumble. Beyond the pair facing each other was a familiar face. Everard stood watching the battle before him. He wore a panicked expression. Beyond Everard was a man she did not recognize. The man wore similar clothes as Alaric had before they had begun the plan. She immediately assumed it was Alaric's Ysgafyn friend. The man stood next to four horses whom he kept steady. Jinny stopped the carriage. Savia hopped out, her daggers held firmly as she began chanting. Ice formed at the tips of her daggers, forming two large spikes of ice. The ice shards shot from her daggers towards the armoured woman.

22.

"That is quite interesting. You must miss your time on the island." Yves said.

"More than anything in this world. Life was simpler." He replied.

"That it may have been, however, it was a false life."

Florian scowled. "A false life? It was a better life."

"If you are happy living whilst being blind to the truth," Yves said calmly. "I did not intend to offend you, Florian. I tend to get carried away when...forget I said anything. How was Rick when you were growing up?"

The pair had been sitting on the haystacks within the stables. Gaile appeared next to Yves occasionally, occasionally glaring at the man with his red eyes.

"Alaric was...different. He was strict with Ashe and me but more importantly he was strict with himself. He did not allow himself to enjoy his youth, he opted instead to read books and study. He never tried to fit in with the villagers, he treated himself as an outsider. The only thing he cared for was...us." He explained.

"Do his actions back then become clearer as you learn more about the Empire?"

"I can understand his actions...I just wish he had told us. He dragged us to death's door on multiple occasions...indoctrinating us with his absurd plans. Tonight is no exception."

Yves stood up and placed a hand on Florian's shoulder. "I am purely making an assumption when I say this...you are not factoring your own responsibility in this," Yves said coldly.

Florian stood up and faced Yves. "I see you have been enchanted by him as well."

"Let me give you some advice. A bitter fruit will only get bit once, then discarded. Whilst the sweeter fruit will be cherished for a lifetime." Yves stated.

Florian turned away from Yves and walked towards the horses. Gaile swiftly placed his arm around his shoulder.

"He is telling you that you are being bitter." Gaile mocked. *I know that.* "What are you going to do about it? Should we *kill* him?" Florian shook his head violently.

"Are you-" Yves began.

"We should get these horses out toward the city entrance. Alaric and the rest should be arriving soon."

The pair led four horses out of the stables and walked over towards the proposed spot. There were a few people walking through the streets. They were mostly ignored. Florian overheard people talk about the Grand Ball, specifically the commotion someone had begun at the event. The enormous red dome that cascaded Andron had vanished an hour prior. He also heard that apparently it was being handled by the Great Lord himself.

Florian and Yves waited in an awkward silence. It was getting really late and he was feeling fatigued. *They are late.*

"For once you are correct, little brother. Our targets will arrive if we just wait here." A voice broke through the silence of the night. Florian watched as two figures appeared on the street before them. He recognized them as Everard and the blonde woman from earlier in the evening. The large man that had been with them had been missing, however.

"It seems as if Lyall will be missing out. That idiot had to run off on his own. It does not matter, I will hog all the fun." The woman said flamboyantly. Everard made eye contact with Florian. Everard looked guilty.

"It seems it will get rather dangerous staying here," Yves said.

Florian walked toward Everard and the woman.

"I apologise for what is about to happen, Florian," The boy said.

"What is this about?" Florian asked.

"We have been ordered by King Godric, *our* father, to hunt down Alaric Burchard. That includes his companions." The woman said.

'*Our* father?

"You should be honoured that you are to die at the hands of Charna. Daughter of Godric and future Queen of the Zidal Empire." The woman said. *She is quite eccentric.* The pauldrons on her armour began to glow red. A black cowl suddenly appeared out of thin air and wrapped itself over Charna. Her gauntlets had the same glow as her pauldrons. Three blue claws shot out of each of her fists. Florian unsheathed his crimson blade. Frost immediately began to form on the edges of his blade. He casually flicked his blade in the direction of Charna. Shards of ice flew towards Charna. He expected her to dodge the blast but he watched as the ice shards pierced his enemy. In a second Charna's figure vanished from his sight.

"Behind!" He heard Yves' accented yell. He jumped forward. He heard the swish of a fast-moving object that slashed through the air close to his ear. He immediately turned around to see Charna behind him. She had been unscathed and smirked at him.

"Impressive trick," He said as took a step towards her and swung his sword at her in a downward arc. His blade seemed to strike through her body. His sword crashed into the snow, the impact propelled snow into the air. Once the snow cleared, the Charna before him began to become transparent. From the corner of his eye, he noticed an object propelling itself towards his head. He managed to lean back just in time, Charna's blue claws left three shallow cuts on his face. The cuts leaked blood that dripped from his cheek to his jaw. He took a few steps away to distance himself from his opponent.

Ahead of him, he saw how Charna's cowl duplicated itself, the second cowl floated into the open air where another image of her formed. The cowl split from the second Charna forming a third image. All three Charna's smirked at him before charging at him from three different angles. He cursed as he kicked up snow with his boot and swung his sword in the direction of the snow. The blade's force was strong enough to propel the snow forward and against one of the images who stopped in her tracks. The two

remaining images ran across each other to confuse him. He swung his blade shooting a strong blast of ice towards them. He missed his target as the duo images easily dodged. He heard a few screams in the background. He focused on the image that inched the closest to him. He was able to easily stab her but she vanished into thin air as usual. He then felt pain on the right side of his torso. The remaining image ripped through his robe with her claws and dug into his skin. He hissed at the pain as he twisted to attack her, She anticipated the attack and swiftly retreated backwards. He brought his free hand to his wound, the wound had been moist with blood. *That must be the real one, she dodged. I'm losing blood fast, I can't win this right now. I have to stall.* He watched as Charna's cowl split into three as two images appeared alongside the original. He ran his now bloodied hand on his sword. The golden runes on the flat side of the blade began to shine brighter. Charna and her images ran in different directions all trying to converge towards him. He pointed his sword outwards. He held the sword with both hands, the hilt pointing to the centre of his chest. Blood flowed from the hilt towards the tip of the blade. Small pellets of blood shot from the tip of his sword. He aimed his sword at the various Charna's as he shot blood pellets. He missed the first few, as the pellets collided with the snowy ground it exploded in a small burst of crimson blood with a hint of gold. He eventually was able to hit one of the images. The blood pellet hit his target in the centre of her forehead causing her head to explode into a dust of gold and red. The body vanished. He cursed as he realised it was a fake. The remaining twin images cautiously made their way towards him. He kept missing as they reached him and attempted to claw him. He attempted to twist his body to dodge the attacks. He felt two pairs of claws rip through his robe. One from his chest and one in his back. Both strikes left shallow cuts. He struck the image in front of him with the hilt of his sword. The image disappeared and he distanced himself from the real Charna. Both his chest and his back stung, the pain on the side of his torso had been another stark reminder of his situation. *Think Florian. You do not have the resourcefulness and defensive capabilities such as Alaric. You do not have exceptional endurance and athletic ability such as Ashe. You do not have the explosiveness and acrobatic skills such as Savia. What do you have?* He glanced at the blade that was currently draining his energy. *I have power...wait...where is Gaile?*

"I am right here." He heard the shadow's voice in his mind followed by a laugh. He was about to charge Charna when two ice shards hit her from the side. The ice shards did not pierce her armour but were enough to throw her off balance. He saw Savia charge towards Charna. He then pointed his blade at Charna and a blood pellet shot towards her. Charna's cowl grew rapidly and covered her entire body. The blood pellet bounced off of the cowl and landed in the snow. Charna alongside the cowl disappeared from his vision. He saw Savia strike at where Charna had been. Savia's daggers cut through the air. Between Savia and Florian the cowl appeared in its original form. Charna appeared as well as the cowl wrapped itself around her.

"Did not think I would have to use that technique here. I guess you must have some skills if Father is that terrified of this Alaric." Charna said as she split into three once again. Charna laughed and the laugh was echoed by the images as well. Two images ran towards him and the other ran towards Savia. He turned his blade and swung his blade horizontally through the air. A curved piece of ice flew through the air aiming towards the image's waist. The twin images impressively flipped over the projectile with a side somersault. The two images attempted to claw him, but he guarded both strikes with his blade. He pushed forward with his sword making her stumble backwards. He cut down both images. The two images disappeared into thin air.

"Savia, that is the real one!" He yelled. He watched as Savia and the real Charna exchanged blows. They were of a similar build. Savia dodged the claws while Charna expertly dodged the daggers. Florian was about to run over to aid Savia when he felt an immense pain in his sword arm. He glanced over and saw another image, she had one of her claws pierced into his bicep.

"Are you certain that is the real me?" She mocked. She was about to strike with her other claw when a bolt of light dropped down from the sky and through her claw. Another light bolt struck the arm that had impaled Florian. The claw was yanked out of his arm causing him to hiss in return. The Charna in front of him had her arms pinned to the ground by a solidified light. Her arms were not bleeding and it did not seem that it inflicted any damage. Two more bolts of light dropped from the sky impaling her legs, leaving her pinned to the ground. Florian looked toward Savia and noticed the Charna that she had been fighting had vanished. He watched as the same happened to Everard, leaving him pinned to the ground as well. He then looked towards Yves. Yves' patterns on his bald head shone a brilliant white. His eyes emitted the same glow as he had his hands in the air. In one hand he had an empty glass vial.

"Hurry, Florian and Lady Savia!" Yves yelled. Florian immediately rushed to Yves' side.

"What about Alaric?" Savia yelled back.

Yves then pointed in a direction. "He cometh."

Florian watched as a woman on horseback rode into the scene. The beautiful woman was dressed in runic armour. A figure laid in front of her, horizontally across the horse. The woman hopped off of her horse and carefully lifted the figure off as well and held him in her arms. He recognised the figure as Alaric. Alaric's face had been bloodied, his white shirt was now pure crimson. He was not conscious.

"Amira Dawne...what have you done to him?" Savia growled. Savia charged the woman who remained unfazed.

Three bolts of light struck in front of Savia stopping her in her tracks.

"This is no time to fight, Lady Savia. I feel she brought Alaric here with good intentions." Yves said.

"Good observation, Yves the Ysgafyn-borne," Amira stated.

"You have heard of me," Yves stated in shock.

"I know everything about my city." Amira handed the lifeless form of Alaric to Yves. "He lives yet. Now, I will ask you all to leave. If I understood him correctly, your journey does not end here." Amira hopped onto her horse and rode off. Savia was still growling. Florian walked over to her.

"We have got to go, we are in no state to fight," Florian said as he pointed out his own injuries. Savia reluctantly put her daggers away and dragged him towards the carriage where Jinny stood. Savia pulled out two large sacks, leaving the unconscious Ashe. Florian grabbed Ashe and placed her onto his back and followed Savia over toward Yves.

"What happened to her?" He asked.

"We were attacked...by King Godric's son." Savia calmly said. Savia dropped the two sacks on the ground and stood in front of Yves. She analysed Alaric. Florian watched as her face lost that hard edge and went soft for a moment.

"Before we leave...we need him," Savia stated.

"Him?" Yves asked.

Savia unsheathed one of her daggers and moved towards Everard.

"Release the light, mister," Savia yelled toward Yves. The light pinning Everard immediately dissipated. Savia grabbed Everard before he could run and placed the dagger to his neck.

"You are coming with us," Savia said menacingly.

Everard nodded his head in fright.

Florian heard Charna laughing wildly as she struggled on the ground.

Savia pushed Everard forward as they walked back towards the horses. Savia took Alaric from Yves and placed him onto a horse. She then climbed onto the horse.

"Rick requested me to do one more thing before we left," Yves said as he faced Jinny. Florian raised his eyebrows as he watched Yves' eyes shine even brighter. He moved his fingers so that his middle fingers touched and his ring fingers touched forming a diamond. In the blink of an eye, a cage made out of pure light formed around Jinny. Jinny yelled as she tried to break out.

Yves grabbed the two large sacks, attached them to his horse and climbed on himself. Florian climbed onto his horse with Ashe., leaving Everard on his own horse. The patchwork group then rode off, leaving the snowy city of Cognizance behind.

ACT 2
Journey into the Shadow

23.

Amira walked through the castle's well decorated halls. She was being escorted in fact, four white stripes surrounded her as they walked. The Grand Ball had been three weeks ago. She had expected this sooner. No one had heard anything about Alaric Burchard since that night. The day following the Grand Ball, Cognizance was visited by King Godric himself. The king had met with Amos and rumours around the city stated that they had been in an important meeting for three days. For three days, she had to babysit two of the biggest irritations she had ever met. She had been referring to Lyall and Charna Adalbert, the children of Godric, who had been staying at House Dawne during the King's stay. They had been two of the most obnoxious people she had ever met. They fought on every occasion, they treated everyone badly as if they were above them. This included other casters. The daughter, Charna, provoked her into a fight. Sadly for Charna, she had won. The fight caused an entire uproar as Charna could not admit defeat. This made the rumours that she is trying to oppose Godric grow further. People had witnessed her allowing Alaric to escape the city, they assumed she was working with him. *Why did I let him live?* She did not expect to use advanced casts on him, she felt irritated. *Someone of his talent should not go after the throne. What am I doing...waiting until the title Great Lord falls into my lap? I should be much more proactive.* The white stripes led her toward the throne room, in which they entered. The room had been lengthy. Paintings lined the walls and a blue carpet was rolled out from the door up to the throne. The throne was at the far end of the room. The throne was elevated as it sat on a few steps. It was placed in front of three large windows. Light from the windows framed Amos as he sat on the throne. The light made him look enchanting as he scowled at Amira. He was bordered by two of his white knights. The white stripes surrounding her made space for her and left her to walk by herself. She confidently walked toward the throne and bowed before Amos.

"Lady Amira, you know why you are here," Amos said.

She looked up at the elderly man. "Yes...I understand my position."

"You have failed me!" His deep voice reverberated around the room.

She met the elderly man's gaze head-on.

"Perhaps I have."

"Perhaps? Little girl, do you realise how I fought to not have you executed? King Godric wanted your head on a platter. You could have ended up just like that idiotic professor." *That explains Lloyd Burchard's disappearance.*

"Why not have me executed?" She asked.

Amos pointed a bony finger at her.

"It is quite simple...you are valuable. Not only for me but for the entire city. There are those who look up to your mother and to you. They are saying you will become the next

Great Lord." The two white knights chuckled at Amos' statement. She scowled at the white knights who smirked in return.

"What happened that night?" Amos asked.

"Nothing at all. I fought Alaric and he escaped...it is that simple." she stated.

Amos frowned at her. "Do not lie to me, little girl. I expect more from you."

"I have not lied."

"How did he escape?" Amos growled.

"I allowed him to escape."

Amos looked as if he was about to burst but he calmed himself at the last second.

"Why?"

Amira thought for a moment, she watched as Amos impatiently waited for her answer.

"I guess I was inspired. Inspired by a weak fool who was ready to risk his life for his ambitions." She simply stated.

"Inspired by a criminal?" Amos said in disgust.

"Alas, he had reminded me what it's like to dream again." She kept her face emotionless as she stared at Amos. "I never wanted to be a 'White Knight'. I want your throne." After the statement, She walked out of the throne room. Laughter echoed from behind her as she stoically walked through the halls of the castle.

24.

22 Years Prior

Godric stood in the centre of a large cathedral. The Cathedral of Zadok. Zadok had been the first to ascend to the throne after the construction of the Empire. Zadok had apparently been a religious zealot, always preaching about having visions of eleven gods who oversaw the realm. Most have never believed, Zadok was powerful however, claiming to be the 'Son of Gods' he used his casts to force his citizens to believe. So he had this cathedral built. The Cathedral of Zadok goes by a different name this age however, now called the 'Cathedral of Ascension' it is where the ascending King of Hominus is named. He stood in front of a large altar that was built right in the centre of the cathedral. The altar was not placed on the ground but built on a platform.

Thousands and thousands of people were packed into the cathedral, all were staring up at him. He ran his hand through the scar across his nose that he had recently received. He had not been alone on the platform. The platform was rather large. Next to him was the 'Keeper of Crowns', an old man who was responsible for the Ascension procedure. Stood in the line behind him were his most recent enemies and now Great Lords under his command. Godric glanced at his Great Lords. First stood the oldest man on the platform, Amos, Master of Defence, Great Lord of Cognizance. Amos wore his white robe as he remained emotionless on the platform. He was followed by the younger Brandr, Fire Dancer, Great Lord of Impestra. Brandr was a large muscular man. He had a brown skin tone as he stood frowning at Godric. Brandr wore his runic armour, his armour had no gauntlets or pauldrons. His arms were bare as he wore a chest piece and chausses. His armour was painted red. Brandr's left arm was engulfed in orange flames. Brandr was then followed by Godric's previous disciple. Senara, Puppet Master, Great Lord of Arstutia. Senara was the youngest on the platform. She was dressed in newly acquired runic armour. Her armour covered every inch of her. Her armour was painted yellow. She beamed at him as he looked at her. Senara was followed by an elderly man dressed in purple robes. Faisal, Night Terror, Great Lord of Porffor. Godric had liked the stoic man, Faisal and Godric had exchanged techniques as they regularly visited each other to spar. Faisal had even taught him one of his main casts, 'The Night Cowl'. The last member on the platform was grinning at him. Godric frowned as he met Jerial's gaze. Jerial the Merciless, Great Lord of Adhu Aqua, the man who should have ascended. Jerial was dressed in his midnight black runic armour, just like the day of the King's Rite. Remembering that day caused Godric to rub his scar once again. Jerial pointed to his own face and smiled, causing Godric to stop rubbing the scar. He turned to the Keeper of Crowns, the elder held a silver crown which had intricate patterns engraved into it.

I do not deserve this...please someone stop this foolish ceremony. We all know who actually won the King's Rite. Give him the crown. I don't need your pity.

"I present to all of Hominus. The man who has ascended beyond all casters in the realm. The man who is now your king. I proclaim Godric Adalbert as the King of Hominus." The Keeper of Crowns placed the silver crown on Godric's head. "He shall not be named the Metal Master but the King of Metals!" The elder announced. The crowd cheered. Godric could not hear them, the only sound he heard was Jerial's laughter. His mind filled with despair.

Present Day

He walked through the underground dungeon below his castle. This was where the vilest criminals were locked up. The air smelled of rot and death. He heard Lyall complain about the smell as they walked through. In many of the cages they passed were decomposing corpses. They had only fed the criminals they deemed as necessary or ones that were awaiting their execution date. He heard banging on the metal bars of a few of the cages he passed. Some cursed at him as he passed. Casting within the dungeon could not happen, this was due to the disenchantment rune found on every wall floor and door within the dungeon. He stopped in front of one cage. His children, Lyall and Charna stood at his side. Within the cage was a large burly man who seemed too big for the cage he was placed in. The man's face was swollen and blue. A few spots of dried blood could be seen on his chin. The man's hands were his most shocking feature. All the man's fingers were chopped off and the wounds were dark as if someone had burned them closed. The man just watched Godric without saying anything.

"Lloyd Burchard, brother of Jerial the Merciless. Professor at Andron, an expert on casting techniques. And your most recent title...Traitor of the Zidal Empire." He announced.

Lloyd watched him with no reaction, Lloyd barely moved making him look lifeless.

"The Burchard family only produces criminals it seems. You should have hated your brother, when he died he gave a kid like Ivo the Great Lord title. It should have been you." He continued.

Lloyd did not respond. Godric clicked his tongue and continued.

"Oh poor Ivo, may Heinzidal rest his soul. Another of Jerial's victims. The man who taught him was the one who took his life." He watched as Lloyd's eyebrows twitched slightly.

"You did not know?" Godric began laughing. "Ivo the Eyes did not die from illness. He was struck down by your brother. Jerial lives on...within his nixumspawn son at least. Alaric Burchard needs to be brought down. For his own crimes and the ones of his father."

"You still...frightened of him. Everyone...knows...you weren't...meant to...become king." Lloyd spoke for the first time. His voice was hoarse and dry.

Lyall stepped forward with an expression of anger. Godric placed his arm in front of Lyall, stopping him in his tracks.

He began laughing, at first a small chuckle then a full-blown laugh that echoed through the chamber. Lyall and Charna looked at their father with concern.

"Do you think there goes a day where I do not think about that King's Rite?" He began violently rubbing the scar across his nose. "We were dismantled...destroyed. And it was nothing to him. The strongest group of casters we have ever seen. Faisal, Amos, Brandr swept aside. Leaving only a duel between that monster and me. I had done everything I could...I couldn't even strike him. I was outclassed in every aspect. The only reason I ascended to the throne was because he forfeited his place. For twenty-two years I had to live with the fact that I do not deserve the right to sit on the throne." He said calmly.

"Jerial and his son will no longer terrorise my mind, I shall eliminate them." He began walking away, his children silently following him.

"Announce to the public that a public execution of Lloyd Burchard will be done," Godric ordered.

"Yes, my lord." His children said.

"Another thing. Announce that Everard Adalbert from this day on will be declared as an enemy to the Empire."

Lyall and Charna began laughing as they nodded at their father.

25.

The darkening sky was blurry, it slowly regained focus as her eyes focused. She could hear a slight breeze and crickets in the distance. An occasional crackle could be heard. She was not cold, a deep warmth ran over her as she lay staring at the blank canvas known as the sky. She heard whispers and turned her head in the direction of the whispers. A small fire was emitting an orange glow and was possibly the origin of the warmth she felt. To her left sat an unknown man, he was dressed uniquely and had white paint patterned on his head. To her right was Florian, he looked drowsy but stared at the fire. Across from her sat a sad-looking Savia. Savia had been looking down toward the person who had been resting their head on her lap. Ashe looked at the person and recognised him as Alaric. Alaric was dressed similarly to the unknown man beside her although his shirt was crimson. He did not seem conscious, the only way she could tell that he lived was by the slight uplift in his torso showcasing his breathing. A green liquid flowed through the air, it was connected to his chest. Ashe followed the liquid as it moved through the air, the liquid stopped at another figure's chest. Her eyes opened in shock as she made contact. *It is just like the dream.* Everard was right in front of her. He looked at her curiously. She tried to stand up but found she was a little weak and stumbled onto her rear. She heard her name being called in the distance. She kept crawling backwards, not releasing her stare on the young boy.

"He cannot be here...he is...dead," She whispered. "I killed him." Tears began falling from her eyes. A hand touched her shoulder and she looked towards the person who grabbed her.

"Deep breaths, Lady Ashe. It is going to be quite fine." The man's accented voice soothed her. She found herself following his instructions. Eventually, she calmed herself. The man helped her to her feet slowly.

"Who are you?" She asked.

"Yves, Rick's friend." The man beamed.

Yves helped her walk over to the fire. Savia had a concerned look but stayed at Alaric's side. Florian moved over to her.

"How are you feeling?" He asked.

"I am...okay?" She recalled the last moment she remembered. She had been fighting alongside Savia. *Fighting...I turned my spear to a person again.* Florian continued to look at her with concern.

"I just need to get my bearings back, is all." She looked over to Everard. "Are you real?" The boy nodded.

"I am-" She started but he interrupted her.

"It is not your fault...it is his," Everard said as he pointed at Alaric, his face momentarily morphing with disgust. Savia glared at him, Ashe watched as Everard quickly turned away from Savia in fear.

"What...happened?" Ashe asked.

"We completed the mission." Savia softly said.

"Does not look like it." She gestured at Alaric.

The campfire went quiet at her remark. She noticed both Savia and Florian stared at Everard. Yves sat next to her, poking the fire with a twig.

"It would've gone much smoother if his brother and sister did not intervene." Savia eventually said.

Brother and sister?

"Wait...someone explain,"

Everard fidgeted before speaking.

"Everard Adalbert...that is my name. I am the third son of King Godric Adalbert. My siblings and I were ordered to hunt down Alaric and the rest of you."

"Alaric...why him?"

Everard chuckled before stopping when Savia glared at him.

"Are you serious? You have seen what he could do in Adhu Aqua...he is too dangerous to be allowed freedom. It seems you have made enemies out of Great Lord Amos as well. He is a criminal and that is just a fact." Everard said.

Savia moved one hand over her dagger.

"Savia stop!" Florian exclaimed.

Savia glared at Florian but respected his command.

"He speaks the truth, Alaric is now a criminal and so are we. We need to work out our next move." Florian stated.

We were supposed to go our separate ways after Cognizance. Ashe looked at Alaric's unconscious body. I cannot leave him like this.

"Nothing is changing...Alaric and I are headed for Porffor." Savia stated.

Florian nodded.

"Are you out of your mind? The only way to get to The Great Forest of Porffor is through the port at Cognizance." Everard complained.

"One more word from you," Savia growled. Everard immediately stopped.

"We are headed to 'The Nix', we shall travel through and reach Porffor on the other side," Savia said. Ashe watched as Everard looked as if he had many things to say but kept it to himself. She heard of a place called The Nix before. Priest Able had explained to them that it was where all the nixum was contained thousands of years ago after the death of Heinzidal.

"I shall join Lady Savia and Rick. I, myself, am headed to Porffor." Yves said from beside her.

Florian turned to her. "Where are we headed? I was thinking we would return to the island." He said.

She stared at her brother, flabbergasted. "Would you leave your brother in such a state to travel by himself?" She asked. Florian looked at her, confusion was written all over his face.

"I had thought you agreed with me that you would not follow him and his self-fulfilling plans. We were supposed to be free...free from him."

"I don't recognise you anymore...Florian. What happened?" She asked.

"My face was crushed into the floor repeatedly," Florian whispered. She just barely heard what he said. Florian moved away from her to sit on his own.

"I intend to leave at first light. Get rest." Savia said after a few moments of uncomfortable silence. Yves made himself comfortable on the dirt and closed his eyes.

Florian laid down on the dirt as well, turning his back to the rest of the group. She watched as Everard made himself comfortable as well, the green liquid dissipating.

Savia made no movement, she kept staring at Alaric's slow-breathing body. Ashe stood up and made her around the fire and sat down next to Savia. She placed an arm around her. Savia was cold. Savia melted into her, her head found Ashe's shoulder. Savia began softly sobbing. Ashe was doing her best to soothe her. She heard Savia say "What do I do, Mother? I can't lose him." Savia eventually fell asleep on her shoulder as the night drew long.

26.

Florian followed the others as he rode on his own at the back of the pack. In front of him rode Yves, the two sacks were still attached to his horse. Ahead of Yves rode Ashe and Everard. Leading the pack was Savia, she had not allowed Alaric to ride with anyone else. They have left the forest behind and now rode within a marsh. The horses splashed water as they travelled. The area smelled bad and he found himself holding his breath constantly to avoid the rotten smell. Far in the distance, he could slightly see a construct breaking into the sky.

"You are just going to follow orders again. I am quite disappointed." Gaile breathed into his ear. He felt his left leg beginning to cramp. *What am I doing?*

"It is for the best...if you had left, life would have gotten boring," The shadow added.

"Boring? A life without fighting is a life worth living. Look at how Alaric turned out with all that fighting." He whispered.

"A life without fighting? That is a naive thought. If you wish to be free and return to your 'peaceful' life then fight for it. Nothing is gained just by brooding." Gaile said mockingly.

"Are you mocking me?"

Gaile chuckled. "Just being honest. You have no backbone. Always complaining about the dependence on Alaric when you cannot make decisions by yourself."

"You do not know what you are talking about." He angrily retorted.

He is right.

"You know I am right." Gaile laughed extravagantly.

"We ride through the night, we can't afford to waste time!" Savia's ordered from the front of the column.

He watched as Yves slowed his horse enough so that he was parallel to Florian. He then looked over to Florian who kept facing forward, attempting to ignore the man.

"Florian, what do you know about this place known as 'The Nix'?" Yves asked.

"Just as much as you. I've heard the name before, but that is where my knowledge ends."

"I can explain what it is," Everard said. Florian noticed that Ashe slowed their horse as well. Savia looked back and joined them.

"What are you doing? We can't afford to waste time." She said.

"Let's listen to what he has to say," Ashe said. Savia turned to her and nodded. *Will she listen to Ashe?*

"Explain then, King's boy," Savia said.

Everard nodded. "I assume you all know about Heinzidal?"

"His heroic tale is well known in Ysgafyn. Heinzidal, the hero who saved Hominus."

Yves said.

"Heinzidal appeared five thousand years ago after the threat of the nixum nearly erased all life on Hominus. Heinzidal wielded bizarre powers that he passed on to his children,

that's what birthed casting as we know it today. Heinzidal passed away while fighting the biggest nixum threat we have ever witnessed. The ancient scriptures only refer to it as 'The Angh', we have no idea of what it means. The Angh was eliminated by Heinzidal as he passed on. Years passed and while not as destructive as The Angh, many other catastrophe-level nixum began appearing. Alongside the regular nixum, these catastrophe nixum continued to reign terror in Heinzidal's absence. The casters were low in numbers but had managed to contain the nixum within three cities. For years the casters fought to contain the nixum; they eventually walled off the three cities from the rest of the continent. This area was known as The Nix. For thousands of years, we fought, taking down catastrophe nixum. Five hundred years ago, a man named Habbeo was the King of the empire at the time. King Habbeo, Master of Seals, entered The Nix. While he was not able to defeat the remaining five catastrophe nixum, he was able to seal them using his techniques. King Habbeo never returned from The Nix. Since that day nobody has set foot in The Nix. You asked what The Nix was... Three cities, five seals, hundreds of thousands of dead casters and millions of nixum still stuck within its walls." Everard ended his explanation.

"A quite scary area for us to be headed," Yves said jokingly.

"We are not seriously going through it. Is there not a way around it?" Florian asked.

Everard shook his head. "I am afraid not. I have been trying to tell you all that this is an insane idea."

Savia glared at the young boy causing him to flinch.

"It was Alaric's idea, his plan was to go through. That's exactly what we will be doing."

Savia simply said.

"I understand Lady Savia, however, we cannot simply ignore the fact that Rick is not in the best condition and we have no idea what his plan to safely traverse was," Yves said. Savia simply frowned. "We have to trust Alaric. It is the only way. Besides, it is too late to turn back now. Amos and Godric will be hunting us down." Savia kicked her horse to speed it up and took off.

Ashe softly smiled at Yves. "I apologise for her behaviour, it h-

"I can sympathise with Lady Savia, I have too been in her position. Things did not turn out very well for me I am afraid. We can agree on one thing...let's trust Rick." Yves interrupted her.

"She is a lunatic...and trusting Jerial after Adhu Aqua. You are all lunatics." Everard shook his head.

"I agree with Everard," Florian said, causing Ashe to glare at him.

"Alaric is not his father. You should know that better than anyone, Florian." Ashe said.

"What Lady Ashe is saying is correct," Yves added.

"What do you know, outsider?" Florian whispered.

"Rick has told me a lot. Are you not too old to be having your rebellious phase, Florian?"

Yves asked with a smile.

Florian grabbed the hilt of his blade. Yves kept smiling but his grey eyes became serious.

"You do not want to do that, boy. I am much more terrifying than I look." Yves threatened, returning to his playful expression.

"Stop, Florian. We have no time to fight." Ashe said as she sped up her horse to catch up to Savia. Yves did the same, leaving Florian behind.

Everyone is against me. I am not in the wrong.

"Exactly, you are not in the wrong. But what are you going to do about it?" Gaile whispered into his ear.

27.

They had been riding for days, they went through forests, wetlands and hillsides. Their destination continuously mocking them in the distance. They were finally close to it. A large smooth stone wall that never ended. It began on the surface and shot up into the furthest part of the sky that was viewable. The wall was wide as it continued to stretch as far west and as far east as they could see. As they inched closer to the wall, the environment changed. Around them were remnants of villages. Every house was broken down, every tree had no leaves. There had been no plants growing, no animals spotted. Every bit of existence seemed to have vanished. They had slowed their pace as they inched closer to the wall. It was silent. *Am I doing the right thing?* She looked down at Alaric's face. She violently shook her head. *Yes, it is all for him.* Alaric's condition did not change throughout their journey. The group has travelled quietly since the day Everard explained the history of The Nix. Ashe spoke to her occasionally and Yves occasionally commented on structures they rode past on their travels. She was concerned about Florian, he was eerily quiet. Sometimes he was found whispering to himself. Her impression of Florian deteriorated over time, when they had left Adhu Aqua he had become more and more unhinged. He antagonised everyone he spoke with, he kept whining about Alaric and his plans. *Why does he even bother to join us?* She knew her question was unjustifiable, Alaric and Florian had known each other for years, and they had become brothers. She could not wrap her head around his actions, however. She never assumed the Florian she met back in Isern would attack them in the manner he did. She grasped onto Alaric's bloodied shirt. *He almost killed you. That is unforgivable. I shall deal with him accordingly.* Her fight against Lyall replayed in her mind. *I must get stronger.*

Ysgafyn's Twin burned bright in the sky as they at last reached their destination. The group stood before the enormous stone wall. The wall was smooth, allowing no grip to climb.

"This structure is man-made, this is incredibly impressive!" Yves exclaimed. Savia could not help but agree with the strange man. She had never seen anything like it before, the scale of the wall made it hard to imagine that it was crafted by people. Next to the wall, they looked like specks of dust.

"Where is the entrance?" She asked, looking over at Everard.

The boy shrugged. "There is no entrance."

"Do not lie to me, boy." She threatened.

"I am not lying...even if there was an entrance it would've been sealed off hundreds of years ago," Everard said.

The boy is right. What should we do? Savia rubbed her chin as she thought.

"No need to break your head, Lady Savia. I can get us through this wall." Yves said as he felt the stone wall with one hand. She heard Everard whisper a curse.

"How?" She asked.

Yves reached into his blazer and withdrew a glass vial filled with white powder.

"The one who wields the light paves the way forward," Yves said. "Or so my people say."

"Wait!" Everard exclaimed. "Are we seriously going in without any plan? Our deaths are imminent if we step foot in there."

She glanced at Ashe, who was looking reserved as well.

"We have no choice...if we die here, that is simply it," Savia said coldly.

You are insane...more insane than my old man. Ashe, and Florian, both of you are with me. She is mad." Everard said, tugging on Ashe's sleeve and then Florian.

"Stop, Everard. It is too late...we have to see this out." Ashe said.

"There is no turning back," Florian said.

Everard kept complaining but it fell on deaf ears.

"Are you all ready?" Yves asked.

Savia nodded and hopped onto her horse. She noticed the other doing the same.

They watched as Yves ingested the entire vial of white powder. The streaks on his head shone a brilliant white, his eyes following suit. Yves bent down and dragged his index finger from the bottom edge of the wall up towards the furthest point his arm could reach. He then lifted his right leg up, and below his foot, a pure white light cube formed. His right foot balanced on the newly formed foothold, he lifted himself up and dragged his finger further up. The cube then shifted horizontally to the right. Yves moved along with the cube, dragging his index finger across the wall. He then began descending as the cube began to lower, his finger gliding downwards on the wall. The cube vanished as he reached the ground. He ran his finger to the lowest edge of the wall before stepping away from the wall and snapping his fingers. A large rectangle of white light replaced a portion of the stone grey wall. The rectangle was wide enough for three horses to stand alongside each other and high enough for a person sitting on a horse. She noted that the rectangle edges were exactly the locations Yves dragged his finger across.

Yves hopped onto his own horse. "We ride through the light and we will be on the other side of the wall," He explained. His eyes still shone brightly as the streaks on his head went dull.

"How did you do that?" Everard asked.

"As I said, the one who wields the light paves the way forward." Yves laughed.

Savia rode confidently into the light. As she entered, for a split second everything was white. Suddenly the world darkened. The environment ahead of her changed as well.

She first glanced back and saw the light rectangle as Ashe and Everard entered behind her. She then glanced at the sky, the sky was dark. *It was not even midday yet.* She spotted a few birds roaming high in the sky. Ahead of her was another bizarre sight. In front of them had been what had presumably been a forest. The number of trees was in

the hundreds of thousands, they had also been closely packed together. The strange thing about the forest had been that every single tree had been dead. Not a single leaf was spotted on the tree.

"An ominous view but that is to be expected," Yves said as he snapped, the rectangle of light vanished.

"We cannot ride our horses through the forest, we will have to go on foot," She ordered.

"Going on foot? That will take us weeks to reach the other side of The Nix." Everard complained.

She rode her horse the short distance to the edge of the forest and hopped off. She then carefully manoeuvred Alaric off of the horse. She carried Alaric on her back. He was much larger than her, limiting her ability to move freely. The others reached her position and hopped off of their horses.

"Everard, stay close to me. Everyone else follows behind. Nixum is everywhere, so be on guard." Savia ordered,

"Yes, ma'am!" Yves said as the others nodded.

Yves held one of the large sacks while handing the other to Florian. Ashe had a tight grip on her spear as she walked. Everard began chanting, and a green liquid sphere formed at his chest. The liquid then flowed through the air and connected to Alaric.

The group cautiously manoeuvred around the densely packed forest. Thus far they haven't encountered any obstacle. It was quiet, the only sounds were their laboured breathing and their footsteps. The lack of sound made the forest seem eerie. They continued to slowly walk through the forest when the ground began to shake violently. She leaned herself against a tree to refrain from falling.

"Look up!" She heard Yves yell. A large stream of water shot through the sky from above the treeline. Above the water was a cluster of birds surrounding the large explosion of water. The water crashed down and the cluster of birds fled. As the water crashed Savia began hearing a hissing sound. Soon thereafter the ground stopped shaking.

"What was that?" Everard asked.

"Most probably a natural phenomenon," Yves explained. "And it looks like if we continue we will find out more."

The hissing continued.

"What is that sound?" Savia asked. The rest of the group turned to face her and suddenly froze as they looked up at the tree. Savia turned to look up at the tree. Coiled around the tree she was leaning against was a large snake. The snake was made completely of black goo. Its eyes were replaced by empty sockets and its tongue was a gooey mess as it hissed. The snake dripped ooze as it slid down the tree.

"Run!" Ashe yelled but Savia did not need to be told as she ran. Running was difficult with Alaric on her back. The rest of the group sped away, leaving her with the nixum

right on her tail. The nixum was not particularly fast but it was fast enough to gain on her. Ahead of her in the dark forest, she spotted two white lights. The lights she saw were Yves' eyes as he ran towards her. In his hands, he wielded what looked like two spears made purely out of white light. Yves took a step forward and threw one of the light spears. The spear barely missed her head as it crashed behind her. A large explosion behind her propelled her forward as she crashed into the dirt face-first. She had been trapped under Alaric's body. She tried to move out from under him when Alaric's body was lifted off of her. She quickly jumped to her feet. Yves was facing her, he held Alaric's arm over his shoulder. She looked back to see where the nixum was, replacing the large snake with a crater in the ground.

"Thank you...but I will be needing him back." Savia said.

"He will only hold you back, Lady Savia. Allow me to carry Rick the rest of the way." Yves said.

"No." She grumbled.

"Think of what is best for him."

Savia withdrew her daggers. "I need him." *I must save him...as he did for me.* Her mother's words rang through her head. *'Savia, one day someone will come for you. Do not shy away from their love. They will give you what I could not.'*

"He is the one..." She whispered.

"Learn to trust, Lady Savia. Most of us have Rick's best interests in mind. Allow us to share your burden. Remember the strongest bonds are not always the kindest to the mind."

Savia felt a hand on her shoulder, it was Ashe.

"Listen to him. You do not have to do it all on your own." Ashe whispered in her ear. *What do I do...mother? I need to be there for him as he was for me.*

11 Years ago

Savia sat alone in the small space she called home. It was a small room that had one entrance and one window. It was dark. She sat in her mother's cloak. The cloak was much larger than her as it covered the entirety of her little body. Her stomach kept growling as she sat with her back against the wall.

Twenty-one days...where are you mama? She had not eaten since her mother had left. *Why did you have to leave?*

Continuous loud banging could be heard from the door. She used her hands to cover her ears. She could not stop the tears from spilling from her eyes. Eventually, the wooden door was kicked in. An elderly man dressed in fancy garms walked through the broken entrance. This was not the same man from yesterday, she realised. The man held a whip in one hand. He walked over to her. She tried to make her body as small as possible. The man grabbed both of her hands in one of his.

"How dare your whore mother run from us? And with a rich noble? Who does she think she is? It is a shame your mother left you here. Now you have to atone for her sins."

The man spat.

Savia yelled as the man began to whip her. She cried begging and pleading that her mother returned. Weeks and weeks went by and nothing changed. Men had beat her, they had used her. She became numb to it all. She stopped crying, she stopped begging, she had stopped caring. She kept herself alive by learning how to pickpocket. One night she had been visited by another elderly man. He had visited her often. Savia was sick of it and stole the man's daggers and managed to stab him. She did not stop, pushing both daggers into the man repeatedly as the man leaked blood over the floor. She panted. Memories of her mother flooded back to her. She then looked down at the deceased man below her. She felt no satisfaction. She did not know what to do with the body, she left it there as she curled up in a ball in the corner of the room. She did not sleep, she stared at the door wondering who was the next person who was going to use her for their frustrations.

The following morning a woman walked into her room. The older lady wore a silk dress that accentuated her curves. She was bordered by two men who held swords.

"Oh my...what a mess." The lady referred to the dead man on the floor.

"Did you do this...little lady?" The woman asked.

Savia did not respond.

"My...my what would Lord Chapman do to you if he found out?" The lady said as she walked over to Savia. She swung her hips as she walked. She then bent down in front of Savia. The lady grabbed her by the face. Savia attempted to strike the woman but found her body to be heavy. She was suddenly feeling lethargic.

"What a cute face. You may be of use to me. I heard there is a little thief going around my city. My name is Gwenllian. Tell me, child, what is your name?" The woman said.

Present Day

Savia sighed. "If you hurt him..." She threatened.

"I understand, Lady Savia. I have yet to show him the 'Continent of Light', until then Rick cannot die." Yves beamed.

Ashe lightly squeezed her shoulder and began walking in the direction she had come from. She followed, keeping a close eye on Yves. They had met up with Florian and Everard who waited. Everard walked alongside Yves and began to resume healing. They began their trek through the forest once again, this time with even more caution. She watched as Ashe jumped at any sound they heard within the silent forest. Savia kept her daggers in hand as she watched the trees. They had spotted more nixum-snakes and moved around them without being spotted. The ground shook on occasion as well. Florian who led the group suddenly yelped in pain as he held his hand to the back of his neck. In front of her, a small black raindrop fell. She glanced at the

tree the group stood under. The bottom half of the tree was not unlike the other trees they had passed. The top half of the tree was completely coated in black goo. Small drops of black goo fell from the branches.

"Leave the cover of that tree!" She yelled. She watched the other look upward. Florian was the first to move, avoiding the black raindrops. Ashe got caught with a few as she screamed while running toward Florian. Savia had to run through the acid-like rain to get to where Ashe and Florian stood. She sprinted, the raindrops burning her skin as they made contact. The hood of her cloak refrained her from more damage. She reached Ashe and looked over to Yves. Everard went first and screamed in pain as he passed through. Yves held Alaric on his back much like she had. Yves began running as fast as he could. The acid rain should have hurt them or at least touched them. The acid rain fell towards them but moved to avoid them at the last possible second. Yves found it strange as well as he stood still under the rain. The rain avoided both him and Alaric.

How is that possible?

Yves casually walked over to the rest of the group.

"How did you do that?" Everard asked the question in all of their minds.

"I did not do anything...however, I do have a theory." Yves began when the ground shook. It was much tamer than before. Savia looked up and noticed no water in the sky above the treeline. She then turned to the tree they had just passed. The tree ripped itself out of the ground. The roots of the tree were covered in black goo. Climbing out from under the tree was a nixum shaped like a lizard. The tree was attached to the back of the lizard nixum. The lizard began crawling on the ground towards them. She urged them to run. She held herself behind Yves, protecting Alaric from the nixum. The lizard moved rapidly, toppling over trees as it viciously made its way to Savia. The lizard rapidly gained on her.

"Florian cut the tree down!" She yelled.

Florian slowed down to reach her. He held his crimson blade in both his hands. The wind began to spiral around his blade. He swung his blade horizontally through the air, the force of his swing blew her cloak's hood off of her head. The wind struck multiple trees causing them to topple over. The tree attached to the nixum was sliced in half causing the nixum to stop. Black tendrils shot out from the back of the lizard-nixum, the tendrils attached themselves to the severed half of the tree. It lifted the tree in the air and threw it towards the group. Savia lifted her daggers to embrace the impact. Florian swung his blade vertically through the air. The force cut through the tree as it missed the group marginally. The lizard-nixum was cut in half as well.

"I am glad that is over," Everard said.

"Nixum is not that easily defeated," Florian replied as the lizard-nixum began to move. The two halves began to morph. When there was once one lizard-nixum, in its place, stood two.

"How do we beat these things?" Everard asked.

"For now just run." Savia calmly said.

The two nixum were not as fast as when they were combined.

"How does one normally slay nixum?" Yves asked.

"Ask the man you are carrying, he is the only one amongst us who has slayed one," Florian said.

Alaric encountered a nixum before?

"Let's test my theory," Yves said. He stopped and handed Alaric to Florian. Yves then waited for the nixum to catch up to him. *Strange*. The nixum had no intention of stopping. As the nixum were about to pass him, Yves stretched out his arms and touched the semi-solid body of the lizards. The lizards began to shriek before turning into grey flakes and vanishing into the wind.

How strong is he?

Yves ran up to the stunned group. "That confirms my suspicions then." He grabbed Alaric from Florian and calmly walked past them.

"Are you not going to address what just happened?" Everard asked.

Yves chuckled. "Oh forgive me...I forgot."

What a strange man.

"When the acid-like rain avoided touching Rick and me, I thought of something." He started. "Is it possible that nixum are weak to the Light of Ysgafyn? Of course, I could not prove this with Rick on my back, it could have entirely been possible that something Rick did was the reason the rain did not touch us. The two nixum gave me the perfect excuse to try...I used no light techniques, instead, it seems the Light of Ysgafyn that flows in my bloodstream was enough to eliminate the nixum." He explained.

"That is incredible...nixum has a weakness...this has never been explored before. And as long as we have you we do not have to worry about nixum." Everard excitedly said.

"I would not say that just yet, small king. The light will not remain in my bloodstream forever and I do not have an infinite supply of light. I hope to spare a few vials for Porrfor as well. Let's avoid conflict where we can." Yves stated.

The group travelled further into the forest. As time passed the sky did not change. It remained dark. Exhaustion was Savia's only tell that it was about nighttime, that and Yves' excessively loud yawns.

"Perhaps we should rest for a while," Ashe suggested.

Savia did not like the idea of sleeping in the forest surrounded by nixum.

"There is something attached to that tree." Florian pointed at a tree further ahead.

Hanging from a branch of the tree was a headless corpse. The corpse was tied to the tree by its feet with its neck hanging below. The corpse was dressed in blue robes. The group walked towards it and noticed more corpses hanging from trees behind it.

"What happened here?" Questioned Yves.

"These corpses must be thousands of years old...but how did they get tied to the tree...it must've been the work of another man," Everard said.

While the rest stared at the corpses, an orange light in the distance caught her attention. She cautiously made her way toward the light, passing dozens of corpses in the process. The orange light grew closer with every step she took. The forest opened up into a large open space. The ground was covered with grass that seemed to be burned black. A large lake stood in the middle of this forest opening. A large nixum far too big for the lake was crammed into the lake. The nixum resembled a large fish and did not seem to be moving. Across the grass, effigies were placed, on each was a skull, and attached to each skull was a piece of blue cloth. Finally, the cause of the orange light was a large controlled fire. Before the fire was a tall, wiry man with his back facing her. The man was dressed in rags, he was covered in dirt. His hair was only found in patches on his head, a large burn scar was found on the back of his head. The man turned to face her direction. In both his hands he wielded a jagged-looking blade. His eyes were crimson. The man's face was rat-like as his eyes met hers. Across his chest hung a familiar artefact. A Rixa amulet hung from his neck, it shone a slight green light. The man brought the tip of his blade to his mouth before licking it with his tongue.

"Come here...lost ones...I promise I don't bite!" The man yelled.

She looked back and noticed the others behind her.

"A living person in The Nix...a scaev at that," Everard said.

"Do we do as he says?" Ashe asked.

"We have no choice, he spotted us...something tells me that that man is dangerous," Florian said.

We can agree on that.

She held her daggers tight as she slowly inched her way toward the man.

"Ashe, Florian...show him your amulet." She ordered.

She watched the man's expression change into one of shock as he noticed the amulets.

"Ahhhh...fellow Scaevs. I spot three others, however, what will stop me from..." He

stopped to lick the edge of his blade once again. "Rip the skin off of

them...uhhhhhh...just thinking about...ahhhh...tearing their heads off and adding them to my collection." The man said while vigorously moving the bottom half of his body.

The man made her feel unpleasant, she instinctively lifted her daggers higher to defend herself. Ashe stepped forward and lifted her spear aiming its blade towards the man.

"You can't!" Ashe yelled.

The man moved, he was incredibly quick. In a flash, he went past Ashe's spear and was face to-face with her. Savia was about to charge the man when she found she could not move. She looked down at her feet, the black grass grew and wrapped themselves around her legs. She noticed the others were trapped as well. When did he cast?

The man licked Ashe's face beginning from her chin up to her cheekbone. The man then moved away from her.

"I know...my darling." He said. The man then slowly walked over to Yves. He lifted one of his blades and Savia's heart stopped. She closed her eyes as he swung his blade rapidly down. She slowly opened her eyes to see the man had stopped his blade only a few centimetres away from Alaric's head. The man began laughing, his shoulders lifting as he laughed uncontrollably. After a moment the man went completely still.

The ground began to violently shake. The lake was moving, she saw the large fish-like nixum begin convulsing. In a second, large amounts of water were shot into the sky originating from the top of the nixum. Shrieks could be heard as the sky darkened even further with the presence of the large horde of birds flocking towards the water. The man suddenly whistled. The birds began to descend towards them. As they came closer, she noticed how large the birds were. The birds were jet black occasionally dripping black goo. The birds landed, forming a wide circle around them. Each bird could easily carry five people on its back.

"Good spliefil!" The man said. She realised he was referring to the bird-like nixum.

"My guests...unfortunately, I cannot kill...uhhhhh...this man is the sole reason you will live...how disappointing...ahhhh." The man pointed at Alaric with his blade.

What does Alaric have to do with this man?

"Name...ahhh...my name...how could I forget...They call me Shammoth...tamer of the Scaev." The man introduced himself. Shammoth then raised both of his blades and pointed to the sky. The water fell back down, causing large rainfall to land upon them. The bird-nixum suddenly took flight.

He can control the nixum.

28.

The night, or what she assumed was night, was cold. Ashe could not sleep. She had her knees tucked close to her chest as she sat down on the black grass. She watched as exhaustion had washed over the others. Fear kept her out of sleep. The ground occasionally shook as the fish-nixum or the '*Balaena*' as Shammoth called it, shot water up into the sky. The bird-nixum or '*Spliefil*' were circling the area around the lake. It was as if she could feel their eyes look down upon them. Shammoth disappeared shortly after their altercation, however when they tried to leave the black grass kept them rooted to this spot. So they were forced to stay here. Shammoth unnerved her. *Are all Scaev like this?* Her memories took her back to Diable Island, where all the villagers were supposed Scaev and her guardian was the supposed leader. *Priest Able...if only you were here? Why did you send us away? Why did you not explain anything to us?* She had been very fond of Priest Able. The times he would be on the island were some of her favourite times. He would be the one to teach them, feed them and take them on trips through the forest. He was always there through the happy times and the sad of her childhood. Ivo's words back in Adhu Aqua stuck with her. "Able Cornexia has been the most sought-after man within the Zidal Empire for years. We believe him to be the leader of the Scaev." Ivo had said.

Are the Scaev...truly evil?

The empire sent casters to eliminate the entire island...they are the evil ones.

A sound made her jump. She twisted her neck and saw Shammoth smiling at her. Shammoth walked towards her, blood dripping from the end of his jagged blades.

Blood...who else is in the forest?

He sat down next to her. She scooted a few more spaces to avoid being too close to him. The action caused him to chuckle.

"You...look like...quite the curious one," He said.

He spoke very slowly like someone just learning to speak.

"Curious, indeed," Ashe said.

Shammoth licked at the blood on his blade. "Mmmhmm...ask away."

"Who is your master?" She asked.

"Depends on...who...you ask. Some...ummmm...will say Angh...some will say...Able...some will say..." Shammoth did not finish the sentence, rather he pointed his bloody blade in Alaric's direction.

Able and Alaric? Where have I heard of Angh?

"What is the Scaev's goal?" She then asked.

"The reckoning...it is what...we wait for," Shammoth said.

The reckoning?

"What is the reckoning?"

Instead of answering, Shammoth began laughing.

"We...wait...and see."

Shammoth licked his blade clean, then stared creepily at Savia's unconscious body.

"Why do some think of Alaric as a master?" Ashe asked, trying to divert his attention.

"I believe...you know...ummm...he was...born for this...some believe him...to be special."

Special? Does it have anything to do with the white sparks Savia saw?

"Why is he special?"

Shammoth did not answer, he inched closer to where Savia laid next to Alaric.

Ashe tried to stop him but the black grass grew over her legs and stopped her movement.

She then tried to shout but stopped when she saw what happened. Shammoth had almost been on Savia when small white flashes sparked from Alaric's forehead. Small lightning-like sparks appeared sporadically around Alaric's head. Shammoth stopped in his tracks. He then fell backwards and crawled away in terror. The sparks completely disappeared from Alaric's head.

"Sorry...master...please...forgive." Shammoth began crying.

What just happened?

She focused on Alaric who laid completely still, the only sign of life had been his chest slightly inflating as he breathed.

Her focus was then shifted to Everard who stirred awake at the sound of Shammoth's wailing.

His eyes first went to Shammoth then it met hers. She shrugged. Everard then crept to Alaric and whispered a cast. The green liquid linked the two of them.

"Desano are known for their healing, am I correct?" She asked.

Everard nodded.

"How is he doing?" She then asked.

"I don't know," Everard said.

"What do you mean you don't know?"

"My casts are not working on him...he seems to be fully healed...or he is inflicted with some unknown wound that surpasses any cast," Everard explained.

"So what-"

"I cannot heal him," Everard stated bluntly.

Ashe felt panicked. "We need to find a healer of some sort." She said.

"The best healers reside in Meinspir and work solely for the Empire...even if we get him there I trust they will be ordered not to treat him," Everard explained.

What is it for then?

"We cannot allow Savia to find this out...you need to keep pretending to heal him, or you are the one who will need healing," Ashe suggested.

"I know."

The rest of the night went smoothly, and Shammoth remained calm. The strange occurrence subdued the man, who was now constantly whispering to himself. Savia woke up first then Florian and lastly Yves. Savia first checked on Alaric before turning her attention to Shammoth.

"How do we leave this forest?" She asked with a threat audibly in her tone.

Shammoth seemed terrified of her. "Walk...takes weeks...fly only a few hours."

"Fly?" Florian asked.

Shammoth whistled and the flock of spliefil descended down and surrounded them.

Shammoth then walked up to two of the birds, the rest returning to the sky. Shammoth climbed onto the large back of one of the spliefil and began encouraging the others to follow him.

"I am not certain if I can ride on one of those," Yves warned. "But I have a way to follow." Yves then pulled out another vial of the white powder from his blazer and downed the contents. With the light shining bright from his eyes and head, he clapped his hands together in front of him and light began protruding from his back. Two sets of wings made out of pure light were attached to Yves' back. The light wings flapped once and he floated off of the ground.

Yves laughed at their look of amazement.

After the initial shock, they decided to climb onto the spliefil. Ashe rode with Florian, who held the two large sacks, and Shammoth on one whilst Savia and Everard along with Alaric rode the other. The bird shot rapidly through the sky. She screamed as she thought she was to fall off the bird. The goo of the nixum sticking to her caused her body to remain fixed to the large bird. They had flown in front, and a quick glance backwards saw the other spliefil and behind them had been Yves keeping up with them. Ashe then turned her attention to the surface which seemed far away now. The perpetual darkness made it difficult to see far in the distance. Below them, the dead forest continued. Shammoth seemed to enjoy flying as he laughed uncontrollably as they flew.

They flew for a long time when a city broke into her vision. The spliefil began rapidly descending, landing a few clicks from the city. The land they stood on was flat, black dirt. The second spliefil landed alongside them. Yves landed next, he had been covered in sweat and was breathing heavily.

From this distance, the city was more visible. The city walls were relatively high, a few buildings could be seen breaking out over the walls.

"Why have we stopped here?" Savia asked.

"Have to...ummm...dangerous ahead...Habbeo will try to seal us...We need to kill Habbeo." Shammoth responded nervously.

"Habbeo...King Habbeo? Master of Seals?" Everard asked, flabbergasted.

Shammoth nodded. "We have to...ahhhhhh...kill the old man...Able ordered us."

"Able ordered, as in Priest Able?" Florian asked.

"The last time anyone saw Habbeo was five hundred years ago, he couldn't be alive," Everard spoke over Florian.

Ashe tugged at Florian's robe which made him look at her.

"I think it is one and the same, he is referring to Priest Able." She whispered.

"Priest Able...involving himself with someone such as..." Florian looked at Shammoth with disgust.

"We know very little yet...I would not assume the worst." Ashe suggested. Florian nodded.

"Once we enter...ahhhh...we will be sealed within....mhmmmm...we have to kill Habbeo...or we are trapped forever...he has sealed many of my brothers....arggggghhh...we have to kill." Shammoth's tone became more sinister as he spoke.

"Kill him, we can do that. How do we leave The Nix?" Savia asked.

"Beyond the city...is the wall...leave as you came," Shammoth said.

"Sounds like a plan, we will head out immediately. All we have to do is kill Habbeo, then we can leave." Savia addressed the rest of them.

"Traversing uncharted areas filled with goo monsters...now killing ancient kings all the while being hunted by an empire. What in Heinzidal's name have I gotten myself involved in?" Everard asked himself.

Yves chuckled as he grabbed Alaric and put the unconscious man on his back.

Shammoth whistled and the two spliefil flew to the sky and returned in the direction they had come from. Shammoth led the way with the rest following.

"Can we truly trust this man?" Ashe asked.

"No, we have to use the fact that he cannot kill us, so far he has been useful. I want to kill the bastard before we leave." Savia said coldly.

"That is one thing we can agree on," Florian added.

As they got closer to the city, the city walls became more detailed. The city walls still remained pristine despite being left for thousands of years. There had been no cracks or missing bricks. The city walls had been overgrown with plants, the growth on the walls had not been green, the plants had been blackened. They approached the city gates which were open. They crossed the gates and the atmosphere changed. It was suddenly slightly colder, and a calm breeze swept through the city. Wails and screams could be heard in the distance. The wailing remained constant.

"What is that sound?" Everard asked.

"Screams of the dead...ahhhh...how I miss it..." Shammoth was visibly salivating.

"How can we hear them if they are dead?" Ashe asked.

Shammoth did not answer.

"It seems the strange fellow was telling the truth," Yves said.

Ashe turned to him and saw him attempt to leave via the city gates. Ashe walked over and tried to walk through the gates, it felt as if she walked straight into a wall.

"We are unequivocally trapped."

"It does seem that way," Ashe said.

Around them had been stone buildings, the buildings were not void of the overgrowing black plants. Not a soul was in sight as they walked silently down the ancient street. Ahead of them on the road had been a corpse. The corpse was dressed in chainmail armour. As they inched closer, the armoured corpse began rattling. The legs of the corpse lifted first as the corpse stood up unnaturally. The corpse at closer glance had been a woman. The woman's eyes were replaced with black goo. The goo oozed out from the woman's nose and mouth as well. The woman ran wildly with flailing limbs towards them.

29.

Able sat calmly on the back of a spliefil, staring at the city in the distance. It had been quite some time since he had last been to Cognizance. It had been where he first encountered his master. Alongside him on the spliefil was Cessair, the young girl that he took under his wing. Cessair's taming ability had been second to none despite her being one of the youngest Scaev members. Her usefulness made her the perfect tool for him. Her bond with the spliefil they currently flew on was special. She had named it Thana, what made the bond different was that other tamers could not control Thana. When he had mentioned they were to travel to Cognizance, Cessair had been overjoyed. She had never ventured out of Elisium before. Able knew why he was fond of Cessair, she had reminded him of his favourite student. They landed Thana in a forest close to Cognizance. He allowed Cessair to say her farewells to Thana before they ventured toward the great city.

"We cannot stand out, do not cause a scene and hide your Rixa." He reminded Cessair. Snowfall was the clear sign they had been close to Cognizance. The forest ended and the great city exposed itself to the pair. They had been dressed as common folk and had no trouble entering the city. As they entered the city Able got the sense that they had been watched. The streets were relatively busy, in particular, there had been many blues roaming.

"It seems our *Lectus* has the casters on high alert." He mentioned.

Cessair frowned. "This is their mess, we have to clean up."

"My mess, this is my mess. I was the one who chose them. They do not understand our ways just yet." Able scolded.

"I am sorry Master," Cessair whispered.

"I am not your Master. I have told you countless times."

Cessair clicked her tongue. "You should be our master, you are the one who leads us. Our master has not shown up in years. Why should we believe he will return?"

"Take care of your venomous tongue or your head shall be taken with it." Able threatened.

"I am sorry." Cessair looked toward the ground.

"Our master has returned." He said, peaking Cessair's attention. "Even if you do not think of him as your master, you should respect the fact that he had begun all of this. He gave us a place to belong. All I do is follow in his footsteps."

"Understood," Cessair said.

The pair walked through the city until they reached a cliffside. From the cliff, the rest of the city could be seen. He pointed out Amos' castle. *I wonder how that old bastard is doing. I should see him soon.*

They took the stria operated contraption to reach the undercity.

"Are we going to the castle?" Cessair asked.

Able shook his head and began heading in the opposite direction of the castle. Even in the undercity, there had been a lot more blues than he expected. Amongst the blues had been a few white stripes.

As they walked, he got bumped into by another man. The man was dressed in noble attire however looked worse for wear. His noble clothes were dirty and his face was bruised. The man apologised to Able.

"You seem to be lost. People like you belong up top." Able said.

The man immediately scowled.

"Yes, I do!" The man proudly stated. "If it was not for Alaric Burchard and that bitch Amira. I am going to kill them."

Cessair perked up at the mention of the first name.

"What is your name, son?" Able asked.

"Brennan. Brennan Linden." The man answered.

"As it seems you have fallen on hard times, I may have an opportunity for you."

"Opportunity?" Brennan asked.

"Why yes, if you want to get revenge for what they did to you."

Able saw the gears turn in Brennan's head.

"What do I have to do?" He asked.

"Just wait for us to return and I shall explain everything."

"I shall be waiting." Brennan began laughing.

Able and Cessair then continued walking.

"What do you have planned for him?" Cessair asked.

"An even grander stage where he shall humiliate himself further." Able could not help but smile.

They had reached their destination. They found themselves on the far eastern end of the undercity. Ahead of them was a small cobblestone building that was not outright impressive. What made the building stand out was the three white stripes that guarded it. He attempted to walk past the white stripes and straight into the building but was blocked by one.

"No one is allowed within these walls!" The caster yelled at him.

"I've come to visit my daughter." Able said.

"No visitors are allowed!" The caster yelled.

"I was not asking." Able grabbed the caster's throat with his right hand. The other two casters immediately attempted to attack. Dropping from the sky was Thana, Thana crashed into one of the casters before taking flight once again, this time along with the caster. Cessair whistled and out of nowhere a black goo-like dog appeared and attached itself to the neck of the remaining caster. The caster's screams were cut short as his lifeless body dropped to the floor.

Able whispered a cast. The man struggling in his grasp suddenly began ageing rapidly before Able's eyes. In a matter of moments, all that remained of the man was his

clothes. His body was all but dust in the wind. He let go of the clothes and headed into the building.

Inside the building had been quiet. The main floor was lit by a large flame that hung from the ceiling. The main floor was unspectacular, with just a few desks and chairs. Toward the end of the room was a stone staircase that led downward. He led Cessair down the stairs. The stairs stopped in a long corridor-like room. The room was divided into cells with metal bars. Within the cells had been people. Dangerously slim people who had been down on their luck.

"The stairs lead to further floors of underground rooms," Cessair stated.

"I wonder which floor she will be situated on. Care Cessair, we cannot use casts down here, if we get into an altercation we will have to run." He warned. Cessair nodded at him.

The air in each room was bad, it was a nostalgic smell. Some prisoners within the cells groaned as he and Cessair passed, but most did not even acknowledge them. He thought back to the time when he was placed in one of these cells. A young mysur with no means of protecting himself. *Then you found me.* Despite his earlier warnings, each floor was empty of casters. They reached the deepest level of the dungeon. Most of the cells were empty, except for one. He gazed at the beaten figure sitting chained up against the back wall of the cell. Able flexed his left hand and appearing in his hand was his spear. The spear had not drained any stria as he held it. Able began hacking at the metal bars of the cell. The crimson blade of his spear was seemingly sharp enough to cut through the metal bars. The noise awoke the figure in the cell. Chains rattle as the figure tries to stand up.

"You have come for me, Father!" Jinny called out. Her voice had been hoarse.

Jinny had been bruised and beaten, dried blood was present over her face, and her clothes were in tatters. Her Rixa amulet was still hanging around her neck.

Able cut a sizable hole in the metal bars that allowed him to pass through. He released his grip on his spear and it immediately vanished. He crawled through the hole and he immediately consoled his daughter. Jinny began crying as she held tight onto him.

"What happened here, my dear daughter?" He asked.

Cessair remained outside the cell, she had her back turned.

"Alaric...he tricked me. He used a Ysgafyn ally to trap me. That little rat bast-" Jinny stated.

"Shhhh...I understand your frustration." He rubbed the back of her head as he consoled her.

"The Lectus has left, they should be within The Nix at this moment," Jinny added.

Able released his daughter and sat across from her.

"Yes, I have been made aware. I communicated with Shammoth." He said. He noticed his daughter's expression change to one of disgust.

"Shammoth is one of the best in his rank, he might be crazy but he is a professional. He made me aware of the situation. Alaric seems to be gravely injured." He further explained.

"He was in bad shape when they had left. They should have Godric's kid to heal him, however." Jinny added.

"So it seems, for precaution however I have sent Scaev scouts to Porffor to wait for Alaric. Now onto bigger matters, this Ysgafyn man...he will be a big thorn in our side. He is capable of ruining everything. He must be swiftly eliminated."

Jinny nodded. "I will catch up to them and eliminate him, father."

He leaned closer to his daughter and whispered. "You will be doing none of the sort. Have you forgotten? You have failed me, Shammoth mentioned that the girl known as Savia is still alive. Not only have you failed my mission...you have gotten yourself caught by the Empire."

Jinny began crying. "Please Father give me another chance, I can make things right. Please...you don't have to do this. What about your grandchildren...they are still in Isern."

"You are simply a liability, you could have compromised us. No hard feelings, daughter."

He flexed his left hand and his spear appeared. His spear pierced through his daughter's chest. Blood began pouring from her mouth as she tried to plead. Able relaxed his left hand and the spear vanished, causing Jinny to fall forward. Her chains restrict her head from crashing to the ground. Blood poured out in large amounts from her chest, as she drew breath no more. Able crawled out of the cell and began walking towards the staircase.

"That must have been difficult," Cessair stated.

He shook his head. "Failures within the Scaev are not tolerated, she knew as much. Being of my blood does not relieve you of our practices."

Farewell, my daughter.

Able and Cessair left the stone building.

30.

"Another!" Godric yelled. Two floating greatswords that had a red glow came flying toward him. The two greatswords attempted to strike, pierce and cut him in various positions. He crouched, leapt, flipped and parried the greatswords as they attacked him. He had not broken a sweat yet. Despite being Fifty-seven years old, it did not stop him from being fit and healthy. His opponent was in much worse shape than him. Across from him stood his first son. Lyall was drenched in sweat and was heaving as he struggled to control both of the blades. They had been training outside of the castle's barracks. The barracks had a courtyard meant for weapons training, at this very moment no one had been training alongside the two men. Standing off to the side were a crowd of blues that cheered as the two men trained. He dodged the last barrage of attacks before the two greatswords lost their red tint and fell to the ground. He looked over to his son, Lyall had been hunched over leaning his hands on his knees heaving. "Done already?" Godric mocked.

Lyall did not respond as he tried to catch his breath.

"If you want a spot in the next King's Rite, you will have to do better than that. Or would you rather get beat by your sister?" He continued.

The two greatswords faintly glowed red before floating once again. Godric in return placed a hand on his armoured stomach. His armour glowed red as a metallic sword hilt began forming from his armour beginning at his stomach. The two greatswords came flying at him, he grabbed the sword hilt and pulled. A metal blade formed out of his armour as he pulled the hilt. He used his new sword to easily parry the two greatswords. The two greatswords fell to the ground, just as Lyall fell to one knee. He made his way to his son and helped him stand.

"You need to grow stronger, it is just a matter of time before our foes will appear."

"Yes, Father! I will continue to make you proud." Lyall said.

He walked with his son to the crowd where he handed Lyall to one of his casters. He then made his trek out of the courtyard. Godric had always somewhat liked Lyall, he had been his firstborn. Each of his children was born from different mothers, while he kept his children within the castle he had not allowed their mothers to live alongside them. It had been a practice that they had abided with, through fear or reasons otherwise. Lyall reminded him of himself when he was young and naive, perhaps the reason as to why he was not his favourite. Godric's favourite child had been his daughter, Charna. Charna had been the least like him. She was usually calm and collected, except when it came to her siblings, and she ingrained those qualities into the way she fought. She was not one to overwhelm with power but rather to whittle her opponent down, slowly, carefully. He could see potential in her, he would not be surprised if she sat on the throne of ascendancy once he had passed. Lyall had potential but was rather simple. For all his strength, he could only remember a handful of casts. For your regular opponent, his

strength would be overbearing and allowed him victory alas, against tricky opponents who thought, he had struggled. This is why he reminded Godric of himself, it was as if looking at a past edition of himself...before the King's Rite. Finally, his youngest child, Everard. Everard had been a surprise and not a welcomed one. Everard was a Desano, he could not wrap his head around it. While Desano is useful for healing, he does not know how to deal with the fact that his child would not be a warrior. Everard would shun weapons training to study and read various texts. He had been the only one who visited his birth mother constantly, who had been a fellow Desano. What made matters worse was that Everard was the child that resembled him most in appearance. It was as if he stood in front of a mirror and all you saw was a much much worse version of you. One that was weak, who refused to get stronger. He thought back to Jerial and how he now lives through his son. *Who will win the battle of generations? Jerial's spawn or mine?* He found himself close to the exit of the castle. The two guards at the large castle doors bowed before they let him pass.

As soon as the doors opened he heard the regular *boom* of the sky breaking. He took a few steps out of the castle. The view always amazed him. The ground ahead of him was made of flat stone, it stretched about a thousand metres ahead of the castle before stopping. There was nothing beyond the edge. The sky was darkened by an abundance of clouds. Raining down from the clouds were tens of hundreds of blue lightning bolts that randomly struck down. It had not been raining, it never rained in Meinspir. He walked out of the shade of the castle and into the open air. It was slightly breezy on the highest platform. Lightning struck down sporadically around him as he walked. As he neared the edge he saw the rest of the city come into view. Meinspir had been a city separated by a number of circular stone platforms. The King's throne is found within the highest platform in Meinspir and the highest point in all of Hominus. Meant to showcase the King's oversight of the realm of Hominus. He looked down at the platform below, it was about a two-kilometre drop to reach the next platform. He looked at the architecture of the buildings below. Another reason he loved Meinspir was the unique architecture found in the Capital city. While Meinspir did not have the sheer size of Adhu Aqua as in actual land, it was still rather impressive. Every building had been tall, each building ending in a spire. Creating a view that resembled thousands of spears aiming at the sky. The blue lightning struck these spires constantly all through the city. Godric stood as close to the edge of the stone platform as possible. He then pointed to the sky with his left hand, using his index and middle fingers. He pointed to the next platform with his right hand stretching out the same fingers. He waited a second before his body was engulfed in a brilliant blue light as the lightning struck him. As soon as it began it was over. When the light disappeared he found himself in a different area. He now stood next to a large stone wall that continued into the sky. Ahead of him were many tall buildings, along the buildings were streets filled with people.

31.

Florian watched as the armoured corpse swung wildly at Savia and Shammoth. Shammoth for some reason was not trying to strike the corpse. Savia traded blows with the corpse.

"Control it Shammoth!" Ashe yelled.

"Uhhhh...Can't tame nixum....uhhhh...fused with human flesh." He said.

Florian withdrew his blade and held it in front of him. Invisible winds began to swirl around his blade as he waited for an opening. He watched Savia impressively backflip away from the corpse. He swung his blade, and a large gust of wind was shot towards the corpse. The corpse was split in two. Black goo oozed out of the two halves of the corpse, the goo turned into grey flakes before floating away into the air.

"What was that?" Everard asked.

"Ahhhh...We call them '*Inmor*'...they are formed by the....uhhhh...fusion of nixum and the dead." Shammoth walked over to the split corpse and began hacking at its dead flesh with his blade. "Thousands...all...uhhhh...over the city." Shammoth moaned.

Florian felt pressure on his left leg as Gaile appeared alongside him. Since they had entered The Nix, Gaile's appearance changed. Where he was more of a shadow before, now he resembled a man. A man whose features were still covered by a large amount of shadow that swirled around him. Gaile happened to be taller as well, reaching about the same height as Alaric. Gaile's eyes glowed red permanently and when he smiled he showcased actual human teeth instead of a dark void. He appeared more frequently as well. Every time he spoke it clouded Florian's mind.

"This...Shammoth, he is quite strange." Gaile said.

"Just quite?" Florian mumbled. He looked around if anyone heard, but it seemed he was safe.

Gaile chuckled. "You could have turned out that way...if you stayed with Able."

He walked in the middle of the group as they walked through the remains of what once was a prominent city. Some buildings they passed were overgrown with black vines. They avoided these buildings and walked until they reached a crossroads. Ahead of them were more buildings with strange vines. To the right was an empty street. To the left, there had been more inmor roaming the street.

"Which is the fastest way to reach Habbeo?" Savia asked.

"To the left," Shammoth answered.

He heard Savia click her tongue as she moved ahead to face the corpses. Ashe followed behind, swinging her spear. He followed behind with his blade in hand. Ahead of them were five inmor, Savia charged the first, she leaned forward keeping her body low to the ground. The first inmor did not see her coming as she kicked out the legs from under the inmor. As the inmor fell on its back, she stabbed its face with her dagger pinning it to the ground. The other inmor were now aware of the trio's presence and

began charging at them, their limbs flying wildly in all directions as they ran. The one pinned to the ground was not dead, it stood up from the ground and kicked Savia. The force should not have been great but it somehow sent her flying a few paces from the inmor. Savia groaned as she collided with the ground.

The rest of the inmor inched closer to Savia before Ashe intercepted them. Ashe spun her spear around a few times to create distance between her and her enemies. Once she created enough distance she thrust her spear at the closest inmor. Her spear tip pierced the inmor in the chest. The inmor did not stop moving. Instead, it pulled its body through the pole of Ashe's spear, desperately trying to reach her. The inmor was dangerously close to Ashe and she was not moving an inch. He saw the horrified look on her face and cursed. He whispered a chant and pointed his free hand to the inmor. The cobblestone ground around the inmor stretched and covered the inmor's feet keeping it rooted. This gave them enough time for Ashe to pull her spear out of the creature. Savia had recovered and pulled Ashe backwards by the hood of her robe. She then sliced through the inmor's neck, causing the inmor's head to fall off of its body. The inmor then turned into a grey husk and disappeared into the air.

They only die if they are decapitated.

The four remaining inmor ran towards Savia and Ashe.

"Split!" Savia yelled.

Ashe nodded and the two women ran in opposite directions. One of the inmor followed Savia and the rest followed Ashe. Ashe ran towards him. He poured his stria into the blade, he felt his energy draining. It was draining faster than normal. The wind began swirling around his blade rapidly. *What is happening?*

He refrained from attacking and took one hand off of the blade. He felt his energy being replenished as the wind around his blade dissipated. Ashe ran directly at him, and at the last second, she ran around him. He kicked at the first inmor that ran at him. His foot connected with its chest and it stumbled backwards, crashing into the inmor behind it. The third inmor charged him with no regard for its allies. It stamped on the rest as it desperately made its way towards him. Florian aimed a strike at the inmor's right shoulder, he sliced clean through the shoulder, and the limb flew through the air in a spray of black goo. The inmor was not bothered by this as its other flailing arm caught him on the chin. Florian's world went white for a second as he found himself knocked to the ground. Ashe's elongated spear stretched over his prone form and pierced straight through the inmor's neck. The inmor attempted to struggle but grey flakes appeared on its body as it faded away. The two prone inmor got to their feet and charged toward Ashe, it did not last long as Savia collided with one. Savia did an impressive kickflip using the back of the inmor as a foothold as she flipped over the inmor chasing her. The third inmor crashed into the back of its ally. He watched as one of Savia's daggers emanated a light red glow. She threw her red dagger at the perfectly lined up inmor. Her dagger flew through the air at great speed as it pierced through all three of the inmor's

necks. Once the dagger passed through the last inmor it reversed through the air and returned to Savia's hand. The three inmor turned grey and vanished into the wind.

Ashe ran to Florian and helped him get up from the ground.

"Mindless creatures, they stand no chance if we outsmart them," Savia stated.

"Strong...mindless creatures." He added while rubbing his bruising chin.

Shammoth led them through the city, they encountered more and more inmor as they travelled. They dealt with them using their teamwork. They reached what looked like a city square. It was large and conjoined to five other roads. In the middle of the square was a large circle of black liquid. It was unmoving, a perfect circle of darkness.

Shammoth began breathing strangely and pointed one of his jagged blades forward.

Atop the black liquid sat a man. The man was old and frail. The man sat with crossed legs as he floated above the dark liquid. His limbs were frail and wrinkled. His face had been so wrinkled it seemed his eyes were sunken into his face. His hairline had receded badly but had not stopped his hair from growing long. His hair was grey, with its tips floating just above the black liquid. The tips of his hair were blackened. His beard had grown long as well, it was unkempt and grew into knots. His crossed legs had black goo growing upon it and it reached his knees.

"Inmor?" Florian heard Savia whisper.

"No...ahhh...Habbeo..." Shammoth moaned as he ran towards the city square.

"That is the five hundred-year-old King?" Everard asked.

Florian watched as Savia was behind Shammoth in a flash, she had her daggers withdrawn and intended to use Shammoth to hide herself from Habbeo. Yves called for the rest of them to follow.

32.

Habbeo felt the dark take more of him every day. *This one is almost lost.* He was seemingly reaching his rest. *How long has it been, my comrades? I will soon join you. For this is what the pillars are deigned for.* He felt their presence. He did not need to look in their direction. These attacks have grown more and more frequent these last thirty years. *They shall be eliminated, if that is Zadok's will.* He felt a tingle on his left wrist. *A part of me is nearby.* He decided to turn to the group. Directly in front of him, was a mindless creature charging him. He wielded two jagged blades and screamed gibberish towards Habbeo. Overgrown vines that blacked the buildings moved toward him by the mindless creatures will. The black vines did not reach him, as he sucked the darkness straight from them and absorbed it into his body. The vines turned into grey husks as they dissipated into the air. The wild man did not stop his charge, this forced Habbeo into whispering a small cast of his own. A small pale yellow cube appeared around the wild man's body. Habbeo closed his fist and expected the man to disappear. The man dragged himself out of the cube. He heard the man wailing as he was in pain. It had appeared that only his left foot was removed. *Crafty little creatures.* He almost did not notice the figure that attacked him next. She kept herself hidden well behind the other. She threw a red glowing dagger at his face, which he easily dodged. He was about to eliminate her when a large pale yellow cube appeared over her entire body, he made sure that she was not going to escape. He saw the familiar panic in her eyes, as she knew her fate. He closed his fist, expecting no resistance. In an instant, his construct disappeared. The woman was released from the cube, looking as confused as he was. Then he heard it, in his head.

HARM SHALL NOT BEFALL HER, AS COMMANDED BY THE FIRST KING

He looked around frantically. He did not notice the woman's dagger as it pierced through his shoulder, the wound did not bother him as he continued his search. Then he spotted it. An unconscious man, around his forehead, sparked the light of the gods. *The scriptures of Zadok have come true, The First Champion of the Pillars has finally arrived for us.*

Habbeo floated through the air towards the 'Champion', two insignificant creatures stood between him and readied an attack. A shout of denial came from the woman before and the two before him looked uncertain. He stopped before a strange man, who offered no resistance. The strange man moved the Champion off of his back and wearily presented him to Habbeo. He saw the piece of himself he felt before. It was an old seal he created, it was attached to the Champion's left wrist. Habbeo fell to his knees and began sobbing uncontrollably.

"The time has come, our saviour has arrived. Praise be to Zadok! Praise be to The Pillars!" He cried out.

33.

Savia was not certain as to what was happening right now. *I should be dead, if the cast did not fail...but why did it fail? I would have failed you, Mother...Alaric.* The situation was strange, the old man was currently praying, or whatever he called it, to Alaric. Yves held Alaric's body up while the old man closed his eyes and whispered. He was not casting as he spoke in common tongue. She looked over to Ashe and Florian who were watching the man as well. She warned them earlier to not attack the man, as she saw the damage he had done to Shammoth. Shammoth, who was currently bleeding out, his wailing stopped but he seemed to be laughing towards the sky. His left foot was completely gone and blood flowed steadily out of his wound. He had tried to get up and attack the old man but was stopped by Savia who easily placed the weakened man on his backside. She went over to the dagger that went straight through Habbeo's shoulder. The dagger was bloody, among the red of the blood were blots of black. She picked up her dagger and wiped the blood off and walked over toward Alaric. As she treaded closer she heard Ashe ask a question. "What are you doing?" Her question was directed at Habbeo. The old man ignored her and kept praying. She twirled her daggers in her hand before placing one menacingly at Habbeo's throat. "She asked you a question."

Her statement made him stop and turn towards her. His sunken eyes met hers.

"I apologise, Lady of the Champion, I did not mean to offend. I shall answer any questions you have and try to do anything possible, but I am afraid my skill set may be limited." Habbeo said.

Lady of the Champion?

"What are you doing to Alaric?" She repeated Ashe's question.

"Alaric...that is the name of the Champion? As to what I was doing...I was merely praising my master." He simply stated.

"Why do you call him Champion?" Yves added.

Habbeo ignored Yves and kept his eyes on Savia. She then repeated Yves' question.

"The scriptures hath written about the arrival of the Lord, should I call him Lord or Master? Zadok hath wrote about the Arrival of Master Alaric and two more of his kind."

He only responds to me.

The looks the rest gave her encouraged her to prod the old man further.

"What do you mean by his kind? Is Alaric not a man?"

"Yes, Master Alaric is human, no more so than you or me. It is not his physical body that makes him special but his capacity for power, if he wishes to wield it."

He is speaking in riddles.

Yves burst out in laughter after Habbeo's last statement.

"A case of Heshdon, indeed," Yves said.

She sees Habbeo move his head slightly when Yves mentioned 'Heshdon'.

"Why did you not kill me when you had the chance?" She asked.

"In all respects, you should be dead. If it was not for the interruption of the Champion's power." Habbeo replied.

"You telling me, Alaric saved me?" She looked at the man bewildered.

"Yes, my lady. He wielded the power of the gods to stop my attack."

Power of the gods? This is getting more strange by the second. You are still looking out for me...Alaric.

Her heart warmed a little hearing Habbeo's words.

"Power of the gods..." She heard Ashe whisper.

"Cut the bullshit, tell us how to get out of here," Florian stated with venom.

As usual, Habbeo ignored him.

This made Florian grab the hilt of his blade. Savia held her hand out hoping to stop him.

"How do we escape this place? We were told the only way was to kill you." She stated calmly. She did not want to aggravate someone who could easily kill them.

"This place is not easily escapable, my Lady. Those who enter must be sure to be eliminated. This here, is where one of the five catastrophes is sealed." Habbeo pointed at the dark liquid in the middle of the city square.

"If I were to perish, the seal would break and the nixum would be awoken. And may go after the other four parts of me."

Other four parts?

"Is there no other way to escape?" She followed up.

"I did not say that, My Lady. To the north-" Habbeo stopped. "They are coming!" He suddenly exclaimed. Habbeo floated back to his position, floating atop the black goo. Then she heard it too. Groans and metal clinking. South from their position was a large group of hundreds of inmor, walking over each other as they neared their target.

"They are here for they sensed the Champion. My Lady, head north and enter the Temple of Zadok. Within you shall find the seal breaker, return it to me and you will be allowed your freedom."

Savia nodded. She noticed Ashe looking to her for command. She then turned to look at Alaric before nodding again.

"Ashe, you and Florian stay here with Alaric. Guard him with your lives." *That is the safest place for him to be.* She then turned to Yves and Everard. "You two, with me."

Yves nodded and dropped Alaric off in front of Habbeo. She heard Florian mumble something but ignored it as he unsheathed his blade and readied to fight the horde of inmor. Ashe was quick to join him, as she readied her spear. Savia jogged to the northernmost exit of the square, Yves and Everard close behind her.

She noted an inmor before her, and she quickly dispatched it.

"Lady Savia, is there any specific reason you brought us along? We could've helped the other two." Yves asked.

"I need both of your counsel." She told him.

"Our counsel?" Everard asked.

"What have you made of all the things Habbeo spoke of? All this about Alaric being a Champion makes no sense. If Alaric had known why ha-"

"Why had he not spoken of it?" Yves interrupted her. "I fear Rick, does not understand it either. If he had known something, you would have been the first to know, Lady Savia."

Yves' words warmed her heart.

"As for this Champion business, I fear I know next to nothing, the old king spoke of. But I may have seen a text that referred to three individuals who used the 'power of the old gods'. The text's origin is not from my homeland, but rather it is a Drakenskav text."

Yves continued.

Drakenskav, Land of Dragons.

Before them appeared two inmor. Savia clicked her tongue as she charged the two mindless creatures.

34.

He floated through the dark waters. His body felt light and he sped through the water. The dark creature with the large red eyes was not present. Sporadically, he would get a sense of danger. His mind would flash an image, First Savia, then Ashe, Florian, Yves, then ending on Savia. Along with the image, a pain would ring through his head. *Will the dreaming ever stop?* He thought to himself, just moments before he was being spoken to by translucent beings and now he was plunged into a dark ocean. He figured out shortly that he could somehow breathe while in the murky waters. The waters seemed never-ending. It felt like hours and days had passed. *So this is the afterlife. I did not accomplish anything...sorry Mother...Savia.* After some time floating in the nothingness, he felt a presence within the waters. He looked around and saw nothing. He was about to give up, and at the last second a hint of purple light caught his eye. He swam, pushing the waters away, forcing his body to reach the purple light. As he got closer, a large figure shadowed the waters. It had been larger than any sea creature he had ever read up on. Dark tendrils flowed off of it, as he got closer he saw the faint purple light toward the back end of the creature. Without fear, Alaric swam. The creature did not move as he approached. He reached the source of the purple light. Wrapped tightly in dark tendrils was a man. The man was an exact replica of himself. The only difference was that one eye shone a bright purple light.

Father

So you have finally returned to me, Son. As I always knew you would.

He stared at his father, emotions bubbled within him. Emotions of rage, hatred and then finally relief.

For years, years that I lost, I wished for your demise. A demise, knowing that it would be the end of me as well.

He pointed to his father and then back to himself.

This is much better, now you can watch. As I do everything in my power to undo the damage that you have done to the world. To renounce your name from me.

Alaric was about to swim away when he heard his father speak.

Do you know why I chose her, Son?

Alaric froze.

I loved her, you too, son.

Rage took control, Alaric turned around and wrapped his fingers around his father's neck. He pressed with all his might, knowing his father would not die.

Try as you might, the world in your soul does not abide by the same rules. You cannot kill me here, son.

Know this, there is nothing you can do that does not fall within expectations. We are reaching the same destination, just taking different paths.

He let go of his father's neck.

You shall never speak about my mother again, you never loved her.

Those were his last words before swimming away.

I shall never be like you.

The images then passed through his head along with the painful sensation. This time it did not stop. He held his head as he writhed in pain. He blinked and the waters were gone, replaced with a dark sky. The pain dissipated, and he felt...good.

35.

Savia stabbed her red-tinted dagger into the chest of the inmor to her right, the inmor was pushed backwards by the blow but did not fall over. The other inmor attempted to lunge its sword at her, she expected this and ducked to the floor with a splits. She recovered quickly and got behind the inmor that attacked her. She pushed it into its kin and then yanked her empty right hand. The dagger that was stabbed into the chest of the inmor flew through the air at a rapid pace. It tore a hole in both inmor. She knew this was not enough to kill them but she turned to Yves and Everard nevertheless.

"Run!" She yelled. Yves was first in motion followed by a confused-looking Everard.

"Aren't you going to kill them?" The boy asked.

"They will follow regardless, we cannot waste time...fighting everything-"

"Not when Rick's life is on the line, am I right Lady Savia?" Yves interrupted her.

She did not answer, she just nodded.

She scanned the buildings as they ran, she checked behind them occasionally. More inmor gathered behind them however they moved too slowly to be of any threat at the moment.

"We do not even know what the building looks like?" Everard complained.

"I brought you along, for your knowledge of the Empire. If you are of no use, you can return to the others." She stated coldly.

"The Empire abolished temples or churches long before you and I were born. There remains only one temple on the continent and it is in Meinspir." Everard explained.

"And when did this abolishment occur?" Yves asked.

"Hundreds of years ago, if I am correct."

"This place is thousands of years old, boy," Yves said.

They searched and searched until they reached the northernmost point of the city. Just before the city gates, it stood. A large marble temple. Before the temple were two statues. The first was a man who was dressed in a robe that contained many holes. The man had long flowing hair, and across the man's forehead was a single line that ran around his head. The man held a sword in one hand and a shield in the other. The other statue was of a rather large snake that had scars across its large body.

"This must be it," Everard stated the obvious.

Savia ran up the steps and entered the temple. She felt a shift as she entered. The air was different. It felt as if they were outside of Habbeo's seal. She heard the two behind her enter. Yves whistled as he entered.

"This place might be larger than any temple from my homeland," Yves said.

The temple was large, it had two floors and the ceiling was high. Large chandeliers hung from the ceiling. On the ground floor, there were wooden benches, a multitude of them. On the opposite side of the room was a large altar, placed on it was a large book

that was open. There was no sign of anyone within the temple. She took one step forward.

"Lady Savia..." Yves warned.

"I see it." She replied.

From the floor before the altar rose a liquid form. It convulsed before shaping in the form of a person.

"No.." She whispered.

The nixum before them transformed into an exact clone of Alaric. She clenched her fists around her daggers.

"Yves, Everard. Find the Seal Breaker." She ordered.

"Are you sure that is wise, La-"

"Just do it!" She urged Yves, who along with Everard ran up the stairs to the left of her.

"What gave you the right?" She stared at the nixum.

Savia made the first move, she stabbed diagonally with her right dagger. The fake leaned away and used his left hand to grab her striking arm. She thrust her other dagger directly at his face. The nixum could not dodge in time as she grazed its cheek. The nixum released its grasp on her arm and she immediately elbowed it in its chest. She then attempted to slice the nixum with her daggers but it dodged her strikes. She was able to land an overhead kick at the fake's head. The nixum did not need time to recover as it countered immediately by punching her in the chest. The punch was heavy as she was flung backwards, she was stumbling before she kicked her body off the ground and landed a perfect backflip. Her core hurt but she stood firm. She lunged forward and swept her leg at his. The fake flipped over her, mimicking her flip earlier. She did not waste time and turned around and charged the nixum. The nixum did not have any time to recover and its face was pierced by her dagger. The nixum pushed her away and crashed into the altar. Savia's dagger had black blots all over it. She did not relent and charged at the false Alaric. The nixum kept dodging and retreating as she aimed strikes and kicks at it. The nixum ran out of room to manoeuvre and she landed a downward kick against the back of the fake's head. The nixum leaned forward, She planted her foot and kicked upward with her other, colliding with the nixum's chin. The nixum recoiled backwards, Savia took the moment to strike but her dagger was swiftly blocked. The nixum kicked at her torso, but she blocked the blow as much as she could. False Alaric then attempted a left hook at her face, but she ducked just in time. She used the time to ram her shoulder into the nixum's torso. This created a little space, and she then attempted another kick. Her leg was caught and she was lifted into the air by a severe strength. False Alaric held her by the ankle and began to spin. She felt weightless, getting dizzy by the second. She felt the nixum let go and her body collided with the wooden benches close to the altar. Her entire body hurt as she attempted to get to her feet. The nixum did not make a move as she struggled to stand. She felt her

energy draining rapidly as she whispered a cast. Around her, the wooden benches and the broken wooden parts of the benches began floating. Savia let go of her daggers, her daggers did not fall to the floor but remained floating. In a split second, around her, the wooden benches were no more. The benches were replaced by daggers that resembled her own. They swirled around her as she took her two floating daggers in hand. One of the floating daggers flew across toward the nixum, who dodged at the last moment. Before the point of collision, the dagger turned into a bench and crashed hard. She did not move, instead, all the floating daggers were forced towards the nixum. She watched the nixum shaped like Alaric attempt to dodge but it kept getting hit by another. She waited until the nixum was cornered before she made her move. The nixum was stuck in a corner of the temple, she moved and kept her body behind a few of her daggers. The nixum only had one direction to move as it dodged another of her illusion daggers. As soon as the nixum moved, it was done. Her dagger sliced straight through its neck. She watched his body dissipate into grey flakes.

Her body shook, not just with pain.

Please...never again.

She was about to head upstairs when she noticed the pair of Yves and Everard stood waiting for her.

Before she could speak, Yves started.

"We may have found what we are looking for." He held up a dusty-looking brown box.

"Then let's not waste any more time." She limped towards the two. She heard Everard cast as a green liquid attached to her chest. The liquid poured out from Everard's chest. Her body felt warm.

When they exited the temple, a few inmor wandered outside. She sighed, as she was about to grab her daggers.

"Let's just try to avoid them, sounds good?" Yves said.

Savia was in no position to argue and nodded at the strange fellow. The inmor was made aware of their presence and moved towards them. Their movements were slow and allowed the trio to keep a fair distance between them and the inmor. The trek back to the city square was slower than the journey to the temple. The streets were filled with more inmor than before, all seeming heading in the same direction. As they neared the city square, all the inmor suddenly froze.

"Something is happening!" She yelled.

The inmor were reduced to puddles of black ooze as the body they inhabited flaked away. Savia limped towards the square following the black ooze.

Once they reached the square they saw it. In front of them, Ashe stood crying, her mouth open in shock. Before her, stood Florian, who smiled as his crimson blade ran straight through the chest of Habbeo. Blood ran down Florian's sword as the ground below them began to shake.

What have you done?

She fixed her gaze on the unconscious Alaric. He showed no signs of stirring.

The black ooze merged into the centre of the square. Forming a large circle of black liquid that began convulsing.

What do we do...Alaric?

36.

Once upon a time, there was a unique boy. He was born deep within the Darklands. With no major cities close, he grew up with not much wealth. The wealth that he was born with came in the form of his family. Alongside his Mother and Father, the boy had a multitude of siblings, aunts, uncles and cousins. The village they all resided in was a peaceful one. Not many venture into this part of the land. The boy was special, physically he was the weakest of all the other boys in the village and he was not good with academics as well. Along with this, it had always seemed as if his body was deteriorating. He was sick often, this caused his Mother to dote on him. He remembered one day, while sick in his bed, he had asked his mother. "Why have you given me this name?" His name was an odd one, no one had a name quite like his. His mother looked at him and smiled. She rubbed his head and said. "The day of your birth, an Angel appeared in the form of man. I remember as if it was just yesterday, I was terrified. Your father was the one who spoke to it while I attempted to protect your brothers and sisters." The boy asked his mother. "What did the Angel want?" His mother smiled once again. "The Angel requested that we call you by the name he had picked out. Claimed it was the wishes of the gods. Afraid for our lives, we accepted it. And in a brilliant light, the Angel disappeared." His mother ended the story. "Heshdon...a name chosen by the gods!" The boy exclaimed. His mother then frowned and turned her face away from him. Heshdon reached his hand toward his mother but stopped when he noticed she had been trembling. His mother had been crying. Then she faced upwards and yelled. "I cannot do this anymore...Abatur!" His mother yelled his father's name before turning back to him. Her face was wet with her tears. She then whispered to him. "Heshdon was not the name the Angel asked us to name you." She paused before crying once again. "It is our fault that..." Heshdon's mother did not finish but he could understand what she meant. His mother rubbed his head before leaving his side. Before she could leave, Heshdon asked her. "What is my true name?" His mother looked at him with teary eyes and shook her head before storming out. The boy named Heshdon became distant with all that he knew. Years later, the day came when Heshdon was to become a man. With traditions within the village, he was meant to face a test of courage. The 'Amtihan' they called it. All the boys had done it, to showcase their might and to be allowed to choose a partner. Heshdon was dreading this day. For all knew, there was not a chance that Heshdon would have the power to become a man. For poor, cursed Heshdon did not have the might to leave his bed. Heshdon had no friends and most of his siblings ignored him. Only his sister occasionally spoke with him. Telling him of her adventures, gathering herbs and plants with the elderly women in the village. Heshdon's sister would promise him that she would find a way, a special herb that would heal all of his ailments. A promise that soon faded as his sister was married off, after she found a suitor she did not visit him again, at least not until that fateful day. The day of his 'Amtihan'. Heshdon

wallowed in despair the entire day. It was late afternoon when his sister barged into the room. He sensed immediately that she was panicked. Her red eyes claimed that she had been crying. She did not explain anything and began dragging Heshdon out of his bed. "We have to leave." Was all she said as she helped him walk. His body was weak and he could barely lift his feet. His sister allowed him to lean all his weight on her as they walked. They left the hut. Heshdon closed his eyes as the fresh air hit his face. It had been many summers since he had been outside. The smell was not quite what he remembered it being. Alongside him, he felt his sister tremble. "No...this cannot be." Was the words his sister said which made him open his eyes. The sky had been dark, which was usual. Directly before him was his mother who was crying violently along with his younger siblings. Ahead of them stood his elder brothers, they had weapons and aimed their weapons toward the village centre. He could not see past them. Heshdon urged his sister to get closer so that he could see what was happening. She refused him. Heshdon tried to force his way out of his sister's grasp but could not. Heshdon did not need to wait longer. His elder brothers rushed forward, despite his mother's protests. The scenery was clear to Heshdon. He had an unfiltered look at the village centre. Bodies were spread across the floor, mostly men. He spotted his father lying lifeless before a large humanoid creature. His mother had warned him of such creatures, Mayt they had called them. What happened when men drowned in the light. Mayt was a fairytale parents told their kids to keep them out of trouble. But here before the village stood four of these fictitious creatures. Twice as large as regular men, their appendages torn asunder by the light that passed through the creatures continuously as blood ran through people. Their eyes were nothing but bright light in the dark world. Long fangs protruded from the mouths of the creatures. Heshdon watched in horror as the creatures bested his brothers and mauled them. A ringing pain in his head was felt, he got this quite often but never this bad. He fell to the ground, where he was alongside his mother. This was the first time he looked at her face since that day. She had gotten quite old, he thought. He then whispered to his mother. "What is my true name, Mother?" His mother was panicked and looked at him with malice. "Now is not the time, Heshdon." She had said. Heshdon did not back down and kept asking until his mother broke. She whispered his true name. At long last he felt at peace. The pain in his head disappeared and felt his life's purpose reveal itself. His body was engulfed in bright light. Heshdon emerged from the white light feeling anew. Walking felt easy, his body felt light. He heard his sister's protests but he continued walking. He had gotten close to one of the Mayt. The creature turned to him and growled before jumping to attack him. Neither Heshdon nor the remaining villages expected what occurred next. Heshdon, the cursed boy, stopped the creature with a singular hand. The creature attempted another attack, however, Heshdon pointed his other hand to the sky. A brilliant white lightning bolt shot down from the sky and collided with the Mayt. Eviscerating the Mayt where it stood. Showcasing great strength and brilliant light, the cursed man known as Heshdon

protected his village from the drowned ones. No one, not even Heshdon could explain what had happened that afternoon. After the attack his body reverted back, leaving him bedridden. The village sang his praises. His mother called him by his God-given name. Children visited requesting blessings from the man blessed by the light. And thus is the story of Heshdon complete, a story of the man whose curse turned to a blessing in the face of adversary.

The End?

Florian fired blasts of wind from his blade towards the incoming inmor. He was exhausted. Alongside him fought Ashe, she spun her spear and slashed at the closest inmor. The inmor were relentless and were charging them with no regard. Habbeo helped them by effectively eliminating small groups of inmor. He did not know where they went when Habbeo had done this, only that they did not need to worry any longer. The fight was long, after every inmor he killed it had seemed that Gaile's voice grew louder. Gaile encouraged him to kill and killing is what he had done. His muscles ached, and his lungs burned. Ashe fared better than him but he still noted the sheen of sweat that covered her body. His left calf pinged with constant pain, he could not check in the midst of battle.

How long has it been?

He battled on, the inmor never seemed to rest as two return as one is defeated. He prepared another wind blast but his body was stopped. He felt an arm around his neck and another that grabbed his blade. The arms were dark and shadowy.

What are you doing, Gaile?

"It seems that I have overestimated you. Alaric was right about you. You are just a weak little boy, who has no knowledge about the way the world works." Gaile mocked him continuously. Anger built, he did not feel in control as he broke out of Gaile's hold. He twisted his body and pierced the shadow.

The world stood still. Then he heard Ashe's scream. He turned his face towards her and noted the horror on her face.

Why-

He turned back to face Gaile but what stood before him was not Gaile. His blade passed through the chest of Habbeo.

"You have doomed us all to oblivion." Was the old man's last words before his body went limp. Dark blood poured from Habbeo's body onto his blade. The ground began shaking vigorously. Behind the inmor was no more, grey flakes drifted through the air. The black liquid they had been protecting had grown larger and began convulsing. He pulled his blade out of the old man. Habbeo's body sunk into the black liquid. Florian made eye contact with a stunned-looking Savia. Her eyes then flicked to Alaric beside

him. Ashe called for him to retreat from the black liquid. He did not listen, choosing to stay still. It was not until Ashe forcibly moved him, that he regained control of his motor functions. Savia had run toward them and moved Alaric out of the radius of the black liquid. The liquid shot up from the ground and formed a large sphere of black ooze. The sphere floated higher and became larger as it travelled. The sphere was now high up in the sky and covered about a third of the visible sky. The ground had stopped its rumble and the air seemed colder. Two large wings emerged from the sides of the sphere. These were not like Yves' wings, they were dark and grotesque. The wings spanned the length of the entire city. A tail emerged from the back end of the sphere. The tail was long and thick, as black as the wings. Four large scaly limbs, each limb the size of five tall buildings stacked atop each other. The sphere was no more as the entire creature revealed itself. It had a long neck that held up a large reptilian head. The scaly creature was as dark as the night sky. It had a singular eye, it had been placed in the middle of the creature's head and it was bright red. It floated ominously above the city. The creature's head faced them, the scaly creature opened its large mouth. Dark fangs littered its mouth, and the creature's mouth began glowing a bright orange. Suddenly a large burst of orange flame began descending onto the city.

All hope is lost.

37.

Savia watched as the orange flames descended upon them, she held Alaric tight and protected his body with her own. She closed her eyes tight and prayed. To whom she had no idea. *For if there is a God above, let him walk free. I plead with you...please!* She expected a quick death but it had not arrived. Her body was engulfed in a warm embrace, there was no pain. She opened her eyes, her eyes hurt as she was met with a bright white light. Her eyes adjusted, and she looked down to where she held Alaric. He was no longer in her clutches. All she saw straight ahead was white light, there had been no buildings, no inmor and no one else. She heard her name being called and she turned around. She froze. Before her, stood a figure. She felt tears leak out of her eyes. Before her, stood Alaric. His figure was framed by white light. He smiled at her, a soft smile. One she hasn't seen since their late-night conversations in Cognizance. He was different. He was clean, not a single bit of dirt or muck from their travels littered his clothes. His crimson shirt was now white again. Around his forehead was a light that resembled lightning, it curved around his head and sparked occasionally. She glanced at Habbeo's seal still placed on his left wrist, then back to his blue eyes. She was about to speak when he cut her off.

"Head to The Great Forest of Porffor, wait for my arrival there. I promise I shall be there."

She wanted to run up to him when the light that surrounded them faded.

She felt cold again, her eyes had been closed. She opened her eyes and noted Alaric was gone from her grasp. She looked up to the sky and all she saw was orange flames. The orange flames never reached her. A pale white barrier protected the entire city. She looked at Yves and saw that he looked past her with shock. Everard had the same stunned look on his face. She turned around and saw why. Behind her stood Alaric, just as she saw in the light. With a halo made of white lightning. He held his right hand upwards. Beyond him sat Florian, he looked at Alaric as if he had seen a ghost. She heard Ashe crying. The orange flames vanished and with it, Alaric put his hand down causing the pale white barrier to evaporate. The large creature in the air roared, the sound causing the earth to shake. She watched as Alaric turned to Florian and Ashe. He held up two fingers. Around the two siblings appeared a soft white glow, in a split second they vanished from their position. Florian and Ashe appeared out of thin air and were suddenly next to her.

"Take care of them." Alaric smiled as he said it. He opened a palm towards them. A white light then engulfed the entire group.

Alaric looked up to the monstrosity in the sky. Feelings of fear and apprehension were felt but it was overshadowed by the lightness he felt. He felt good. He breathed in deeply. *No more floating in the waters.* He watched as the creature descended rapidly

towards him. He whispered no cast, he just thought. A barrier made of light protected him. Buildings collapsed around him, the ground shook by the impact of the colossal monster. The creature's massive head was but a few feet from him. Its large singular eye observed Alaric. Alaric readied a punch. Lightning sparked around his fists as he took large steps toward the creature. He was about to strike the creature when it blew air out of its nostrils. The force of the air was enough to knock him off of his feet and toss him hundreds of metres away. *Stop!* His body immediately froze in place, ending all momentum pushed against his body. He got back to his feet and gazed at the now-shrinking creature. The creature shrunk rapidly until a black sphere surrounded it. The black sphere shrunk until it was a head taller than Alaric. Out of the black sphere, a man emerged. The man was handsome and had an almost ladylike beauty to him. His face was clear and held no spots or imperfections. His nose was sharp but not too sharp, his jawline chiselled but not overly so. The man's eyes were ruby in colour, his gaze sucked you in. The man had long hair black hair that sat just below his shoulders. The man was dressed in a fashion that Alaric did not recognise. The man's arms were bare just as Alaric's had been. The man had little muscle, the man wore dark bands on various locations on his arms. The man's sleeveless shirt was combined into his trousers forming a loose-fitting one piece. The man wore no shoes and was barefoot. The man's fingernails were long, sharp and painted black. The man said nothing, he walked slowly towards Alaric. Alaric did not move. This was not by his own volition, he simply could not. The man finally reached him and smiled while looking down upon him. The man was a head taller than him.

"The time for our duel has not come yet, Demi-God." The man spoke. His voice was smooth and slick. He spoke with a strange accent Alaric had not heard before.

"I apologise, it is respectful to your kind that I introduce myself. Your kind called me a catastrophe-level nixum. I never liked that. Our maker only referred to me as *Heneiddio*. And what was your given name, Demi-God."

Alaric stared straight into the ruby eyes of Heneiddio.

"I am simply a man, and the name I was given is Alaric." He calmly said.

Heneiddio then smiled brighter. "I think I am going to like you. Which makes the day we clash all the more better." Heneiddio turned around, his back facing Alaric. Dark wings began forming out of Heneiddio's back until his wings framed his body.

"Off to awaken the rest of your kind?" Alaric asked.

His comment made Heneiddio burst out with laughter.

"You know nothing yet of my kind. We hate each other, Alaric. We absolutely despise our own kind." These were Heneiddio's last words before he flew into the air and vanished amongst the night sky.

Our cup has been spent. Wish to drink from our waters once again, you shall have to form your own cup, First King.

His body suddenly felt heavy as exhaustion overcame him. He collapsed amongst the rubble of this ancient forgotten city.

ACT 3
The Shadows of our Mind

38.

The light around them faded after a few moments. Her body was washed with heat. Light from Ysgafyn's Twin above shone on them. Ashe looked around. Behind them had been a large neverending wall much like the one they encountered as they entered the Nix. The wall continued far into the sky and was wider than her eyes could see. They stood upon a large hill. From this altitude, much of the land ahead could be seen. Far in the distance was a large formation of pink fog. They were silent. Ashe herself had no words. She looked to Savia who sat on the grass with her back to the wall. Next to Savia were two large sacks, she recognized them as their collection of sentz and treasures. *How did it get here? How did we get here?* Yves stood not too far from Savia, he did not look fazed. Instead, Yves smiled as he faced forward. She noted a strange wooden box in his hands. Everard stood quietly on his own, he had a slightly worried expression. She searched for Florian who stood far away from the rest, he had his back facing towards them. She walked up to Savia.

"Should we not...return? We need to help Alaric. He cannot deal with that...that" She said. She had thought their lives had been over. The orange flames were about to engulf them all until Alaric's body exploded into pure white light. The light out of which he emerged. To her, he looked the same but he felt different...the same but different. Then there were his newfound abilities. She witnessed him cast a barrier around the entire city without using hand gestures. After which he teleported both her and Florian with ease, before sending everyone bar himself instantly out of the Nix.

Savia did not look at her, she simply stood up and handed one of the sacks to her. Savia then whistled, and Yves and Everard looked toward her. She motioned Everard to come toward her, she then handed him the other sack.

"We head for Porffor, this is Alaric's wish." She simply stated.

His wish? Savia walked forward and began the descent down the hill. The rest followed. Ashe kept an eye out for Florian, who followed further behind them. He kept his distance and kept his hood up.

They walked until nightfall, they found even ground and decided to make camp. Everyone bar Florian sat around the small fire. No one dared to speak. Everard was the first to pipe up.

"Are we not going to speak of what happened?"

Ashe eyed Savia, Savia did not look towards Everard as he asked the question.

"And what will we speak of?" Yves asked.

Yves' question was answered with silence.

"That light...that he used. Was it the same light you use, Yves?" Ashe asked.

Yves shook his head and then chuckled. "If the Light of Ysgafyn was used, I would be able to sense it. I felt nothing as Rick made his triumphant return."

"About Alaric...do you think he survived against that...monstrosity?" Everard asked.

"He will be fine, we shall be reunited in Porffor," Savia stated.

Ashe noted the expression on Savia's face. *She believes that wholeheartedly.*

"How can you be so sure?" Everard asked.

At first, she was silent, then she spoke up.

"Alaric told me...he appeared to me in the light."

Everard chuckled at this. "You mean we have to believe your fear-induced hallucinations. Your belief in him is unjustified, you believe in him because he is the only one willing to bed a lowborn such as yourself."

She expected Savia to attack Everard instead she did nothing, she sat calmly not drawing her daggers.

Something changed.

"Tell us about this light, Lady Savia," Yves said.

"This is the third time it has happened. The first was in Cognizance, where Alaric and I were attacked. We fought, and then he got wounded. A simple wound that should not have mattered but he began screaming and held his head. White...sparks appeared around his head. I grabbed him...that is when it happened."

"When what happened?" Ashe asked.

"When I touched him...I was engulfed in a bright light. It did not last very long, just a few seconds. The world around us disappeared only to have it return to normal moments later." Savia explained. "I did not think much of it at the time but then it happened once again."

Ashe gasped, pulling everyone's attention towards her.

"The night we met Shammoth." She whispered.

Savia looked shocked at her. "You knew?"

She shook her head. "That night...the sparks around Alaric returned."

"Explain, Lady Ashe. This is rather interesting." Yves said.

"You were sleeping." She pointed to Savia. "Shammoth was about to...attack you.

Before he could...he got spooked by Alaric. That is when I noticed the sparks. After that Shammoth acted completely differently."

"The night we met Shammoth...I slept. In my dream that night the light returned. I was once again engulfed in the light. This time it was slightly different, I was stuck in a birdcage. On the outside of the cage stood Alaric, he never faced me, he never spoke to me. I tried to escape the cage...but in the end, I woke up." Savia explained her dream.

"Quite fascinating...to me it seems Rick was protecting you, Lady Savia." Yves smiled before asking a question. "Do you know why Rick was protecting you and only you, Lady Savia?"

Savia nodded. "I know...it is something that I can only answer to Alaric."

Ashe smiled.

"And what of the third time this happened?" Everard asked, suddenly interested.

"It was just before that...that thing...almost killed us. Alaric appeared before me in the light. He promised that we would reunite at the Great Forest of Porffor."

Everard clicked his tongue.

"If he said we will meet him there, that is where we should be headed," Ashe said before nodding at Savia.

Later that evening, once the rest had slept. Ashe went out into the darkness. She could barely see in front of her. She whispered a cast and the blade of her spear began illuminating. The illumination helped her see slightly further. It wasn't long until she found her target. Florian was lying in the grass, he was curled up in a ball. She heard soft whispers that stopped when she came closer.

"Florian..." She whispered.

"Leave me alone." He simply said.

"You know I cannot do that." She inched closer slowly.

"Please...just leave me." He begged.

She refused to leave. She was close enough to grab his hand in hers. His hand was warm, much warmer than it should be. She then looked over and saw his face. He was sweating profusely, he had his eyes sealed shut.

"You do not look well...brother." She began rubbing his forearm. "I should call-"

"Leave me alone!" He shouted at her.

The sudden shout frightened her and tears began to form in her eyes.

"Why...why did you do it? Tell me, Florian. Tell us." She whispered.

"I do not know! I do not fucking know okay!" He yelled then froze when he saw her tears. He tried to reach out to her but she moved backwards.

"I messed up, Gaile..."

She heard her brother whisper.

Gaile.

39.

"Is that the best you can do? You are Commanders of 'The Eyes'! Our citizens look to you for protection, for guidance and for strength. The King will trample us if you show any signs of weakness." Cressela watched the two young commanders before her.

Their bodies were soaked in a mix of sweat and rain and their breaths heavy.

"If only we had our weapons, Great Lord." The one who spoke was the newly inaugurated Fifth Commander of The Eyes, Commander Swain Gregory. Nephew of the treacherous Commander Col Gregory. Swain had been tall, his dark hair flowed to his shoulders.

"We should not rely only on our preferred weapons, for if we are without them we may become obsolete. Is that not correct, Great Lord Cressela."

"Well said, Commander Hughes."

Commander Klyvert Hughes was the Fourth Commander of The Eyes, he was the cousin of the treacherous Commander Kilman Hughes. Klyvert had been of short stature, he made up for his shortness by his muscular strength.

"The man you face does not have any weapons, so why should you?" Cressela stated.

"But the man we face...is him, My Lord." Commander Gregory said.

Cressela chuckled slightly.

"Do not let his words feed your vanity." She said to the man who stood between her and the two young commanders.

"O Great Protector, when have I ever been vain? I cannot be vain until I wipe the smile off of Jerial's face." Drustan Drucker, First Commander of The Eyes, and Cressela's right-hand man. His appointment had caused outrage. Commanding officers within Adhu Aqua historically had always been ilium casters. But she knew of Drustan's talents, she predicted he could surpass her in a few years. Her late husband believed in Drustan, so she chose to as well. Even if she could not stand the man sometimes. Cressela rolled her eyes at her first commander.

"I say the two fledglings had rested enough, start the next round." She said as she watched Drustan charge the two young commanders. She stood on the steps in front of the castle, ahead of her were the two young commanders desperately attempting to dodge Drustan.

It was here...where it all came to an end.

She fidgeted with the wedding band that hung around her neck.

I miss you...every single day, every hour, every minute...every second.

She heard footsteps behind her and turned around. Approaching her was Commander Orvyn Burchard, Second Commander of The Eyes. The stoic man wore a frown on his face.

"Your expression is not a good one, Orvyn. I presume it is bad news from the capital." She pointed to the letter in Orvyn's hands.

"I am afraid so...my Lord." The older man said.

"We have been expecting this, ever since they failed to breach our walls. What is it? Terms of War?"

Orvyn shook his head.

"It is an announcement of an execution."

"Whose execution?" *It cannot be Alaric's...*

Orvyn opened the letter and passed it to her.

"The execution of one Lloyd Burchard, guilty of aiding his nephew Alaric Burchard whom is an enemy to The Empire and all its people." She read aloud.

She cursed.

"When will this execution take place?" She asked.

"It is said to happen once Alaric reaches Meinspir."

"So they are using Lloyd as bait? We cannot act on this! Stopping the execution will make us enemies of The Empire and not just the King." She said.

"Doing nothing does sound like the sensible option, however, that is not the only news I bring," Orvyn said, looking ashamed.

"Spit it out Orvyn."

"The...Burchard family calls for action from the Great Lord. They believe Lloyd to be falsely accused and all the blame falls on the cursed child Alaric."

"They want us to stop the execution?"

"Yes, my Lord. They are threatening to withdraw the funding they put into the city's infrastructure. They want to make the market district into a city-state ruled by the Burchard family." Orvyn explained.

Cressela cursed again. "Your family has become troublesome, Orvyn."

"My family has always been troublesome, my Lord." Orvyn chuckled.

"True enough." She chuckled. "Inform your family that Adhu Aqua is not run solely by the Burchard family. We will not move against The Empire and that Lloyd Burchard is an enemy of not only the King but to me as well. Adhu Aqua will live on without the Burchard family."

"Is that all, my Lord?" Orvyn asked.

"No...this one is just to anger them but announce that Alaric Burchard will be the Third Commander of The Eyes and he is not considered an enemy of this city."

The usually stoic man laughed at her request.

"Great Lord Ivo would be proud, my Lord," Orvyn said as he headed past her.

She went back to rubbing the wedding band.

Are you watching?

"That is the sixth time in three months, your Majesty. Something must be done about this." Anselm said.

Godric wiped the blood off of his twin blades as he stared at the two dead bodies lying on the floor before him.

"And what do you assume we do, Anselm?"

Anselm looked a little frightened.

"We should find out who is doing this." His right-hand man said.

"Many have tried to kill me, Anselm." Godric pointed to the two dead men. "These are my men. Fools who thought they smelled weakness."

"There must be-"

"Enough! Anselm, you are dismissed."

"But your-"

"Dismissed!"

Anselm frowned and walked out of the throne room.

This must be your doing...Jerial.

40.

He was awoken once again to the sound of his mother speaking in the other room. He reluctantly got out of his bed. He slipped into his purple robe, on the sleeve of his robe were three black painted lines. Before he exited the room he put his filtration mask on. The mask covered his nose and mouth. He exited his room, and as usual there his mother sat. She wore no mask. She faced an empty chair. She was speaking out loud and gesturing with her hands. His mother had aged terribly in the last decade. Her hair had gone completely grey and wrinkles riddled her face.

"Good morning, Mother." He said.

His mother stopped speaking to the empty chair and turned to him.

"Good morning, my boy. Look how much you've grown." His mother smiled.

"Yes, I am aware, Mother." He smiled under his mask at her before exiting their quaint house. As he left the house, he was met with a strong gust of wind. He made sure to close the door behind him.

"Good morning, Captain Etel!" A voice said.

Before him stood a young-looking woman. She was dressed in a purple robe, with four black stripes on its sleeve. She also wore a filtration mask.

"Good morning, Joelle." He greeted her.

"How is your mother?" Joelle asked.

"The usual." He looked out toward the dirt road ahead of them. "Anything to report?"

"Commander Étienne has asked for you to meet him in Deux. He has a mission for us." Joelle reported.

"Understood. Joelle, we travel light. Only you and I, the rest must stay here and protect my mother." He ordered.

"Yes, captain." Joelle ran down the road, avoiding other masked citizens.

Etel returned to his house where he found his mother talking once again to an empty chair.

This has been going on too long.

"Mother, I am off. I will return in a few days. Father has a mission for me." He announced.

His mother paused and looked at him. She smiled.

"Yes my darling, be safe."

Etel nodded before exiting his house.

He walked down the road in the opposite direction he had sent Joelle. People greeted him as he passed.

He stopped at a large-looking wooden building and knocked on its door.

The door opened slightly and a small boy looked at him through the crack of the door.

"Good morning, Otes. Care to tell your mother that I am here."

The little boy nodded and walked from the door. He heard the boy call for his mother. A few moments later the door opened wildly and a middle-aged woman revealed herself. "Good day Captain Etel, what brings you to my establishment today?" The woman said. "Good day, Miss Dufort. I have come to request two horses." Etel said. "Alright." Miss Dufort yelled toward the inside of the building in return she got a chorus of affirmations from within the building. "I am expecting payment this time, Captain." Miss Dufort told him. Etel shrugged and Miss Dufort visibly deflated. "They are not paying Captains these days?" "I fear the towns of Porffor might meet its end if this continues, Miss Dufort. I shall send the bill to my father; perhaps he can settle my debt." "Etel, I have children to feed. We cannot continue like this." "I know, I'll figure something out." "Not you Etel, The Umbra." Miss Dufort said as two men led two horses towards him. Etel said his thanks and was about to leave when Miss Dufort spoke up. "How is your mother, lad? Still speaking to ghosts?" "Not ghosts, Miss Dufort. Ghost." "I shall send her a few baked goods later." Miss Dufort said. "Thank you, she shall appreciate it. Just leave it by one of my guards." He walked back past his house and in the distance he saw a small group of robed individuals with Joelle at the forefront. The robes were purple and they all wore the same filtration mask he had. He held onto the horses as he walked to the group. The group bowed before him. "You have gotten your orders from Joelle. It seems as if I am needed elsewhere for the time being. I do not know how long I'll be away, so please keep her safe." "Yes, captain!" The small group called back to him. "Joelle will be travelling with me. Also, Miss Dufort will be by my house tonight with a package for my mother, do let her in this time." Etel instructed. After dismissing his squadron he found himself slowly riding his horse. Many people waved at him as he passed through the town. Joelle rode alongside him. He looked upward, far above the village the sky had been blocked off by the tall trees of the forest. The trees danced as the wind passed by them. Pink petals descended from the sky. He remembered a time when it was not pink. *A better time perhaps, perhaps not.* "You seem to be in deep thought, Captain Etel," Joelle spoke, breaking him out of his trance. "Just thinking, Joelle. Just thinking." "What is it this time? The leaves or your mother?" "Our mission. What awaits us at Deux?" "We cannot be certain in these times, Captain. Word came from Un that The Umbra sent assassins to Meinspir, none had returned, however." Joelle informed him.

Etel clicked his tongue. "Does her ambition know no limits? To get into bed with the Lightbringers, now this." He clenched his fist tight. "While the towns suffer and the people go hungry."

Joelle moved her horse closer to his and reached out and grabbed his hand.

"'Things will get worse before it can get better.' Those were The Umbra's words. If we trust in her, our land will become prosperous." Joelle stated.

"Do you truly believe in that?"

"Yes, Captain. The Umbra has brought nothing but goodness to Porffor."

It is that 'goodness' that I am afraid of.

"As a soldier should, Joelle. As they should...We have quite a way to go until Deux, let us speed up a little bit."

Joelle nodded as they rode into the forest, away from his hometown Cinq.

41.

Alaric woke up to the sound of metal dragging on a stone floor. The sky was as dark as when he collapsed. He slowly picked himself out of the rubble. His clothes had become grey from all the dust. He stretched his limbs, his arms and knees cracking as he did so. He looked around the rubble and saw nothing, the city had been quiet. He walked around. The city had been empty. He turned a corner and froze. In the middle of the road stood a figure dressed in all black, the hood of its black robe hid its face from him. "I know you," Alaric said.

The figure then pointed to its chest.

"Last time we fought, I cheated and used him. How about a fair fight this time?"

The figure did not answer, instead, it dashed at him. He moved out of the way and realised the man had not meant to attack him. The hooded man collided with a different man.

He is the one who attacked Savia.

The other man was wiry and tall. He held two jagged blades, and around his neck, he wore a Rixa amulet. Half the man's body had been taken over by black goo. Alaric also noted the man's left foot had been completely missing. The hooded man swiftly dispatched the Scaev by twisting his neck until grey flakes began to form on his body. After the Scaev was dispatched the hooded man turned to him.

Casting will not work.

Alaric lifted his hands up to prepare for the fight. He inched closer slowly. The hooded man did not attack immediately and slowly moved closer.

He is wary of me.

Alaric made the first move, he attacked with a wide right hook which did not reach his opponent. Alaric used the punch as bait and swung his left leg at the man. The hooded man moved backwards to dodge the kick and with incredible reflexes stepped forward and swung his right leg at Alaric's head. Alaric got his arm up to guard. The kick was heavy and stung his arm. He then went in with a flurry of punches that all missed and ended with a forward kick, which the man sidestepped. Alaric's foot collided with a wall of a building. The man aimed another kick at his head which he blocked again. Alaric then landed an overhead punch with his right fist, the man answered with his own left hook which Alaric blocked. Alaric could not avoid the man's left fist, that he suddenly swung at him. It collided with his chin, and his world went white for a split second, he then swung widely and accidentally landed a punch on the man. They began to trade blows, blocking each other as they read each other's blows. This lasted for a few moments before Alaric planted his left foot forward and spun on it, swinging his right foot. His kick did not land. The hooded man shuffled backwards, Alaric kept the pressure, taking long strides to close the gap between him and his opponent. He walked straight into a kick against the right side of his torso. He grunted in pain. Alaric

immediately answered with an elbow to the top of the man's head. The man did not make a sound. He then grabbed Alaric's waist and began forcing him backwards. Alaric struggled, he hit the man continuously with his elbow but the man did not relent. The man had been unbelievably strong as Alaric could not stop him. Alaric finally stopped as his body collided hard against a concrete wall. He screamed out in pain. The man did not relent and pinned him against the wall. Alaric wrapped his arms around the back of the man and began to lift. The man was heavy, Alaric yelled out as he slowly lifted the man off of the ground. The man's grip on his waist loosened, Alaric lifted the man in the air and threw him down with all his might. As the man writhed in pain on the ground, Alaric saw its face for the first time and froze.

He breathed in the fresh air as he stood on top of the grassy hill outside of The Nix. He stretched as Ysgafyn's Twin shone its light on him. *Ten days of constantly fighting.* He stared at his target in the distance, a large formation of pink fog.

"This is farewell, Geni." He said looking to his left.

The hooded figure nodded before waving enthusiastically. Alaric smirked before jogging down the hill on his path to Porffor.

Wait for me, Savia. I am on my way.

42.

"My brothers and sisters, the time is almost upon us. I have received word that the Lectus are approaching The Great Forest of Porffor. We must make ready! Every man and woman that can wield a blade, every man and woman that can cast, every man and woman that is capable of taming. We require all hands on deck if the day of reckoning shall arrive. All hail The Angh!" Able exclaimed.

Hundreds of scaev chanted in response to his speech.

"There shall be casualties, this is true. But only through death does man find salvation. Five thousand years ago, for not the arrival of the accursed one, all would have found salvation. The Angh shall be restored and mankind shall know salvation, once again!" The crowd cheered.

He stood before the golden temple looking over the scaev. His people...they never felt as if they were his. Many in the crowd believed in him because he was the only leader they had known. He spent his years scouting individuals and built a community for over thirty years, all by the instruction of his master. When their kind began there had only been a few people. Like-minded individuals, who hated their place in the world.

Outcasts they called us, too dangerous to be kept alive. But he found us a home...Elisium, the city forgotten by all. He made us believe in a cause, he showed us what it was like to die for something far greater than yourself. He shall always thank his master for all he has done."

"Our lord has waited for us...and it is finally time to show the lord how powerful his followers are and that we shall never turn our back on him!" With his final words said Able turned his back to his people and pointed to the sky.

"The day will come when Meinspir shall fall from the sky! And every soul on Hominus shall know that we were the ones in the right all along! In the name of Jerial, Alaric and The Angh. Shall our mission be blessed!"

With his last words said, he walked towards the golden temple. Alongside him were Anteros and Eros, and slightly behind them was Cessair.

The chants of the crowd echoed through the crimson tiles of the path.

"Shammoth has contacted us, it seems as if a Habbeo was successfully eliminated by Master Alaric and the Lectus." Anteros informed him. He stopped walking and then began to laugh.

"Another catastrophe has been unleashed upon the land. Which of The Angh's siblings was it? We shall find it and let it join our cause."

"That will be an issue, Able. The catastrophe that had been unleashed was none other than Heneiddio. Sworn enemy of The Angh." Anteros replied.

He cursed.

"I do not understand, does Heneiddio not want his brother to be released?" Cessair asked.

The twins shook their heads at the girl. Able walked towards the temple once again.

"No he would not. Nixum do not love their own kind, tis why they transform into creatures that resemble the ones from our realm. For catastrophe-level nixum this hate is larger, it is said that the catastrophes fought each other constantly for the claim of the strongest nixum. Heneiddio's hatred was the strongest as he had fallen in love. His love had been slain by The Angh, and Heneiddio could not avenge his love. The accursed one got to The Angh before he could. In his rage, Heneiddio attempted to return to his love's kind but was sealed within The Nix." Able explained.

"His love's kind?" Cessair looked confused.

"Dragons, my dear. Heneiddio fell in love with a dragon of Drakenskav." He concluded.

"Any other catastrophe, we might have been able to manipulate to join us but Heneiddio we cannot."

They reached the temple and the twins and Cessair stopped.

"Anything else I should know before I contact our brothers and sisters of the mainland?" Able asked.

"Yes, there is one more thing." Eros began. "It has seemed that Shammoth had begun the process of turning."

"Ahh...sad to lose a talented tamer but a brother that has found salvation is not one to be mourned but to be celebrated. Announce that a feast shall be held tonight in honour of our turned brother."

The twins nodded and marched in tandem away from the temple. Cessair remained.

"Your work here is done, Cessair. You are welcome to return to your village." He said.

She frowned. "I would like to remain here."

"Very well."

Able then walked into the dark temple. Its halls were quiet, he was the only one allowed to set foot in its walls. Scaev believes the temple to be cursed. Temple of the Cursed One, they call it. The temple was not cursed, its previous inhabitants had just been an enemy of their beliefs. Able preferred to call it by its original name, Temple of Heinzidal. It was said that Elisium had been a sanctuary to those whom fled from the threat of the nixum. This place represented all that the scaev hated. It was this fact that his master chose this place to be their home.

He found himself before the altar, he held his spear over his hand. Tears began spilling from his eyes.

You have grown soft, Able. Crying over a lost daughter...it will not matter when we all find salvation. Sacrifices have to be made.

43.

Through the trees, the large stone fort came into view. Deux, a large garrison which housed the majority of Porffor's forces. Deux was built as protection for the town of Un. Un was where the Great Lord's castle resided and any nobility deemed worthy to be in the presence of the Great Lord.

"Are you ready to see your father?" Joelle asked from beside him.

"When am I ever ready, Joelle?"

"Commander Etienne can be quite the fearsome man,"

"Try being his son." Etel sighed.

They rode up to the large gate of the fortress. Two men were guarding the gate, once they had recognised him, they called for the gate to be opened. Etel hopped off of the horse and handed the reins to a guard who had come to meet him.

"Where is Commander Etienne?" Etel asked.

"He is within the strategy room, shall I let him know that you are coming?" The guard asked him.

"No, he will be expecting me."

The inside of Deux had been bustling with soldiers. Some lazed while others barked orders. He noted a few men that were dressed in suits, their heads were shaved and white streaks were painted on their heads. The men looked at him strangely as he passed.

"Our Ysgafyn allies seem at home," Etel said.

"Ever since their partnership with The Umbra, they have been useful," Joelle answered.

"To what end I wonder..." He stopped and turned when he heard someone call his name. He watched as a larger man jogged his way toward him. He knew the man very well, he was hoping he wouldn't run into him. The man looked bullish, he had a very strong physique and small scars riddled his face.

"Commander Nazaire, how may I assist?" Etel saluted.

"At ease, captain. No need for formalities, we may as well be family." The commander's voice was thick.

"That mayhap once been true but it has been ages since you visited Cinq," Etel replied. Nazaire did not look him in the eyes.

"Your brother's soul still lingers within those streets."

"Do not want to become haunted by it, Commander?" Etel asked.

"How is your mother doing?" Nazaire asked

Etel noted the sudden subject change..

"She is happy...always happy. You have to forgive me, commander. I have a meeting to attend to." Etel motioned to Joelle to follow. He heard the commander call after him but he ignored it.

"Do you think that was appropriate to do, Captain?" Joelle asked.

"Not at all, any other commander and I would have been stripped of my rank."

"Why wouldn't Commander Nazaire do the same?"

"Guilt, Joelle. He feels guilty."

He could feel Joelle wanted to ask more questions but she decided to keep quiet.

"Perhaps one day, Joelle. I will tell you everything that happened. But for that to happen, I need to heal first."

Joelle nodded and followed him into the enclosed areas of the fortress. He knew the route to the strategy room, he had accompanied his father there when he had just been a kid. He remembered the excitement it brought him coming to Deux as a child. He would run within these walls, the soldiers would indulge him and act as if he were one of them. Now that he was one of them, this place had become a curse. This fortress resembled a puppet dancing to the strings of those who resided in Un.

After a long walk, they arrived at the outside of the strategy room. Two guards stood on the outside.

"He is expecting me." He simply said.

One of the guards nodded, then in turn opened the door slightly. He had a small conversation with someone inside. The guard then opened the door widely and motioned them to enter. Etel entered first and Joelle was stopped.

"It shall be alright, Joelle," He said. The rooms were filled with shelves of books and maps littered the walls. Standing at a table was his father. He had looked like a more chiselled version of Etel, with smooth greying hair. Alongside his father stood a man he had not known. The man was bald with white streaks of paint on his head. The man had only one eye, as the other was covered with a leather patch. The man smiled at him revealing his fangs.

"Ahh, Etel. Let me introduce you to our fine guest. This here is the leader of our Ysgafyn allies and now a personal advisor to The Umbra, Jahdiél." His father introduced.

Etel lifted his hand in greeting to Jahdiél who ignored him and turned back to his father.

"This the one you have been talking about, Etienne?" Jahdiél spoke with an odd accent.

"Yes this here is son, his potential is high. Much higher than the previous." Etienne replied.

Etel clenched his fist.

"At the moment, he may still be wet behind the ears. I fear he will not be ready for the upcoming battle." Jahdiél stated.

"Why have you called me here, Commander Etienne?" He asked, growing rather impatient.

His father smirked at him and turned to Jahdiél.

"You might be correct about the moisture behind his ears." His father laughed. Jahdiél smirked and left the room.

The room went silent for a few seconds leaving him uncomfortable.

"A request has come through from soldiers residing in Neuf." His father began. "They have requested some comestibles and a few weapons. I sent word that Captain Etel and his squadron shall escort the goods from Deux to Neuf."

"Understood, is there anything else Commander?"

"Ahh, there is another matter. It seems a nobleman from Un that has angered The Umbra. He has since fled Un and has gone into hiding. This did not stop us from tracking him, however. It seems the nobleman has been hiding within Sept. You are to locate the man and eliminate him."

"What is the nobleman's name?" Etel asked.

"Renard Rey, he was a winemaker that has been found of dealing under the table with members of Cognizance's High Board."

"It shall be done." Etel stared directly into his father's eyes. "There is another issue, Commander Etienne. The poverty of our people has stretched all the way to Cinq. People are starving, our people. I barely have enough to-"

"It shall all change very soon...Growth does not occur overnight, son. If you are worried about your mother, then stop. She is in a happier place." His father interrupted him. He cursed.

He was about to leave the room when he heard his father speak one last time.

"Tatienne shall be joining you."

He cursed again as he exited the room. He passed the guards and Joelle immediately followed him.

"Send word to the men in Cinq, two shall remain with my mother and the rest should meet us in Sept. We have received a mission from The Umbra."

"Yes, Captain!" Joelle said as she ran down the corridor.

He walked slowly dreading the thought of his sister joining them. Just as he thought of her, she came into view. Alongside his sister stood two handmaidens, who seemed to notify her of his arrival. His sister was dressed in a cerulean puffy dress, which seemed difficult to move around in. His sister gave him a snarky smile as he walked up to her.

"Good day, Tatienne." He said flatly.

"Good day...brother." She smiled.

He knew she was doing it to anger him. He just rolled his eyes.

"If you are joining us on this mission, you cannot be wearing that. You will stand out."

"I have already spoken to Father, he said it is okay or rather I'll be okay as long as you...brother, protect me." She chuckled.

"Very well." He walked by her. Tatienne and her handmaidens followed.

He made his way outside of the garrison. He saw Commander Nazaire scolding a few soldiers. He ignored it and walked towards the large carriage that was standing in front of the gate. A guard came up to him and informed him that the comestibles and weapons had already been loaded into the carriage.

"Is there space for a spoiled princess?" He asked the guard. He heard Tatienne groan with disgust behind him.

"For Lady Tatienne a spot shall be made." The guard said.

Tatienne walked up to the guard, she ran a finger on his chest. The guard transfixed his eye on her finger.

"Thank you, my good sir, I shall see that you are *well* compensated." The guard nodded and gave her thanks. Etel helped his sister enter the carriage.

"A few rules we have to establish." He began.

"His sister rolled her eyes.

"You do not talk to any of my men, if you require anything you call me or you speak to Joelle."

"You still keep that little monkey around, she'll be expecting to marry you if you are not careful, brother," Tatienne said and began laughing.

"That monkey is in charge of your safety." Etel heard Joelle's voice as she walked angrily up to the carriage.

Tatienne snorted in disregard.

"You are not to leave this carriage unless specifically being told to. And if things go south, you are to run. Understood?"

"Yes, brother. Shall we just get going?" Tatienne replied.

He nodded. "Joelle, you ride with Tatienne. I will lead the carriage."

Joelle did not like the news and frowned as she hopped into the carriage. Tatienne chuckled which caused Joelle to mumble her disregard for the situation.

"It is just until we get to Sept. We will make a stop at Un." Etel said as he left the two women and took the reins of the pair of horses.

After six hours of horse riding they reached the pinnacle of Porffor. Un was no larger than the other towns of Porffor, it was in prestige and the type of people that lived here that set it apart from everything else. Here children did not play in the streets but were well educated. Noblemen and women live lavishly off of the wealth they tax off of the poor. If you were born here, your life would be exponentially better than the regular civilian. While Porffor is known as the least developed Great City in Western Hominus, it is not much felt in Un.

"Head for my house." He heard Tatienne's voice. He turned around and saw his sister's head was out of the carriage.

"Very well."

It was dark, people were not out on the streets. Various carriages stood parked by large wooden houses. In the middle of the town was The Umbra's castle. The only cobblestone building within the town. From the top of the castle, pink smoke could be seen flowing out. A knot formed in his stomach.

He rode past the castle and stopped the carriage by Tatienne's house. Her house was large. It was triple the size of a house in Cinq. He had been here a few times but he had never acclimated to it.

He gave the horses a few pets as he hopped off. When he reached the back of the carriage, Joelle had already been there waiting for him. He helped Tatienne to exit the carriage.

"You are welcome to stay here for the night," Tatienne stated.

"We have to pass, we do not belong here." He simply said,

Tatienne grabbed his purple robe and dragged him to the door.

"Do not be difficult, it is only one night. I am sure Mother will not mind."

Joelle walked behind him.

"We cannot disobey her Highness." Joelle coldly stated.

He sighed as Tatienne opened the door to her house. They were greeted by a grand foyer, and a red carpet was laid out before the door. From the foyer, there were four directions to go. Left, which if he had remembered led to the kitchen. Right, which led to the dining area. Forward, which led to their various libraries and study rooms. And upstairs, which led to the bedrooms. He heard footsteps and sighed.

"Tatienne, I thought I told you if you were-" A lady walked slowly down the steps. The lady stopped and frowned as she saw him.

"What is he doing here?" The lady asked.

"He'll be spending the night, Mother. Just for the night, pretty please? He is your son." Tatienne said.

"That thing is not related to me." The lady said.

"Something we can agree on then, Lady Hadrienne," He said.

The lady huffed. "Well, if they are gone when I wake in the morning, then they can stay."

"Your hospitality is always wonderful, Lady Hadrienne."

Tatienne's mother returned to where she had come from. Tatienne then showed them to their rooms.

44.

They inched ever closer to the pink swirl that Yves called Porffor. Travel was quite slow as they had no mount. They would rest twice a day, it was during these rests that she and Ashe would go out and forage for anything edible. Some days they had been luckier than others, the occasional rabbit would be caught but mostly they would get by eating a few edible plants. Everard's knowledge about botany was extremely useful as he knew to differentiate between those that were poisonous and those which were nutritional. She placed Yves in charge of keeping an eye on Florian. Florian had not spoken to them since the incident, she was not bothered. Her mind was set only on one goal. What would she say to Alaric once they met in Porffor? She played out the situation a million times in her head for the past few days and as they got closer to the Great City, she felt her stomach hollowing. She had never experienced anything like it before, she had asked Ashe about it. Ashe had just smiled and stated that she was just nervous. Had nerves caused this? She felt on the cusp of throwing up, every waking moment. Her appetite was lost and it was not of the plants they ate. Her breathing got shorter and shorter. She even had asked Everard if he could heal her but he had stated that she was perfectly healthy. She had become frustrated, a fact that made Yves chuckle. He gave her weird grins and knowing smiles. *Had they realised what she and Alaric were to speak on? What do they know?*

They had almost been upon Porffor, the pink swirl broke and the overly large trees could now be seen. The view did not surprise her, through her travels she had seen much. Every leaf was painted pink as a slight breeze hit them. They had still been about a day's travel out of the city. Everyone besides Florian sat by the fire. The wind had grown stronger as night came.

"What do we know of Porffor?" Ashe had asked no one specifically.

She looked to Everard, who sighed.

"Porffor, another name, had been 'The Strange Forest'. It was said that thousands of years ago another race lived there. Pointed ears and very intellectual, they were a race known as the elves. After the awakening of casting in humans, they were forced out of their homes and land by The Empire." Everard explained.

"Many of them reside now in the outskirts of Ysgafyn, still a very secluded race as they do not make contact with any that are not elven," Yves interjected.

"The forest we see before us was then turned into a Great City. But a city it is not."

Everard continued. Noticing the confused looks of Ashe and herself, he elaborated.

"The Great Forest of Porffor is made up of nine towns and a garrison. The citizens of these towns are chosen based on their bloodline and wealth amongst...other things. The first town we will encounter is one of the smallest and is known as Dix, the least affluent citizens of Porffor reside in this town."

"But our issues begin before we even step foot in that forest, doesn't it?" Yves began. She noticed Yves drew the shape of a square in the air. A box of white light appeared and Yves placed his hand into the light. He dragged a black object out of the light and the light disappeared.

"The air of Porffor is poisonous, we will need this to breathe." Yves pointed at the object in his hand.

"Poisonous?" She asked.

"Yes...rather than explain it, it would be better if you see it for yourself," Everard said.

"Great Lord Damiana also known as 'The Umbra' poisons the land with her special casts."

"That pink swirl you see before you comes from a singular person." Yves ended Everard's explanation.

"One person? No one should be able to have that much stria." She stated.

"That is where you are wrong, Great Lord Damiana is known as the most talented caster of this generation. With near limitless restrictions on her abilities, she would be the favourite for the throne if my father was to be dethroned." Everard explained.

"That is the reason. We are to form an alliance with her." She said.

"What are our goals with this journey?" Everard asked.

Everyone remained silent. They looked at him guiltily.

"And do we not need one of those things?" Ashe asked to break the awkward silence.

"Fret not, Lady Ashe. I received a few once I arrived at Porffor's harbour as I entered this continent." Yves stated.

"What about Alaric?" She asked.

"I am certain he will have a plan," Yves said. Ashe nodded in agreement.

Our blind faith will be the death of him.

Morning came and the trek towards the forest continued. They had all worn their newly acquired masks. The wind had gotten stronger the closer they got to the forest. The trees became even larger as they neared them. The trunks were as thick as buildings and their branches blocked out the sky. It was evening when they had made their first step into the forest. The wind never stopped as she held her cloak as they walked.

"The town of Dix is not far," Yves announced.

Pink leaves flew past them as they rode the wind. As they moved through the forest, lanterns were hooked onto the trunks of the trees, illuminating the path before them. She heard voices in the distance. Her hands moved to the hilts of her daggers. Yves placed a hand on her shoulder and she jumped slightly.

"We do not wish to make enemies yet, Lady Savia." He whispered in her ears.

She let out a breath and nodded.

The grassy path they walked upon slowly converted into a stone one. The first few houses came into view. They were all wooden, the buildings were far smaller than the ones in Adhu Aqua and Cognizance.

"Welcome to Dix," Yves stated.

The voices became louder. Men, women and kids dressed in rags and torn clothing walked in the streets. A few casters stood on guard at the edge of the town. They eyed the group and spoke amongst themselves.

"What...is going on here?" Ashe asked.

Savia noted what she was talking about. The casters wore the same mask as them however the residents did not wear the mask. They all spoke but not to each other, they spoke to the air. They walked aimlessly, bumping into each other with no regard. Saliva leaked from them as they spoke to the thin air. They were all deathly thin and swayed with the wind.

"The true face of Porffor," Everard said. "These people are mysurs, they are all placed in a stasis."

Savia stared at him and he sighed.

"Great Lord Damiana being brought up in Meinspir, does not like mysurs all that much. But one thing she does believe in is happy citizens. So she devised a plan, she placed the entire forest under an illusion cast. Anyone who does not wear a mask is trapped in an illusion and is completely detached from reality."

A few mysurs accidentally attempted to walk into the forest, they were swiftly detained by the purple-robed casters.

"That is awful! We need to put a stop to it." Ashe insisted.

"We cannot, at least for the time being. We need to stick to the plan." She instructed.

Ashe tried to plead but realised it was pointless.

"And what is the plan?" Everard asked.

"We are to request an audience with Great Lord Damiana. Which is exactly what you all are going to do. Yves, you know the way so I expect you to lead them." She instructed.

"And what exactly would you be doing, Lady Savia?" He asked in return.

"I shall wait here for Alaric. He may arrive at any moment."

"What if we all wait here? Would that not be easier?" Ashe asked.

"This is a matter between Alaric and I...I would prefer to have it done in private."

"But-" Ashe began but was stopped by Yves.

"If Lady Savia does not want us beside her, there is naught we can do. Besides I fear if we are here she might lose her courage."

Savia raised her eyebrows at the last part. Yves smirked at her.

They entered the town only to be stopped by a guard. He asked them about their intentions for their visit and claimed that most do not enter the Great City by foot but rather at the Harbour at Trois. The guard kept eyeing Everard suspiciously. Yves' appearance had qualmed the hostility and they were able to enter the town peacefully.

She noticed that Ashe tried to speak to a few of the mysurs. None of them seemed to hear her as they continued their mindless behaviour. Ashe walked up to her and whispered in her ear.

"We have to help these people."

Savia sighed. "We cannot help everyone, after everything is done we can return."

Ashe continued to look worried. "Alaric had said something similar a long time ago."

That was all she said as stopped walking alongside her.

They had checked a few houses and they had been vacant. She instructed Yves to ask a caster if they could stay for the night in one of the empty houses.

Yves had returned and explained that a few homes belonged to the casters that were stationed here. The rest of the houses belonged to the mysurs and were almost never used. The mysurs apparently roamed all day and night without rest. They had found a house large enough for them and proceeded to spend the night.

45.

Damiana was a short woman, people had not been intimidated by her and often had underestimated her. When she resided in Meinspir this was a common occurrence for her, it was only until they were met with her power that they recognised her as strong. The world only respects the strong. The weak are inconsequential and only exist to grovel at the feet of the strong. She searched for strength, searched and searched. For it was by a stroke of luck that she was able to achieve her strength. She had merely been at the right place at the right time, any second later and she might not have become what she always wanted to be; the self-proclaimed strongest caster in Hominus. None shall stand before her and her ambitions. She had become strong, she had honed her strength to build a platform for herself and now was the time to proclaim to the world that this was her world, all were just pawns to uplift her. However, claiming her world had become increasingly more difficult than she had once anticipated. She was made to rule this god-forsaken forest, a small sacrifice to reach her goal is what she had thought. Every year spent wasted here, a forest that will become insignificant when she ruled the realm. She had to deal with people's little problems, did they not realise that she was preparing for a war? She accumulated soldiers for an army that now complained they had run out of food. Her plan was deteriorating much faster these days. The arrival of the Ysgafyn force had patched over the immediate issues. The bald-headed fools were easily manipulated into joining her. Even if they hadn't been fools she would have just used her abilities on them. For none will be able to deny her. The captain of the fools walked into her throne room. A smirk on his face as usual. She did not like the man, he reeked of slime. She had sensed he had not been a high-ranked officer as he so told her. She knew opportunists for she was one as well. Jahdiél would betray them, she was sure of it. For it was only a matter of time before he had obtained what he had wanted. She had obviously planned to betray the Ysgafyn as well, the pieces just had to fall in her favour.

"Umbra, we have word that the assassins you sent to Meinspir had been eliminated by King Godric," Jahdiél stated.

She chuckled. "I expected nothing less."

"You have sent men to their deaths on purpose?" Jahdiél looked at her with confusion.

"Should we not be preserving our soldiers?"

Damiana ran her hand through her red hair.

"It is all part of the game, Jahdiél. We cannot win without weakening the King."

"I am sorry if this offends you but he did not break a sweat taking down our assassins, how does that weaken him?"

"Seeds of doubt weaken the mind before we attack the body." She chuckled. "Simple tactics."

She heard Jahdiél mumble something in a language she did not recognise.

"What of Renard?" She asked.

"Commander Etienne has sent his son to Sept to flush the rat out."

"Hmm, Young Captain Etel. What do you think of him?"

"He is far too green...and I sense a deep hatred. If an opportunity arises he shall betray."

Like looking in a mirror then, Jahdiél.

"Which is exactly why we need to keep him close. He has good reason to hate his father. But what will occur when we pit them against one another, will he choose family or ambition?"

As she spoke those last words, the door to the room swung open once again. A sweaty man entered and bowed before her.

"Commander Etienne, to what do I owe the pleasure?" She asked.

"Everard Adalbert was spotted in Dix, your Majesty!" The commander exclaimed. Damiana began to laugh uncontrollably.

"Who is this Everard?" Jahdiél asked.

"He is the third son of King Godric," Etienne said.

"Perhaps this is the stroke of luck we have needed. Notify all soldiers that Everard should be brought to Un. Do not harm him, capture him alive." Damiana ordered.

46.

He felt good as he sped his way towards the large forest. He travelled through day and night, he needed to catch up. The rest had a ten-day head start, but he had finally made it. As he entered the pink forest a sweet smell hit his nose. It began with a slight feeling of dizziness. It then faded and he felt warm inside, he smiled at nothing in particular. He walked forward feeling giddy. A shadow loomed behind him and he turned to face it. The sight immediately brought him to tears. A woman stood before him, she had long jet-black hair with the most striking blue eyes he had ever seen. She wore a pure white dress that showed no stains of travel. She was beautiful as she smiled at him. She stretched her arms, inviting him. He stepped forward and fell into her embrace. He felt the hands wrap around his back. He cried, but he never said a word. The woman just comforted him, as she had always done.

"It has been too long, hasn't it? You have grown big and strong. My handsome boy." The woman whispered.

"You are not real..." He said between sobs.

"But you can feel me, can you not?" She rubbed his back encouraging her point.

"But...but..."

"I waited years for this day." He heard the woman's voice beginning to crack as she spoke.

"I have missed you...Alaric."

The tears were beginning to dry up and lifted his head from her shoulder and stared into her eyes.

"I missed you too...Mother."

She placed her hands on the sides of his face and tried to wipe away the tears that stained his face.

"We have much to catch up on, shall we carry on into the village?"

He nodded and let his hand slip into his mother's. It felt natural, she led him as they walked through the forest together.

"Mother, do you know about...Father?"

She gave a small smile. "What was the rule, son?"

"When we were alone together, we shall not speak of Father." He said as he had all those years back.

"I do not wish to think of that man...he was cruel to us. We are free of him, finally."

Alaric froze. His mother stopped and turned to him.

"He lives yet..." He pointed to his chest. "Within me, he is there."

His mother shook her head and hugged him once again. "You are nothing like him, he will not rule us."

"You don't under-"

"Listen, Alaric. Your father is dead, whatever you feel inside you is just an illusion you have clung to. Let go of him and lay your burdens on me."

Alaric sighed. "Okay, mother."

Lanterns illuminated the forest, as his mother navigated him through. Through the trees, he spotted a few wooden buildings.

"How did you end up here in Porffor?" He asked.

"After...it happened. Ivo found me, he nursed me back to health. I heard that you had disappeared and I went mad. I went looking far and wide but I..."

"You stopped looking for me?"

She nodded, and he noted her eyes were watering. He tightened his grip on his mother's hand.

"It is okay...I would understand if you never wanted to...see me again."

His mother shook her head furiously.

"No, no, no! I never blamed you for...it. It was all Jerial...He must've done something to you. I promise if I knew you had yet lived, I would have not stopped looking for you."

He squeezed his mother's hand. They entered the small town. It was quiet, there had been no people around.

"Where are the people?" He asked. He felt a pressure on his chest. The feeling moved down his free arm. It felt as if he was being dragged somewhere, he held firm.

"Dix was the first town to fall under the reign of The Umbra." His mother said. She led him into an empty house. The inside of the house was dark, and his eyes quickly adjusted. Broken furniture was splayed out across the room. The house had three rooms, only one had a single bed.

"We can rest here for the night."

"Mother, I cannot stay...I have people waiting for me." He stared directly into his mother's eyes. Her smile dropped slightly.

"Tell me...tell me everything that I missed."

Alaric sighed and sat on the bed, his mother joined him and sat next to her son.

He proceeded to tell her of his upbringing on Diable Island and of their arduous journey toward Meinspir. He refrained from mentioning his father. While telling his mother, he felt something grip his arm, there had been no one else in the room.

"I would have loved to meet those you call friends, especially this Savia girl who has my son so enchanted." He stared at his mother, she had not aged a bit since he had last seen her. In a blink, her appearance changed. Her white dress had been stained crimson with blood. A stab wound on her chest poured out blood. She bled from her mouth but she smiled at him, tears spilled from her eyes. He began trembling.

"No...Mother...I am so sorry...I never...meant for this." From his eyes, his own tears began forming. He closed his eyes, forcing the tears to spill out. In his head, he heard his father's mocking voice. He placed his hands over his ears. It did nothing to stop the mockings from his father.

"Stop! Get out of my head!" He began yelling. He felt another pair of hands over his own. He felt a heavy object on his chest. He opened his eyes. Before him was his mother, all the blood had disappeared and she looked healthy. She smiled and moved to embrace him. He broke down in his mother's hold.

He had not realised he had fallen asleep until he woke up the following morning. He had been on the single bed, he looked around for his mother. She had not been in the room. When he had gotten up he felt slightly dizzy. He stumbled his way out of the room. He found his mother outside the room waiting for him. She immediately grabbed his arm, steadying him.

"Good morning, Alaric."

"Good morning, mother."

"Are you prepared for our journey?" She asked.

"Our journey?"

"We are requesting an audience with The Umbra, are we not?"

"And what of my friends?"

"If they are here, we shall meet them on the way. I want to show you the towns of Porffor as well." His mother said happily. She dragged him by his arm out of the empty house. He felt his other arm get dragged as well by an invisible force. She led him through the town. Towards the edge of the town, he felt a force on his chest that made him stop completely. His mother looked back at him worriedly, he was confused but the force soon vanished and he was allowed to leave the small town of Dix.

47.

After three hellish days of listening to Tatienne and Joelle's spats, they had finally arrived in Sept. Sept had been the paper capital of Porffor. It was simply the most important town in the forest. Porffor's main trade had been paper, with its abundance of trees and incredibly fertile ground Porffor paper had become a precious commodity. If there was wealth in The Strange Forest, it would originate from Sept. The town had three large mills that provided paper to all of Hominus. Men who had been born in Porffor only had two choices once they had grown up. Either join the military force or work in the paper industry. Working in the paper industry was tough, it often required long hours and a lot of heavy lifting. Men who strived for wealth often foolishly joined the industry, not knowing that all the mills were owned by noblemen in Un. Noblemen, who were notoriously known for underpaying and pocketing the sentz, all for the cause of keeping the societal structure. Sept had been the largest town and could almost be passed for a city. Etel waited for the rest of his men at the southernmost edge of Sept. "How long until they arrive, I want to explore the town," His sister asked.

"It should not be any longer. And you are not to leave the carriage." He told his sister. She mumbled her disregard.

He heard sounds in the distance, from within the town a large carriage that carried long wooden planks stopped before them. From the carriage, six men emerged, all dressed in purple robes. He recognised the men as his men. The men gave a curious look at Tatienne who chuckled at them.

"Do not mind my sister, we are here on important business. We have received two missions from Commander Etienne." He said to his soldiers who nodded.

"The first is a simple delivery of comestibles and weapons to our fellow soldiers that are stationed in Neuf. This is not why I called you out to Sept, however. The Umbra has requested the assassination of a man named Renard Rey, he is meant to be hiding in this town." He explained.

"What is the plan then captain?" Joelle asked,

"I was just getting to that part, lieutenant." "Since I am a known figure within the Porffor military I cannot simply sneak around the city. So it shall be said that I am accompanying my sister around Sept. The rest of you shall leave your robes and infiltrate the town as a regular citizen. My presence shall spook Renard, so we will have to move quickly. Learn what you can from the residents, make friends, and focus on the suspicious kind. In two days we shall return here and review what we know. You all understand?"

"Yes, Captain!" His squadron called.

"Then you are dismissed." He watched as his men along with Joelle took their robes off. He signalled Tatienne to return to the carriage.

"What will we be doing?" She asked.

"You'll get your wish, we will be exploring Sept. First, we need to drop this carriage off." He replied whilst climbing onto the front of the carriage. He kicked the horses into motion and the carriage began moving. As he entered the city people watched him as they moved on the streets continuing their day. He saw some recognised him and waved at him. He gave a small greeting as he passed them.

Tatienne's face popped out from the carriage.

"This is where you were stationed before, was it not?" She asked.

He just nodded. He guided the horses through the streets.

"Why did you leave?"

His mind wandered back to the time when he was just a regular soldier stationed in Sept. He was a popular figure amongst the people due to his family. His father was a Commander and his brother was a Captain. His work in Sept had been routine. He was asked occasionally to escort wood transports that entered from other towns to their respective mills. Occasionally he would escort the finished product from Sept to Trois where the paper product would get placed on a ship and transported all over the continent. Other than those two specific jobs, his usual work would be to settle disputes and stop any fights that broke out in this male-dominated town. He had recalled he was in the midst of stopping a protest in the Frederic Mill when he was informed.

"My brother passed away." He simply told Tatienne. He kept his eyes forward.

"I was but a mere thirteen years old whence it happened. He did not visit my mother and I often." Tatienne responded.

"Élie, like me, did not approve of Father's remarriage," He stated. "And your mother did not like us as well."

Tatienne sighed. "Mother is stubborn. I for one have outgrown Un, why remain stationary when the entire world is in our grasp."

"World?"

"As long as things follow our beloved Umbra's plans," She said.

Etel's grasp on the horse's reins tightened.

He stopped the carriage in front of a larger building. Horses could be seen alongside the building slowly walking and eating grass. He dismounted from his spot and walked up to the wooden door that was the entrance of the building. Behind him Tatienne jumped out of the carriage, her dress dirtied in the process. A fact that she began grumbling about.

Etel knocked three times on the door. After an elongated silence, the door swung violently open. The man before him had frowned but it quickly changed into a smile.

"Etel!" The man exclaimed loudly, the sound causing Tatienne to jump slightly. He returned the man's smile.

"Bartholomieu, it has been a few years. How have you been?" He asked.

Bartholomieu was a large man, he was twice the size of Etel. He had a large belly that was covered by a shirt that was hopelessly too small for the large man. He had long grey hair that had been braided, his plump face was covered in stubble. His most

recognisable feature had to have been his peg leg. Bartholomieu hobbled out of the way to let him inside. Etel in turn had motioned his sister to enter first, Tatienne held a frown on her face. He could not help but grin at his sister's misfortune. The inside of Bartholomieu's home had been messy, kids ran around inside chasing each other, which caused Tatienne to grumble under her breath.

"What brings the prodigal son back to my home?" Bartholomieu stated loudly. He had gotten used to the loudness of his friend but wondered what his sister thought of it.

"I require a favour," He stated.

"It shall be done!" Bartholomieu stated before laughing hysterically. Etel could not help but chuckle at his friend. Bartholomieu hobbled further into his home and he followed, his sister closely behind. Bartholomieu led them to a large room that hosted a dining table, he motioned them to be seated. Bartholomieu sat at the head of the table while Etel sat next to him. Tatienne sat next to him in turn. A shorter but plump elderly woman entered the room and lit up once she had seen him.

"Lady Mirabelle, it has been quite some time. How have you been?" Etel stated.

"Ohhh, Etel. I have missed you, if you had notified us of your coming I could have at least tidied up." The woman responded.

He waved her off. "There is no such need, Lady Mirabelle. I know your dear husband here hates formalities."

"He is right, Mira!" Bartholomieu laughed.

Mirabelle's eyes turned to Tatienne. "And who is this beautiful woman you've brought along with you? Do not tell me you intend to invite us to your wedding."

Etel inwardly cringed at the thought of marrying his sister.

"No, nothing like that Lady Mirabelle. This is my half-sister Tatienne, I was ordered to bring her along with me."

"Ahh I see, she does resemble your father slightly," Mirabelle stated. Tatienne remained silent throughout the interaction.

"How is that little squirt of a father doing?" Bartholomieu asked.

Etel then told him of his father.

"Ahh, then Etienne has made quite a name for himself."

Etel frowned slightly. "About that favour, Bartholomieu. We require a place to stay for a few days as well as a safe place to store our carriage."

"Consider it done!" Bartholomieu laughed.

"Just like that?" Tatienne asked, which caused Bartholomieu to laugh even louder and Etel began to chuckle.

After the laughter died down, Bartholomieu asked a question. "What is the newly appointed Captain up to in my town?"

Etel began telling Bartholomieu of his mission.

"Are you certain it is wise to tell this...this random man?" Tatienne asked.

"This random man is ex-Commander Bartholomieu right hand of previous Great Lord Faisal. He was my commanding officer in Sept as well." He proudly stated which made Bartholomieu laugh.

"All that talk was for an era in the past. I am merely a random man just as you said, little girl."

"I am not a little girl." Bartholomieu laughed at Tatienne's protests.

After a rambunctious night attempting to convince Tatienne that she had to stay the night at Bartholomieu's house, they had finally been walking in the streets of Sept.

"I swear that man's snoring had caused an earthquake. How on earth does Lady Mirabelle survive that every night?"

"I am certain she is well acquainted with it, they had been married for years," He remembered how poorly he had slept the first night he was stationed in Sept. His fellow brothers-in-arms complained just as much as Tatienne.

"And the Kids! They kept bothering me, asking to play with my hair or if I'd join them in their silly games." Tatienne continued to complain.

One look at Tatienne's hair made him chuckle. Tatienne had clearly got along with the kids as he found her brushing their hair alongside Lady Mirabelle this morning.

The soldiers stationed in Sept saluted him as he passed them. Ahead of them, a soldier ran down the street. It was a woman, she was heading straight for him. She stopped in front of him and saluted before speaking.

"Captain Etel! So the rumours are true, you are back in Sept."

"Yes, I am here off-duty. I would like to show my sister around." He answered.

"I apologise, Captain. But there is a matter we would like you to solve for us...only if you might have the time for us." The soldier stated.

"Very well but where is Commander Sybille?" He asked.

"The commander has fallen ill. Please Captain follow me." The soldier turned and walked further down the street. He motioned for Tatienne to follow and she rolled her eyes.

Commander Sybille has fallen ill once again? There is something strange about that.

She had never been ill whence she had been his Captain.

The soldier led them towards a small building, she motioned that they should enter.

Within the building was a small group of people huddled before a man who stood atop a chair. From the man's age he could tell what was happening.

"Our people are starving, us working men are put through the wringer to keep our Great Forest afloat and we get nothing but mud on our faces and a thank you. I go home every night fearful that my children will already be dead once I enter my home.

Something has to change. The Umbra has to be dethroned, we cannot continue like this." The man exclaimed.

"Why not just leave?" Someone in the crowd had asked.

The man on the chair began laughing. "Leave? Us folk do not even have the privilege to leave our own homes. Porffor is ours, not hers! The Umbra does not understand the struggles of us common folk. She came from Meinspir, the city closest to the Gods. She is far above us ground dwellers. I refuse to leave my land in the clutches of an evil woman."

"Are you not just scared?" Tatienne spoke up next to him. The crowd turned to face her. Etel tried to drag her out of the small building but she had swatted him away. He sighed. "Would you like to repeat that, Miss ..."

"Tatienne! And yes I would like to repeat it. Look at all of you, little rats speaking big in a tiny room where only those who believe will listen. All of you are cowards!"

Etel could tell the man was getting angry. The man stepped down from the chair and walked towards Tatienne, who did not move.

"Miss Tatienne, I am certain you find yourself in the wrong place." The man said threateningly.

Tatienne chuckled. "Deep down you all know I am correct. If you wish for change go and take it. That was what The Umbra had done. Stop talking about it and do something about it. Why waste your time complaining about it?"

The man's veins were about to burst and he knew it was time to step in.

"Enough of this!" He yelled. The men stared at him and some recognised him with shock, including the man who spoke to Tatienne.

"Unless everyone in this room wants to be imprisoned for treason I suggest you all leave!" Etel exclaimed. The men started exiting the building in a hurry.

The old man glared at him.

"That includes you, Mr. Clément." The man clicked his tongue and hobbled out.

He motioned to the soldier to close the door. When she had returned he asked. "How long has this been going on?"

"For a few months now but they have risen in number since Commander Sybille had fallen ill." The soldier responded.

Makes sense, they would not dare do anything to anger Sybille.

"Did you know that old fool, Etel?" Tatienne asked.

"Yes, Mr. Clément works as a foreman at one of the mills. We are quite acquainted." He stated. "And Tatienne, you are not to do that ever again. You have a reputation as Commander Etienne's daughter, you cannot be inciting revolution."

Tatienne shrugged. "I was not inciting revolution, I was just showing them their own cowardice."

"Even so, Father will hear about this and I may get in trouble because of it," Etel said and left the building.

48.

Everyone was looking at him, at first he thought he had grown insane but he was certain. They had left Dix days ago and they were on their way to a town called Huit. They had managed to get refreshments and a map of the previous town thanks to a few helpful residents who accepted their sentz rather hastily. He could feel eyes on him. It was not the regular residents or the mind-broken mysurs. It was from the soldiers. They had become helpful, gave them directions, and gave them a place to stay the night. *Why?* They were especially helpful to Yves. Huit had been at least twice as large as Dix and Neuf. The buildings were all single stories and built closely together. The town had not been illuminated and the canopy of the trees cascaded the town in utter darkness. The only reason they had known they had reached the town was because Yves told them they had. He had the ability to see in the dark, a trait gained if you were from Ysgafyn. Yves gave them a description of the town and led the group. Following slowly behind was Florian. He wondered why the curly-haired man bothered to follow them. The man had almost caused their deaths, he knew they were not safe as long as Florian roamed. The town was eerily quiet, there had been no mysurs in the street talking mindlessly. He heard a door creak open somewhere to the left of them. He heard a male voice speaking in a language that was foreign to him. He heard Yves respond to the man using the same language. *Must be The Umbra's Ysgafyn allies.* More doors were opening now and footsteps were getting closer. He strained his eyes but he could only see a few shadows in the darkness. More voices spoke now. It sounded like an argument but he could not be certain. They were speaking faster, Yves was speaking to multiple of them at the same time. It went on for a few moments before Yves told them to follow him closely. As he got closer to Yves, he saw a man that had looked almost similar to Yves. They had been dressed in the same manner and had the same white streaks on their head. The man had been scowling and he stared at Everard. *Something is wrong.* The man led them to a small house that could barely fit them all in. They sat on the floor and the man said one last thing in his foreign tongue before leaving.

"That was truly an enlightening encounter," Yves said as he sat on the ground.

"It was about me, was it not?" Everard said.

Yves was quiet for a moment. *I knew it.*

"You might want to sit for this, King's boy," Yves stated.

"Just say what it is."

Yves fidgeted a bit before exhaling. "To put it in simple terms...You are wanted as an enemy of the Empire."

He shook his head, his legs suddenly felt weak. "No...no...it cannot be. My father would never allow this."

"That is exactly it, this was an order that came from King Godric himself," Yves added.

Everard collapsed to his knees. *Why...why? Why would he do this? All I have ever done was try to impress him. Why was I never good enough?*

Ashe's words broke him out of his trance.

"Great Lord Damiana intends to use Everard to get to the King." She said.

They all want to use me like I am some tool.

"That is indeed true, Lady Ashe," Yves stated.

"But why...why have they not captured me already?" He asked.

"Because I was with you. They had thought I was one of their Ysgafyn allies." Yves said.

"They thought you had captured me?"

Yves nodded. "This town is where all the Ysgafyns are situated, they ummm...recognised me. I managed to convince them that I will escort you to Un."

Everard cursed. Ashe looked at him expectantly.

"What do you want us to do?" Ashe asked him.

Like we have any choice.

"There is only one choice. We head to Un. That will get us our audience with The Umbra." *I shall help her take down my father.*

"There is one more thing, King Godric has ordered the public execution of a man named Lloyd Burchard," Yves said.

It was Ashe's turn to panic, Everard saw her face twist with regret.

"The King is awaiting Alaric's presence before the execution shall begin," Yves added.

It had been days of waiting, she sat on a low roof. From her position, she could see the majority of the occupied streets of Dix. The mindless chatter of the mysurs below no longer affected her. She had grown accustomed to it. The casters that guarded the town grew accustomed to her as well, they seemed to enjoy having another person that had not been poisoned in town. They had tried to start conversations with her. For the most part, she had ignored them. She had given them a description of Alaric, they had told her they would inform her if a man of his description appeared. She fought her thoughts to stay positive, every possible outcome played through her mind. The most common one being Alaric's death to that...monstrosity. A loud call broke her out of her thoughts. She looked toward the origin of the sound and saw a purple-robed caster waving at her frantically. She immediately hopped off of the roof. She felt her hopes rising, she smiled slightly. She ran up to the caster.

"A man that fits your description just arrived." The caster said.

"Where?" She asked.

"The southern en-"

The caster had not finished his sentence when she broke off in a sprint. *Please, it has to be him.* The town entrance had not been far. She stopped in her tracks, it felt as if her heart had stopped. Her stomach sank as she spotted him. He had been a few paces ahead of her. He held his left arm out and walked as if he had been dragged along. He

was speaking into the air. She had stood right before him but his eyes never focused on her. Her eyes began to tear up. He wore no filtration mask. She ran up to him and embraced him. He did not react to her embrace. He paused for a second before he walked forward and almost pushed her away. She then grabbed his free right arm and tried to drag him away. He held firm and was strong, realising she could not move him, she held onto him as he walked mindlessly. He led them into a run-down house. He walked through the house into one of its backrooms. The room was not very spacious but held a single bed. Alaric immediately sat down on the bed. He began to speak, but he did not speak fluently. His words came out jumbled and most times he only spoke gibberish. She could swear she had heard him say 'mother'. He began to speak much more and much faster now. She heard him say 'Ashe', 'Florian' and her own name occasionally. She sat right beside him. She began to panic. She had not thought of this outcome. She brought her hands to her mask. *If I were to give him mine...would it help?* Her hands began to shake. She was about to rip off her mask when she heard him crying. She looked over at him and saw he placed his hands over his ears. He had begun yelling violently. She got up from her spot, moved her body in between his legs and embraced him tightly. He began to slowly calm down, he placed his head on her shoulder and began to weep into it. They stayed that way until she realised that he had fallen asleep. She moved him onto the bed and laid down next to him on the small bed. There had been no distance between them as she pushed herself further into his chest. His embrace was warm. It felt different than the others before. She was not scared. *I belong here.* Her mother's words ran through her head. *'Savia, one day someone will come for you. Do not shy away from their love. They will give to you what I could not.' I shall keep him safe no matter how long it takes.* She softly fell asleep.

Alaric's movement woke her from her slumber. His eyes had still not focused on her as he stumbled off of the bed. She hastily got off the bed as well. At first, Alaric seemed dizzy but as he left the room, he reached his left hand out and it somehow stabled him. She rushed to his side and placed an arm around his right arm. He led her out of the house. He continued to speak with jumbled words. They walked into the street, he moved towards the exit of Dix. She had to guide him slightly so that he did not walk into other people. When they had reached the edge of the town, one of the casters placed an arm across Alaric's chest stopping him.

"What are you doing?" She asked the caster threateningly.

"Stopping him...for your sake. The poison just gets stronger the further into the forest you tread." The caster said.

"Is there no method to cure the poison?"

The caster looked uncertain.

"Tell me!"

"I...cannot. Only Commanders or The Umbra herself has the ability to sanction a cure."

Savia placed a hand on her daggers. She then eyed Alaric.

"Where can I find one?" She asked.

"The nearest Commanding Officer is stationed in Sept. Her name is Sybille. Just follow the 'Question' Road and it shall lead you there. I warn you however, she might not do something about *him*."

"I can be very persuasive," she said. The caster nodded his head and moved out of Alaric's way. Alaric moved immediately and dragged her along as they left Dix.

49.

He was just coasting through life. He had no purpose any longer. He just followed them mindlessly. He was not unlike these mysurs that they had walked past. He could not speak, he would not speak. Speaking would breathe life into his actions. They should have died. Perhaps death would have been easier than to live with guilt. He could not get Ashe's face out of his mind. His own sister had been terrified of him. *Her own brother...How could he have done this to her?* He had tried to find excuses for himself, he could blame the shadowy figure of Gaile but he was certain that Gaile did not exist. No one could see Gaile. He felt the flames engulf him at every waking moment, the flames of the largest nixum he had ever seen. The largest nixum...that he had released. The sweat never stopped, he felt the warmth constantly. He kept his distance from the group, he could not be closer in fear that he may unconsciously hurt them again. He thought of Alaric, his brother, who miraculously made his return and saved them. Another soul that he had doomed. He had stayed behind in The Nix. He had killed his brother, all for what? The taunts of a ghost had blinded him. There was no forgiving him for what he had done. He did not expect no forgiveness for why had he even deserved it? When he could not even forgive himself. He was not the only one who walked behind the group. Alongside him, his shadowy friend had grown even further. Gaile's body had still been shrouded in darkness but he had a distinct face now. Gaile had been a handsome man with well-kept hair and a beard to match. His red eyes were piercing as always. He had not said a word since that day. He kept cackling and watching Florian closely. They had left the darkened town of Huit behind and were on the path to Sept, or so he had overheard. As they walked he noticed that Everard kept looking back towards him. He had kept following. A few moments later the young boy had slowed down and began walking right next to him.

They walked in silence, Everard wore a worried expression on his face. After about an hour on the path, the boy had finally spoken up.

"Can I ask you a question?" He had asked.

Florian kept his eyes on the floor and walked. The boy had probably realised he was not going to speak so he had continued.

"What does the future hold for the unwanted, such as us?" Everard asked.

Gaile began chuckling next to him.

Unwanted...am I unwanted?

"Why would anyone want you to be around? Certainly not since all the bad things you've done." Gaile mocked.

He is right.

"Since finding out about my father...I have been lost. I sense you are lost as well." Everard said.

What should I do? How do I fix this?

"You cannot fix this, no matter what you do your mistakes will always define you." Gaile laughed.

Sensing Florian was not going to respond to him, Everard clicked his tongue and walked away.

Fix this? No, I need to fix this. I will fix this. I will make them see that I am not a waste, I am not unwanted.

So he walked with a new purpose, the shadowy figure laughing all the way alongside him.

After a few days of walking, they arrived in Sept, just as the large town was cascaded in the darkness of night. The town was much more established than any of the other towns they had passed. He had spotted three large buildings that stood above any other building in the small city. The streets of Sept were busy even at this hour. Men were out on the street lifting and moving cargo onto carriages, some were shovelling coal into huge heaps. Hordes of men entered alongside them carrying large tree trunks that had their branches and bark stripped off.

"This place is incredible." He had heard Ashe say.

"This is the most important town in the Great Forest," Everard stated.

"There will be time for sightseeing later, for now, we have to find Commander Sybille, she shall provide us a route to Un, or so my people have told me." Yves commentated. Hearing this, Ashe went up to a man on the street. They spoke and he saw the man point down the street as Ashe nodded in response. Ashe called for them to follow. She led them through the busy streets of Sept. Their destination became clearer to him, a grey stone building that looked out of place between the finely built wooden houses alongside it. The streets they currently walked were void of people, a fact that Yves stated was strange. A middle-aged man ran out of the stone building, he looked desperate. He ran towards them. He heard someone yell behind him. He felt the ground rumble as the large stone building began to collapse. A lone figure emerged from the collapsing building. A fierce-looking woman dressed in a purple set of runic armour, that glowed slightly. The woman floated in the air as severe winds swirled around her. The retreating man looked back for a second and Florian saw the man's face go white in horror. *He needs my help.*

"Save me! He yelled to them as he ran towards them. The floating woman began coughing violently and fell harshly to the floor. A few purple-robed soldiers emerged from out of nowhere and went to surround the fallen woman. The man stopped dead in his tracks a few paces from the group. He looked scared. Florian realised he had looked past them. He turned around, and behind him stood a dark-skinned man dressed in purple robes. The man wielded two scimitars.

"What are you going to do?" Gaile whispered in his ear.

I am going to become wanted.

"Captain Etel...please spare me, I have done nothing wrong! I swear!" The man pleaded.

I'm tired of the killing.

"The Umbra has ordered this, Renard. There is nothing else that can be done." The dark-skinned man said.

Florian's hand moved to the blade strapped to his back.

"Florian, No!" Ashe yelled.

"Take this man somewhere safe, Ashe!" He yelled back.

Captain Etel's glare moved to him. The middle-aged man looked confused by the situation and somewhat relieved.

"Oh, you mean to stop me?" Etel asked.

"Florian, we are not here to make enemies! Do not fight him." Yves stated.

Florian withdrew his blade, he poured a little stria into it and a pink wind began to swirl around the crimson blade.

"You mean to kill this man?" He asked.

Etel nodded.

"Are you certain there is no other way to solve this?"

"It is either him or me." Etel began to mumble softly.

Florian swung his blade in Etel's direction. A sharp vertical line of pink wind travelled towards Etel. The man calmly dodged it by moving to the side. He noted Etel's scimitars glowed slightly. He was about to aim another strike at him when he felt someone grab his shoulder.

"Stop, you're only making things worse. Why are you always making things worse?" Ashe asked.

"I am tired of all the killing...first it was that kid in Chapman's factory...this is something I need to do." He noticed Etel had almost been upon him, he leapt out of the way pulling Ashe with him.

"You should listen to your companions," Etel stated. "Joelle, capture Renard!"

He wriggled out of Ashe's grasp then began chanting. The paved ground at Etel's feet began morphing. The captain expertly read this and impressively flipped backwards, avoiding the rising gravel.

He got to his feet and stared at the captain. The man was calm, he did not rush Florian instead he waited, watching his every move. Florian inched closer, he did not want to make any rash movements as well. He moved closer slowly until he was certain Etel was in range before taking a large step forward. He swung his blade, inserting no stria into it. Etel used the curvature of his blade to parry the strike. Etel then used his strength to shift Florian to his right. Florian stumbled forward, immediately twisting his body to block an incoming blow from Etel. The blow never came. Etel's second blade struck the pole of Ashe's elongated spear. Etel used his strength to move her spear down before thrusting his scimitar towards Florian. He dodged the blade but not before

it pierced his shoulder slightly, drawing blood. Etel rushed towards him but was crashed into by Ashe.

"Stop this please!" Ashe begged Etel. Who threw her off of him. Florian wanted to shoot another blast at Etel but something had been wrong with him. His eyes were losing focus. His vision was blurring, he saw two Etel's and two Ashe's as they wrestled on the ground. He tried to take a step forward but found that he was unsteady and almost stumbled to the floor. His head was spinning. When he looked towards Etel, he saw that he had dispatched Ashe and walked towards him. He could not tell which of the two Etel's he saw was the real one. So he leapt and attacked the first one. His legs felt like jelly so he stumbled forward as he attempted to strike Etel. The man calmly dodged the strike, which caused Florian to lean too far forward. The last thing he saw was Etel's knee closing in before he heard the crunch and darkness arrived.

50.

He walked alongside his mother on a brick road that was incredibly wide. The road was bordered on both sides by large trees. He heard the slight sounds of wildlife in the distance. The wind was not as fierce as it had been the previous day. The breeze was warm and comforting. His mother held his left hand tightly. Something irked him about the situation. He was still in disbelief that his mother had still been alive.

I saw her body...

The second reason he felt strange was the fact that they had not seen another soul. This was a Great City of the Zidal Empire but there had not even been a snuff of life. The third and final reason the situation irked him out was the fact he could feel something clinging to his right arm. There had been something or someone there and he could not shake the feeling. He kept himself calm, there was no need to panic quite yet so he decided to enjoy the moment with his mother. She asked him questions, mostly about his time away from Adhu Aqua. Whenever he had tried to bring the topic up, she had either changed the subject or looked sad which made him feel guilty so he had stopped. His mother had told him that the road to Neuf had been long and it would take a day and a half of walking. Occasionally he felt the force on his arm push him towards his mother, she had almost fallen over if he had not stopped himself.

When nightfall came, his mother insisted that they rest under one of the trees alongside the road. The road was well-lit, and lanterns hooked onto the large trees enchanted the road. It had a sort of ethereal look to it as the pink petals from the trees fell onto it. He sighed as he turned to his mother.

"I have to tell you, Mother." He said.

His mother looked at him and smiled softly.

He looked towards the golden band that circled his wrist.

"About that...night." He turned back to his mother. Her appearance changed. Blood poured out from her mouth. Her dress was stained crimson with blood. A knife stuck out of her chest. She continued to smile at him. His breathing was getting shorter and shorter. No matter how much he breathed he felt that no air was reaching his lungs so he closed his eyes tight. Absolute silence. He opened his eyes and saw a familiar setting. He was floating in murky waters. Ahead of him, he could see a faint purple light. He began swimming towards it. There he was, just as he had left him. His father's mocking smile. He had still been wrapped in the dark tendrils of the large creature. He waited but his father did not say anything.

"Are you not going to mock me?" He asked.

His father laughed.

"Do you wish for me to mock you?" Jerial asked in return.

Alaric said nothing.

"Will mocking you make it easier to hate me? Or do you blame yourself? Staying there that night could have saved her but instead, you ran...not me, Alaric, you ran."

"Shut up...I know...what I have done." Alaric said. He could not look his father in the eyes.

"Then accept it! She stands right in front of you, ask her what she truly thinks of that night."

"How can I? When I was the one who pushed the knife into her chest." He felt as if he was crying, but tears did not exist where he was.

"Ask yourself, Alaric. Who was in control, me or you?" Jerial asked.

Who was in control? It couldn't have been me.

He was about to retort but he found himself face to face with his mother, who gave him a worried look. There had been no blood, she looked pristine.

"Is something the matter, Alaric? You are not getting sick are you?" She placed her hand on his forehead, just as she had when he had been a child. He grabbed her hand and held it in his palm.

"What's wrong? Son, you know you can tell me anything."

"Do you often think of those days we had spent in Father's castle?" He asked.

His mother's hand began to shake slightly.

"I try not to...my mind keeps trying to go back. That place, no matter how far I try to run, has a hold on me."

He held his mother's hand tighter.

"I cannot blame you, it has the same effect on me. For the last nineteen years, my mind has never left that place."

His mother placed her free hand on his cheek.

"Then let's go back, face our fears. I am certain Ivo would love to see us."

"Mother...Ivo...Ivo is...he is dead."

When he had woken up that morning his mother had vanished. She was nowhere to be found. He yelled and yelled for naught. He felt the force wanting to drag him down the path but he had held firm. He was not going to leave her again. He heard footsteps. He moved towards it only to freeze in place.

"If Lady Argenta hadn't heard you I am afraid she might have gone deaf. It is nice to see you again, Al."

Alaric fell to the floor as he watched the man take steps towards him. He was dressed in his silver runic armour that had a green-coloured emblem of the Empire painted on it. His eyes burnt shut but his eyelids had glowed slightly. His beard and jet-black hair had been unruly.

"You can't be here...you are dead!" Alaric shouted.

"Perhaps," Ivo said. "Ghost or not, however, it does not change the fact that I am here."

Ivo put his hand to his chest. "Your father did quite the number on me." He laughed.

"Are you going to get up and help a blind man walk or are you just going to sit there?"

Alaric slowly got to his feet, he looked at Ivo curiously.

"Where is my mother?" He asked.

"Lady Argenta is dead, Al. I buried her myself, nineteen years ago." Ivo answered.

"No...she was just here...I spoke to her...we were we wer-"

Ivo walked towards him and placed an arm around his shoulder.

"Breathe, just breathe. It will be alright." He then tapped Alaric's chest. "You know she is always with us."

That's right, she is dead.

Alaric regulated his breathing and calmed himself down.

"Now let's walk."

They walked towards the brick path and continued the trek down the enchanted way.

Their journey had been quiet, Alaric did not speak. He needed to understand what was happening to him. *Has someone used a cast on me? If they had...then when? When did this begin? It must've been just as I set foot in Porffor. They must have known I was coming.*

He was thinking when Ivo spoke up.

"Lady Argenta was someone I had looked up to, even more so than your father. She was always kind to me, treated me as part of the family even if she wasn't...like me or Jerial."

"She was a mysur...there is a certain kindness that comes with being born powerless," Alaric added.

"You must be right, for I saw it in you as well." Ivo chuckled. "Lady Argenta was special, I do not know why your father had picked her but I know if there was one good thing he had done for this world it was picking her. No matter how bad it got...she held firm, for you Al." Ivo continued.

"What are you trying to tell me?"

"You haven't figured it out yet?" Ivo laughed. "Forgive me, you had been so smart when you were just a boy."

"Since when have you had a sense of humour, Ivo? I remember you being as stoic as they come."

"Acceptance...and women. But mostly the women." Ivo's joke caused Alaric to laugh. "I am not joking, Cressela changed me for the better. She taught me to continue to live with my mind and body in the present, something I could not achieve until my death sadly. But you have that chance. That reminds me of something *your* woman had once told me. She had said that 'His disregard for himself is the worst thing, he seems to want to protect everyone besides himself.' "

"My woman?" He asked.

"Is that all you got from that whole thing?" Ivo chuckled.

"Savia is not my woman, she is her own person. I am just trying to show her that she owes nothing to me." Alaric explained.

"Did she tell you that or are you making that decision for her?" Ivo asked.

Alaric remained quiet.

"Life is strange, Al. Not unlike this forest. There are times to trust your senses and there are times when your senses lie to you. We seem to be in the latter. So quit being held hostage to the past and let your mind and body connect in the present."

Alaric stopped walking and began to jog. Ivo did not follow instead he yelled his farewells at him.

Thank you, Ivo. You may not be real but you have helped me once again. Thank you...Mother.

He ran and ran, the ghosts of his friends and family kept appearing. He held firm and looked past them. He was not going to be a slave to his past any longer. He had eventually reached the small town of Neuf. Neuf had been bigger than Dix but it had still been empty. Not a soul was in sight as he walked through its streets. He was looking for a suitable place to spend the night in when a sharp pain in his stomach caused him to bend over. His ears began to ring and his world was darkening. He fought to stay conscious but in the end, the darkness overwhelmed him.

51.

Ysgafyn's Twin had been setting and he was posted up on a building opposite Commander Sybille's base. His men had assured him that would be able to lure Renard Rey to the base as soon as the Twin set and the sky darkened. He had informed Commander Sybille, however, he did not know if she was in the right state of mind to understand the magnitude of this operation. She had stated that she understood but he knew she was weak from her illness. *She is the most powerful caster here in Porffor other than The Umbra, she will be alright.* That is what he kept telling himself. The plan was to lure Renard to the base to have Sybille ensure him that she would protect him if The Umbra were to send her forces. This is all to fool him and keep him in the base where Etel would then sneak in and finish the job.

"Captain Etel, we may have a problem." Joelle's voice rang in his head.

He raised a hand into the air, their signal for her to keep talking.

"The target does not seem to be alone. The target has just left his position at 'The Radelle Mill'. He is walking with a small group of people and they seem to be armed. They resemble some of the men you have warned us about."

Men from the rebel meeting? They have teamed up with Renard or he was their benefactor.

Etel made a bunch of hand gestures in the air.

"Roger that, Captain. I will send word to Commander Sybille."

He kept his eye on the empty street below him. They had made certain to clear the street, it was a request from Renard. The man seemingly was paranoid that he would be attacked.

Well if he was a bit more paranoid, he would have met a Commander of Porffor in a place other than her own fortress.

The Radelle Mill had been on the other side of town, it would take Renard some time to arrive. He looked over at his twin blades.

Is this what you wanted to become? You wanted to protect people just as Father taught me. No, Father is not Father anymore, it is Commander Etienne.

Six Years Earlier

He woke up to the sound of his commanding officer laughing. He smiled and got out of his quaint bed. He then got prepared. He put on his purple-coloured robe, on its sleeve were four black lines woven into it. He stared at the twin scimitars that sat on the table then reached for his own regular broadsword. When he opened his door, a little baby girl had been crawling past. Behind the girl was Lady Mirabelle who crawled on her knees chasing after the baby as the little one screamed in protest. Lady Mirabelle then swiftly picked up the baby and laughed as she greeted him.

"Bartholomieu has been looking for you," She said.

"Thank you, Lady Mirabelle."

He headed off in the direction of the dining room, where Commander Bartholomieu was always at.

It had been six months since he had been stationed in Sept. His father had used his connections to allow him to stay with Bartholomieu instead of living with the other soldiers in the base. His father did not want his son to be like all the other soldiers. A reason he did not understand completely but his father had been acting strangely for a while now. His father did not come to see him in Sept or visit his mother in Cinq. He kept himself in Deux or was with that other woman. Etel was angry but knew that there was nothing that could be done. He entered the dining room and Bartholomieu smiled brightly at him. The large man had taken good care of him since he arrived, Etel thought the man was easygoing with him since he knew who his father was but that was not the case. Commander Bartholomieu was the same towards anyone he met. His loud boisterous self was difficult to not like. People respected him not for who he was but for the emotions he imposed on them. He was always smiling, which always made you feel the need to smile as well.

Commander Bartholomieu smiled as he entered.

"Etel, my boy!" Bartholomieu laughed.

He saluted his commanding officer.

"Commander, Lady Mirabelle said you were looking for me."

"Ah yes, apparently old man Clément has been causing some trouble over at Frederic Mill, I would like for you to go and sort it out," Bartholomieu ordered.

"Again, sir?"

"That old fart does not know when to retire." Bartholomieu laughed. "Meet me and Captain Sybille back at the base afterwards, we shall discuss what to do about the situation."

Etel gave his affirmations and left the house. Just outside the house stood a girl who had been a year younger than he was. She was not a soldier just yet but she had been a trainee that he was ordered to look after.

"Lieutenant Etel, good morning!" The girl said with a smile.

"Good morning, Joelle. I thought I told you that you do not need to wait here every morning. It would be..."

"Better to wait in the town square, yes I am well aware. I was not here for you, I brought something for Lady Mirabelle. It was just convenient to stay and wait here." Joelle said. He was not sure if he believed the girl but he was not about to disregard her. They began to walk down the streets of Sept when she had asked him a question.

"Why did you decide to become a soldier?"

"To protect the people of Porffor just as my father had all these years." He said almost robotically before he paused. "And to be like my brother, I really look up to him."

"Your brother? You have a brother, what is his name?" Joelle asked.

"Élie."

"Your brother is Captain Élie?" Joelle looked at him in shock.

"And this is why I do not tell many people." He laughed.

"I am terribly sorry, I did not mean to react that way."

He waved her off. "Then how would you react when I tell you that my father is Commander Etienne."

Joelle's mouth was agape in shock. He laughed as he walked.

As they neared Frederic Mill they heard people shouting. In front of the mill was a small group of men, they had their fists in the air and were blocking all entry into the mill. At the forefront of the crowd was the group's leader. Mr Clément was the foreman at the mill and kept it running for years. Recently he began these protests, for he felt that he and his workers' current wage was below par. Mr Clément had accidentally stumbled on import documents and found how much Porffor had received for the sale of their paper. He had felt as if the Great Lord had done an injustice to the working men so he had begun to protest. Etel had sympathised with the man slightly. When his father had moved from their home in Cinq to live in Un, he had visited him occasionally. It was only during those visits that he saw the differences in class those in Un had. It had been unfair but there should be a better way of dealing with it, is what he had always thought. The older figures had always claimed that life in Porffor had been better under Great Lord Faisal. Etel could hardly remember the previous Great Lord, all he had remembered was that when Faisal held the reigns King Godric had visited often. Since The Umbra took over, the king had not visited even once. He thought nothing of it since it had been apparent King Godric had not visited any other Great City other than his home in Arstutia. A fact that made Hominus' populace very unhappy with the King of Metals.

The group of men had stopped shouting when they saw him.

"Lieutenant Etel, come to give me another warning?" Clément asked.

"When will this stop, Mr Clément?" He asked.

"Stop? This will stop when we have been paid what we deserve."

"I understand your plight, Mr Clément. But there are better methods of dealing with it. You are causing innocent people who just want to live their lives harm. The closure of the mills temporarily could cost some families their lives or their children's lives." Etel explained.

"Are we the ones causing harm? What about The Umbra? We are the ones who have to constantly wear these damned masks. If The Umbra doesn't care then why should we?" A man in the group asked.

"Then be better than The Umbra. If these protests continue I will have to detain all of you-" Etel had to pause because a strong gust of wind passed through the crowd. A shadow from above blocked the Twin's light. He looked up and saw a familiar figure floating above them.

"Captain Sybille, I got this-" He began.

"Lieutenant Etel, you have to come with me!." She exclaimed. He looked at her face and saw the worrying expression. He nodded, told Joelle to remain there and he ran after Sybille who flew through the air.

He was out of breath when they arrived at the base. Sybille landed next to him, she had been sweating heavily. He knew flying took a toll on her so the reason he had to come here had been urgent. Sybille was dressed in her purple robe that had three black rings woven into it.

"What is so important, Captain?" He asked.

She did not look at him, instead, she opened the doors to allow him to enter.

"It is better to hear it from-"

They saw Commander Bartholomieu standing at the end of the hall. He knew something was wrong. Bartholomieu had not been smiling, he was deadly serious. Etel had not seen the man like that before.

"Lieutenant Etel, come to my office," Bartholomieu ordered.

He quietly followed, he felt Sybille's hand on his shoulder.

It had been inside Bartholomieu's office when he had been told the news. He did not believe it. How could he? To believe that his brother had died. Bartholomieu had told him how Élie's squadron was ambushed by pirates at Trois' harbour; the only surviving member of his squad had been Élie's lieutenant, Nazaire.

Brother wouldn't...he would not lose to pirates...how could he?

He held his tears back. *They have to be lying.*

"We have a carriage ready for you to travel back to Cinq. your parents will be waiting for you." Bartholomieu got out of his chair and headed for the door before he left his ruffled Etel's hair. When his Commander left he broke down. He did not know how long he cried but no one had entered that room or bothered him. When he ran out of tears he left the room as an empty husk. When he opened the door, he saw that Joelle had returned and waited for him. She looked at him with downcast eyes but she said nothing. He passed by her without saying a word. Sybille and Bartholomieu waited for him at the carriage that stood in front of the base. They left wordless. Before they made the trek to Cinq, he stopped at Bartholomieu's house and picked up the twin scimitars that he had received from his brother.

The journey to Cinq felt long, he dreaded seeing his mother again. He knew how much she had loved Élie, he knew too how fragile she was. He himself had run out of tears, he could not cry anymore. The anger took hold of him, he was going to find whoever had done this to his brother. When they arrived in Cinq, the town had been deathly quiet. No one roamed the streets. Cinq had always been one of the more peaceful towns but even this silence was unnerving. They had passed Miss Dufort's stables and somehow even the horses had made no noise. Ahead he could see a carriage had been parked in front of his home. In front of the carriage stood his father in his full runic

armour, the insignia of the Empire was painted purple on the silver cuirass. Holding his hand was a little girl dressed in a teal dress. On the opposite side of him was a woman he had despised. He got out of their carriage as it parked behind the other. His father nodded at him, his father showed no emotion.

"When do we get to go home, papa?" The little girl asked. The comment angered Etel.

"Soon, Tatienne. Just a little while longer." His father stated.

"As soon as I get out of this filthy place the better." Hadrienne had said.

"Then go, no one asked you to come," Etel said as he walked past them to enter his house. He heard Hadrienne scoff behind him. He could hear his mother's sobs echo through the house.

"She has locked herself in her room ever since she heard the news," Etienne said.

Etel made his way towards his mother's room. He knocked three times.

"Mother, it is me. Open the door."

The crying stopped. Her muffled voice came through the door.

"Élie...is that you...I knew they had been lying. Please tell me you are okay."

Etel bit hard on his bottom lip and clenched his fist.

"It is me...Etel. Please come out...mother. We need to make the arrangements."

He heard the sobbing begin once again. His mother never came out of her room.

"I should return home. If she remains like this, tell me and I will make a plan. Goodbye, Etel." Etienne said.

"One thing, Father. Where is Nazaire?"

"He remained in Deux, he was distraught as well."

He nodded and said his farewell to his father.

For the next few months, he spent half his time in Sept and the other half in Cinq. His mother was not getting any better. She barely ate and barely spoke. He was getting increasingly more worried about her. On Commander Bartholomieu's request, he was transferred to Cinq. He had thought that his permanent presence would help his mother however it had the opposite effect. Her attitude towards him had changed. She had been bitter toward him. When he was at his wits end he had decided to write his father a letter. He did not know what his father's solution was until he arrived five days later, by his side had been The Umbra.

Present Day

He watched the small group of men casually walk down the street. They kept checking behind their backs and looked up toward the roofs. He had to lay horizontally on the low roof to remain unsighted. The gate to Commander Sybille's base began to open. He recognised the purple-robed soldier who opened the gate, it was the woman from the previous day. Renard led the group cautiously toward the soldier. After a few moments

of bickering among themselves, they were led into the base. When he was certain that Renard and his group were inside he began to climb down from his position.

"Captain! An unknown group of people has just entered the street." Joelle's voice appeared in his head.

"They are dressed in black robes which would claim them to be adventurers. They have a Ysgafyn man along with them as well."

Adventurers? Now? The Ysgafyns are not allowed to leave the forest?

He cursed as he ran through the alley he had landed in. He stealthily made his way back and snuck a few paces behind the unknown adventurers.

"There has been an issue within the base, Captain. Renard has apparently provoked Commander Sybille. A fight could break out at any moment."

Get out! With Sybille there the...

Just as he was about to think it, the entire stone base began to crumble. He saw a terrified-looking Renard running for his life towards him. Commander Sybille floated in the sky but soon fell as she broke out in a fit of coughs.

52.

His knee connected with the man they called Florian's nose. He heard it crack as the man fell unconscious. He was about to stab Florian with his blade when he was kicked in the back of his knee, which caused him to drop to the ground. He had just narrowly managed to dodge the blade of the spear as it passed his face. Ashe twisted her spear and allowed its pole to hit the temple of his face. The man recoiled backwards. She thrust her spear towards him. He stabbed his scimitar to the ground and blocked the strike. He grabbed the pole of her spear and dragged it towards him, pulling Ashe closer to him. He pushed his elbow upward until it collided fiercely with her chin. She let go of her spear as she fell backwards. He got to his feet and picked up his scimitar. He was going to strike her when a wall of pure white light blocked him. He looked towards the Ysgafyn man. The man's eyes glowed white and the streaks on his head shone as well. The man held Renard tightly, Renard had been struggling in his grasp.

"We mean no harm, we have just come to see a Commander named Sybille." The man said with a heavy accent.

He noted that members of his squadron had surrounded the man and the boy who stood next to him. His squadron looked at him awaiting orders.

"Detain these four!" He ordered. A few of his men walked over to Ashe and Florian and began to tie them up. He walked over to the Ysgafyn man, the man allowed him to take Renard from him. He wasted no time as Renard began to plead for his life, he slit the man's throat. Renard fell to the ground as blood poured out of his neck.

"Who are you?" Etel asked.

"The name is Yves and as you are already aware I am from Ysgafyn."

"What are you-" He stopped when he heard Joelle had been calling his name.

He looked over at her and saw she stood next to two large sacks.

"Captain...these people have...they have enough sentz to feed all of Porffor for months." She said ecstatically.

"And why would a small group of adventurers have that much sentz?" He faced Yves when asking the question.

"Funny story about that...those are for Great Lord Damiana," The Ysgafyn man stated with a slight chuckle.

"Joelle! Do not touch anything in those sacks!" He ordered. Joelle stopped messing with the sacks immediately.

What is going on here?

He then tied up the boy, the boy kept his eyes on Renard's body.

His men returned carrying the unconscious forms of Ashe and Florian along with their weapons.

"Load these four onto a carriage, along with those two sacks," He ordered.

"Where are...you taking...them?" Sybille asked him as she walked with the help of one of her soldiers. She then began to cough violently.

"Since the base is wrecked, I was going to ask Bartholomieu if I could hold them in his horse stables." He answered.

"I...am coming...along." She stated.

"You are in no condition, Commander Sybille. Rest-"

"I can heal her!" Etel looked at the boy who was about to be escorted away. He asked his soldier to stop.

"What do you mean?" He asked.

"I am a Desano, we can heal almost anything."

The capital's elite healers! What is going on?

"Very well...I will allow Commander Sybille to travel along with us." He walked towards the boy. "If I find that you are lying...you're going to end up just like that man." He whispered in the boy's ears. The boy looked terrified as he nodded rapidly.

Etel had escorted the carriage personally, he allowed the rest of his squadron, bar Joelle, to help anyone that had been trapped under the Sybille's base. After they had arrived he had a quick discussion with Bartholomieu who agreed to hold the captives here. He then returned to the carriage and opened the back. Sybille sat closest to him, she looked weak and was still coughing. The man and woman he fought were still unconscious. A green-coloured fluid was attached to the unconscious man's chest, it floated in the air and attached to the boy. The man's nose was seemingly fixed itself.

He is not lying then.

He allowed Joelle to escort Sybille into the house. Bartholomieu helped him and carried the unconscious man, Etel picked up the girl and Yves got out himself.

"Boy, take the sentz and follow my lieutenant into the house." He told the boy.

The boy followed his instructions and followed Joelle.

"Yves, follow us." The Ysgafyn man nodded and followed them. They did not enter the house, instead, they went around the house. Behind the house was a large field where horses roamed. Bartholomieu led them to a small wooden structure on the other side of the field. The wooden structure was surrounded by hay bales; five wooden pillars kept it upright. He then searched Yves for any weapons, he withdrew five glass vials from the man's suit. Only one of the vials was filled, inside the vial was a white powder.

The light of Ysgafyn, the first time I've seen it.

He searched the man named Florian, he had no weapons but he felt something on the man's chest. There was a golden necklace around his neck, Etel reached down and exposed the golden amulet that hung from the man's neck. He nearly recoiled.

Scaev? What is going on here?

"Well, this complicates matters." Yves had chuckled.

He searched the woman and she had the same amulet around her neck

With the help of Bartholomieu, he then tied the three to a wooden pillar. Happy with his work he was going to return to the house when Bartholomieu pulled him aside.

"Captain Etel, who are these people?" He asked in his attempt to whisper.

Bartholomieu had only ever called him by his rank when he was deadly serious.

"I am not certain but I suspect they have business with The Umbra," He answered.

"Working with Scaev now, this is wrong. I know she is crazy but not this crazy."

This was the first time he had seen Bartholomieu this worried.

"And who is this man?" He heard his sister's voice ask.

When he turned around he saw Tatienne standing before the man he had fought. He walked up to her and grabbed her arm before dragging her to one side.

"Did I not tell you to stay in the house?" He asked.

"Yes but only until you are finished with your business. And you are finished so here I am."

He rolled his eyes. She broke out from his grasp and walked to the man.

"I want him!" She said.

"What do you mean?" He asked.

"He is cute, I want him." She simply stated.

He sighed. "He is scaev, criminal to the Em-"

Yves interrupted him by clearing his throat. "About that...they are not technically scaev, I think,"

"You think?"

Bartholomieu laughed boisterously. "I like this one!"

"Start from the beginning, why are you here?" Etel asked.

"They are here to request an audience with The Umbra." Yves stopped but continued when he realised they had been waiting for him to continue. "They would like to support The Umbra in her attempt to seize the throne."

"Wait, wait, wait! Seize the throne? What are you talking about?" Etel asked.

He looked to Bartholomieu who looked deadly serious.

"Ahh...she has not told her soldiers yet."

"She is finally going through with it, it seems," Bartholomieu said.

"Going through with what?" Etel asked.

"Etel, have you ever wondered why I quit being a Commander?" Bartholomieu asked.

"What does..."

"Five years ago, The Umbra held a meeting with her three Commanders. She laid out a plan...a plan to one day infiltrate Meinspir and take the throne for herself. I did not agree with her, so I quit." Bartholomieu explained.

Does her ambitions know no boundaries? All of Porffor would be enemies of the Empire. She intends to bring war to our doorstep...but

"How do you know...Yves?" He asked.

"I was the one who offered Ysgafyn's help to her."

"That explains...nothing. Why are you with the scaev then?" Tatienne asked.

"They are not scaev...and I am not with them. Their leader is a friend, a man named Alaric. He should be entering Porffor any day now. I am just here to see an old friend."

Alaric...why do I know that name?

"Alaric Burchard? The most wanted man in the Empire? We are talking about *that* Alaric!" Tatienne began excitedly.

Yves nodded. "If you need to know anything else about why we are here then he is the man you need to talk to."

Etel heard footsteps and he turned around. He strained his eyes and saw a woman dressed in purple sprinting across the field towards them. When she had gotten closer he noticed that it was Joelle.

She was out of breath when she reached them.

"What is the matter, Lieutenant Joelle?" He asked.

"It is Commander Sybille, we have important news on her well-being."

"Is the healing working?"

Joelle nodded.

"That's good then." He sighed.

"That is not all, Captain. The boy is telling us that the Commander was never ill-"

"That's impossible!" He exclaimed.

"He is saying that she has been poisoned."

53.

"May I enter, Umbra?" She recognised the voice as Jahdiél.

"Just a moment!" She called out as she rolled out of her bed. She hastily found a silk robe and covered herself. She made her way to the door and opened it. Behind the door had been her right-hand man, the Ysgafyn commander. She allowed him to enter. She noticed him staring at the unconscious naked man that laid sprawled out on her bed.

"A new boy toy, Umbra?" He asked.

"Like what you see...Jahdiél?" She moved behind him and wrapped an arm around his waist. She could not reach his neck so she had to stand on her tiptoes, she planted her lips to his exposed skin. She felt his breathing become laboured then she stopped. She let him go and passed him to sit on the bed. She crossed her legs making sure her robe exposed enough of her. She watched as the man struggled to keep eye contact.

"What occurrence has brought you to me?" She asked.

Jahdiél cleared his throat. "A ship...was spotted in Trois."

"A ship?"

"Not one of ours...it has not anchored at the harbour instead it waits on the outskirts." He explained.

"Pirates then, they always try to attack our outgoing ships. Tell Etienne to send some men."

"You misunderstand, Umbra. The people on this ship...your people call them, scaev."

"Did I...just hear you correctly? You said scaev?"

Jahdiél nodded.

She exclaimed curses into the air.

"Who is this...scaev?" Jahdiél asked.

"A group of dangerous psychotic people. Their leader is a man named Able Cornexia, the Empire has been searching for him for years. Send all the forces we can to Trois, we need to get ahead of this. We cannot afford to lose any forces until we move for Meinspir." She planted her face in her hands and let out another curse.

"There is more news, Umbra."

"What now...has Jerial risen from the dead? They say his kid is formidable, he even took out Ivo and attacked Cognizance." She began.

"No, it is one of my brothers. It seems he is back in Porffor; he was spotted in Huit not too long ago. He is headed here to have an audience with you." Jahdiél explained.

"Yves is back? Last time he was here, he left you with quite the injury." Her hands grazed Jahdiél's eyepatch.

"Why would he come back?" He asked.

"Let's ask him when he gets here...but for now you have a responsibility to make me feel better after all the bad news." She brought his face close and planted her lips on his. He pulled her closer.

54.

Etel rushed up the stairs and barged into the room. Laying on her side on the bed was Sybille. She lay with her head slightly off of the bed. Below her head was a wooden bucket, from Sybille's mouth a pinkish liquid dripped out into the bucket. The boy stood beside the bed, the green liquid connecting from his chest to Sybille. Lady Mirabelle was also in the room, she had her own bucket that was filled with water. She placed a cloth in the bucket and cleaned Sybille's face.

"Is what you said...true?" He asked.

"When I was in the capital...I learned all about toxins and poisons but this is most likely stria poisoning. This has been going on for a while as well." The boy said.

"Stria poisoning should not work on a caster." He rebutted.

"I am well aware of that...but that is the only explanation I have. The commander's stria has been tainted with another person's stria. If not stria poisoning then a cast...but who could do this?"

Sybille began coughing, and more pink liquid leaked from her mouth.

"It...is...Damiana..." Sybille said.

"The Umbra! Why-" Etel was losing his mind.

"I...wouldn't...join her...mission...so she...kept me...from stopping...her."

He cursed. "How long until she is fully healed?" He asked the boy.

"A few days if I heal her without stopping."

"That's good...Lady Mirabelle, can I ask you to look after Sybille while I am away?" Etel asked.

"Sure but what are you planning?" Mirabelle asked.

"I am going to have an audience with The Umbra."

"No...Etel...it is dangerous...take me...along." Sybille looked at him. Her fierce eyes were weaker than he remembered them.

He shook his head. "I'll be back for you in a couple of days, Commander Sybille. I have business in Neuf and I will return with...hopefully...an ally or at least a threat to The Umbra."

He heard Bartholomieu laugh behind him.

"You have grown, Etel. Perhaps a little too much." The large man said.

The sound of birds singing woke him from his slumber. It had been daytime, and ahead of him were haystacks that blocked his vision. He tried to move but soon realised he could not.

"It seems that he has awoken." He heard a feminine voice say. He looked to his left and saw a beautiful woman dressed in an out-of-place emerald dress. Her dark skin was smooth and resembled the man that put him in this position. Next to her was Ashe who seemed to be tied to a wooden pillar, just as he was. She did not seem to be upset,

instead, she looked sort of...happy. Yves was on the other side of Ashe, he had been tied up as well.

The woman in the dress walked up to him and leaned forward so that her face was close to him. He tried to move his head but could not move it very far.

"Brown...I expected a blue" The woman said.

"Not to your liking...Tati?" Ashe asked, then she giggled.

"It will have to do...It is still cute though." The woman shrugged.

"Who are you?" He asked.

"Your future wife, silly." The woman laughed. "Your sister has told me all about you, Florian"

"Florian, this is Tatienne. She is the sister of our captor." Ashe explained.

"And seemingly your best friend," He mumbled under his breath.

"Awww...it seems someone is jealous." Tatienne patted his curly hair. He tried to move away but to no avail.

"I am supposed to take care of you three while my brother goes and finds your leader, Alaric," Tatienne explained.

He heard Gaile's laugh in the back of his head. He looked around and saw no signs of the shadowy man.

"He is not our leader." Florian insisted.

"Are you telling me...this nice Ysgafyn-man has been lying to us? I may look harmless but with one request to my Father I can have you all executed...maybe not Ashe, I like her. " Tatienne threatened.

He looked toward Ashe who was giving him a death stare.

"No, he was not lying...Alaric is our leader." He reluctantly said.

"Good, I would not want to kill my future husband...am I right Ashe?" Tatienne chuckled. Ashe smiled back at the woman.

"What do you intend to do with us?" He asked.

She grabbed his cheek and squeezed it slightly. "Why, nothing. My brother has a plan but I do not know what that is. Ask him next time he is around."

The sound of footsteps caused them to stop conversing. Two women came into view ahead of the haystacks. One wore a purple robe as all the other soldiers he had seen wear. The other woman was elderly and dressed in common garb. They both held bowls of food in their hands. The food had been some sort of broth, a wooden spoon was present in each. The women placed a bowl at each of their knees.

"How are we meant to eat it?" Ashe had asked.

"We will feed it to you." The elderly lady said.

"I call, Florian!" Tatienne called out, causing the other women to laugh.

"Are you going to be embarrassed like this?" Gaile's voice asked.

They intend to humiliate me.

Tatienne removed his filtration mask, he immediately began to hold his breath.

"No need for that." The elderly woman said. "Runes were placed around this place, The Umbra's cast will not affect you here. In Porffor every house is built with these runes, therefore you need not need the masks when indoors." She explained further.

Tatienne withdrew some of the broth onto the spoon and lifted it towards his face. He turned his head the furthest away from the spoon but she kept following by aiming the spoon toward his mouth.

"So cranky...was he always like this, Ashe?" She asked.

He was about to respond, he opened his mouth to speak but Tatienne jammed the spoon into his mouth. He almost choked on the broth as he began to cough.

While in his coughing fit he heard Ashe speak.

"He was not always like this..." She took another spoonful that had been fed to her by the soldier.

Have I truly changed that much?

"No...your true self was just revealed to them," Gaile said.

And what is my true nature?

"You were born to be a sinister man, born to be alone, born to be abandoned by everyone you care about." Gaile laughed.

Is that all I will ever be?

He had been so deep in his thoughts that he did not realise that he was drinking the broth as Tatienne fed him. When he had finished the broth he asked her a question.

"Why are you interested in me?"

She smiled at him showing her perfect white teeth. "It looks as if you need help and you are pretty cute."

That is all I am...someone that needs help.

"I do not know you that well...so I would like to learn." She continued. "You see, I lived my entire life here in Porffor, I do not know anything about the world out there. I find all three of you interesting but you are the most interesting."

"In my experience, learning more about the world made my life worse." He stated.

"Even so...I would rather learn than not know anything at all. Experiences are not what makes a person but their actions." Tatienne proudly said.

You know nothing.

"Perhaps you should listen to her...she might be smarter than you think," Gaile said.

55.

She held onto Alaric as they walked down the brick path. The Twin had been setting and the road darkened. Lanterns hooked into the trees kept the path illuminated even during the night. Carriages passed by them, but Alaric did not react to the carriages; she had to push him out of the way to prevent a collision. When it had become quite late, Alaric had begun to make his way off the path and sat under one of the large trees. He did not face her but faced toward the tree as he spoke. She still did not understand anything he said. She just sat at his side waiting. She heard his breathing change, it was getting more and more rapid. He seemed to be struggling to breathe. She began to panic, she grabbed his head in both her hands and placed her forehead against his. "Please...you have to breathe...Alaric...you cannot die...I need to speak to you." She whispered to him. She began praying to a power above. Alaric's breathing began to normalise. She stared into his eyes but they seemed to have lost focus. His eyes had been dilated and he did not speak. This lasted for quite some time before his eyes returned to normal. He began to speak once again. He spoke until he had fallen asleep, she slept right next to him, holding onto his arm.

She was woken up by his yells. He looked panicked as he searched for something within the forest. He kept yelling. He was not screaming anything foreign for once she understood what he had been saying. He had been calling for his mother. Her heart broke watching him call out for his mother. A part of her felt relief. She remembered a time when she had too called out to her mother. For weeks after she had left her alone in Isern she called, until she lost the spirit to call out. Alaric never spoke to her about his mother, she knew that his mother had passed because Ivo had told them. She watched as Alaric fell to his knees. She ran up to him and comforted him.

"It is going to be alright...you still have me...we have each other." She whispered. Alaric then slowly got back to his feet, and she helped him. He began talking to the thin air once again. She just kept being at his side. He then walked back toward the brick path. They walked on the brick path for what felt like hours. He spoke the entire time then suddenly he stopped. He wrestled out of her grasp and began to run. She had been fast but his long limbs meant he took bigger strides. She struggled to keep up with him until they had reached Neuf. Neuf had been slightly bigger than Dix. There were more mysurs wandering the streets, maskless. She had spotted more casters, each with a look of visible frustration on their face. A soldier stopped them when they were about to enter the town. The soldier gave them a look around and called another one over.

"Call Captain Etel! This one fits the description." The soldier ordered, the other nodded and ran off.

Savia's hand rested on her dagger while the other held tight onto Alaric.

"What do you want from us?" She asked menacingly.

"I do not know either, darling. Just following orders." The soldier shrugged. She heard a whistle. "Follow me then." The soldier said.

She reluctantly followed the soldier. He led her into the town. He stopped ahead of a large carriage. A dark-skinned man sat on the edge of the carriage, he stared at her then at Alaric. He then stood up from his position and began to slowly walk towards them. Savia withdrew one of her daggers and pointed it at the man.

The man lifted his hands in the air feigning surrender.

"I presume that man is Alaric Burchard." The man said. She did not say anything. "My name is Captain Etel, he seems to be in need of help."

"Take me to Commander Sybille," she said. "They said she would help him."

"You must know that curing one from The Umbra's curse is against Porffor's law." Etel calmly stated.

"If she won't...I will have to force her hand." Savia threatened.

I cannot fight here...they outnumber me and I cannot let go of Alaric.

"You need not do any of that. But you will have to come along with me...I can help you." Etel said.

"Why would I do that?"

"Because I have your friends." She analysed his face looking for any trace of a lie. His expression was icy cold.

"Yves, Ashe, Florian and the boy, Everard. I can take you to them...and cure him."

What is his motive?

"I sense you do not trust me." He pulled out his twin scimitars that hung from his waist.

"We can always settle this your way."

Savia sighed. "Fine...We will come with you but if..."

"Yes, you can kill me or try to." Etel interrupted her, then then withdrew his blades. She did the same and she dragged Alaric toward the man. Etel showed her to the carriage and encouraged her to enter.

She was about to help Alaric into the carriage when Etel stopped her.

"He cannot travel at high speeds when he is under the curse...it will frazzle his mind even more and he might die," Etel warned.

"Then what do we do?"

"He has to stay unconscious throughout the entire trip," Etel stated before placing a hand on Alaric's head, he whispered a chant and Alaric's body went limp.

They had been travelling for a full day before Alaric had attempted to wake up again only to be knocked out once again. She felt bad but she could not risk it if what Etel had told her was the truth. The back of the carriage was large, it could fit around twenty men give or take she had estimated. She had not spoken to Etel, the man reciprocated her silence making for an extremely awkward journey. He had told her that they were

making two stops, one in Sept and one in Cinq. She did not trust him, she always had one hand on the handle of her dagger. They reached the darkened town of Huit, and Etel made no signs of slowing down.

He is in a rush.

"My friends...where are they?" She asked. Etel did not look back towards her.

"Held captive in Sept...you shall have your reunion soon enough." He said.

"What do you plan to do with us?" She asked.

"Ask for your help."

Her eyes widened in surprise. She heard him chuckle slightly.

"Not the answer you were expecting? You see...Porffor is in a terrible state."

"You meant other than the poison gas in the air?"

"Yes...other than that." He laughed. "We are currently going through a few...economic struggles. Underpaid workers and soldiers while the riches are piled up in Un where The Umbra is." He explained.

Alaric was right...and we hold what they need.

"Great Lord Damiana intends to begin a war with King Godric," Savia said.

"So you know...do you know why he intends to help The Umbra?" Etel finally turned around and pointed at Alaric.

"And how sure am I that you will not rat us out to...The Umbra?" She asked in return.

"I do hold your friends' lives in my hand." He confidently stated.

She sighed. "Alaric will be the next King of the Empire."

Her statement caused Etel to choke on his spit.

"He intends to manipulate Damiana and the scaev to attack Meinspir alongside him, all in the hopes of assassinating King Godric." She began to explain.

"The death of King Godric will lead to the call for a King's Rite...a battle of the strongest casters on Hominus for the throne." Etel continued her explanation. "Do you think he could do it?"

"I am not certain...but if I was betting on anybody it would have to be him." She stated.

"You must have a special relationship," Etel said.

They did not reach Sept until a few days later. On their journey, Etel had asked her a few questions which she had answered honestly. She found that he was a good-natured person. His exterior was stoic much like hers but he did not come off as threatening. The carriage stopped in front of a large house. Ahead of them was another carriage, surrounding the carriage was a small group of soldiers. The soldiers saluted at Etel as they arrived. He warned her to stay within the carriage while he asked the soldiers to keep an eye on the carriage. He headed into the house. She waited for an hour before the front door of the house opened. At first, a woman dressed in a purple robe exited, she held onto a rope that she dragged along. Attached to the rope was Ashe who was bound tightly. She did not look injured and her expression showcased no signs of

distress. The next to exit was a younger woman who was dressed in a dark burgundy dress, she exited the house holding tightly onto Florian who looked uncomfortable. She watched as the rest exited, a large man held onto Yves and a fierce-looking woman held onto Everard. Etel was the last to exit, he held the two large sentz sacks and showed them into the carriage. Ashe and the soldier entered first. Ashe was surprised at her presence but was more shocked at the state of Alaric. The soldier gave her a once-over and looked at Alaric. She continued to look at Savia with a hint of suspicion. The next to enter the carriage was Florian and the fancy woman. The woman greeted Savia loudly before placing her eyes on Alaric.

"Are all of you handsome or does it have something to do with being criminals?" The woman asked while chuckling. Savia decided then that she did not like this woman. Ashe chuckled.

"But fear not, my dear Florian you are still my first choice. For the great Alaric Burchard to look so pathetic, poisoned by The Umbra's curse." Tatiene continued. Savia immediately moved her hand to her dagger.

"Do not provoke them, Tatiene!" Etel's voice broke the awkward silence.

"Just stating the obvious," Tatiene said as she shrugged.

Yves entered and looked at Alaric giving a simple 'Oh dear'. Everard and the fierce woman in runic armour entered. The woman looked as if she had struggled but kept her expression neutral. Savia noticed the green liquid that passed from Everard to the woman.

Etel lifted the two sacks into the carriage and cleared his throat, everyone looked towards him.

"This is what is going to occur, we will ride toward Cinq. Where myself, Savia and Alaric will stay for a while, the rest of you will be escorted by my men to Deux." The soldier that sat next to her wanted to interrupt but was stopped as Etel lifted his hand.

"I have a purification kit at my house where I shall do the procedure on Alaric, the procedure is illegal in Porffor and will require everyone's silence on the matter. When you arrive at Deux, my father will be expecting me. I pray that in the presence of Commander Sybille and my lieutenant Joelle, he understands that you are escorting prisoners to The Umbra. The rest of us shall meet you all in Un. Any questions?"

Tatiene lifted her hand.

"Why will Father bring the prisoners to The Umbra, won't he just imprison them."

Etel wanted to answer but Everard beat him to it.

"They will escort us to The Umbra for I am King Godric's son.

56.

Etel pulled his carriage into his hometown. It had been much livelier than that day. He waved at Miss Dufort as he passed her stables. The wind was especially strong. The hood of his robe could not stay on his head and he left it down. When he closed in on his home he noticed a man standing at his door. He immediately recognised the man.

What is Nazaire doing here?

The bullish man was dressed in his runic armour as he watched the carriage near him. He lifted one eyebrow in suspicion. Etel got off his seat at the front of the carriage.

"Commander Nazaire! Never thought I would see you in Cinq ever again." He said with a slight sass.

He could tell the commander did not like his words very much.

"I have come to speak with you and I visited your mother."

"Speak to me about what, Commander?"

"Your brother." Nazaire said candidly.

Etel's mind began to erupt with thoughts. He composed himself.

"I will make time for you then...but first I have some business to attend to," He said as he waved at Joelle to take his seat at the front of the carriage.

"I heard you dealt with Renard Rei easily," Nazaire said.

Etel nodded as he walked to the back of the carriage and he helped Savia extract Alaric out of the carriage. He put the criminal's arm around his neck as he walked him to his home. The carriage sped off as the other carriage filled with his soldiers followed. He saw Nazaire's curious look at Alaric and Savia.

"I apologise for the poor manners but I fear you have to remain outside as I deal with a few things," Etel said.

The commander nodded as he did not move. Nazaire watched them enter his home.

The commander's actions surprised him, Nazaire had always been a stickler for the rules. Etel's actions right now had screamed suspicious and Nazaire just accepted it.

His house was dimly lit, and he heard his mother's voice in the living room. He stopped at the living room and greeted his mother. She looked at him, her eyes were dull. She

sat in an armchair that faced a wooden chair. She greeted him and returned to talking to the chair. He felt Savia's gaze as he turned to enter his room. His room was not large by all means, just a double bed, a wardrobe and a desk. His brother had the larger room however no one had entered the room since his death. His mother had never let them.

He placed Alaric on his bed. Savia watched him carefully, he noted her hand was on the inside of her cloak. Presumably on a weapon. He opened his wardrobe before searching frantically. He pulled out two glass vials, one had a viscous brown liquid and the other was empty. He placed the two vials on the desk, then he extracted a syringe and a large glass bowl.

He pointed at the vial with the brown liquid. "Make sure he ingests that, give it to him slowly." Savia looked uncertain. "I promise it is not poison."

Savia picked up the vial carefully before moving toward Alaric.

"He will try to fight...just hold him down." He warned her.

She opened Alaric's mouth and poured just a tiny bit of the liquid down his throat. The well-built man began to thrash on his bed. He heard Savia curse as she placed her knees on Alaric's arms. Etel kept his legs down as Alaric attempted to kick. Savia poured a little more of the liquid into his mouth. The man began to scream.

Savia looked worried and turned to Etel.

"This is normal...we are just extracting him from the illusionary world and pulling him towards ours," He explained as he struggled to contain Alaric's legs. *He is incredibly strong.* Etel remained steadfast as he watched Savia pour the rest of the contents of the vial into Alaric's mouth.

"What happens now?" She asked him.

"We wait for him to stabilise in this world and then we extract the poison." He answered as he climbed off of the bed. Savia followed his example and climbed off of Alaric, she stayed next to him and held his hand. Alaric seemed to be in pain and he could not stop groaning. It was a few moments before Savia spoke.

"Your mother..."

"She is inflicted with the same curse as him...though in a lesser manner and by choice." Etel interrupted.

"Why...why do that to your own mother?"

He remained silent and clenched his fist. He struggled to find the words then he sighed.

"Sometimes living in delusion is more simple than living through the harshness of our world."

"And you truly believe that?" She asked him.

Do I?

"You have not seen what she was like before," He stated sternly. The girl said nothing further and just looked toward Alaric.

"I would have given everything back then to have my mother back...now I am uncertain if I ever want to see her again. Do not let the chance slip when you still have it." Savia whispered.

Alaric had seemed to calm down and was lying peacefully on the bed. He instructed Savia to remove Alaric's blazer and dress shirt leaving the man shirtless on the bed. He expected to see a Rixa amulet hanging from the man's neck instead there was nothing. In the middle of his chest was a glowing yellow stone that was embedded into his skin. Black vein-like stems flowed from around the stone. He noticed Savia's shock at the sight as well. He grabbed the syringe and stabbed it in Alaric's shoulder. Pink fluid began to fill the syringe, once the syringe was filled he disposed of the liquid into the glass bowl.

"How long has he been exposed to the poison?" Etel asked.

"It must have been a few days," Savia answered.

He sighed. "It could have been much worse if he had been exposed to it for a lengthy period of time...there could have been long-term adverse effects," He explained as he inserted the syringe back into Alaric, withdrawing even more pink liquid.

After the procedure was completed, the glass bowl was filled with pink liquid. He grabbed the bowl and disposed of it before returning to Savia.

"Stay with him...he might wake up at any moment. I will be outside if you need anything." Etel then exited his house and noticed Nazaire had still been waiting for him.

The Twin was beginning to set and the people in the streets were few and far between.

"Commander, I did not expect you to still be here," He stated with false surprise.

"And I did not expect you to perform a purification ritual...Cinq is under my jurisdiction you would have needed me to sanction it." The commander retorted.

"Commander Sybille has ordered me to, as her base was recently demolished."

"Whatever you say, Captain Etel."

"Commander Nazaire, tell me why are you here?"

Nazaire fidgeted a bit with his hands. "We needed to have this talk a long time ago...but I have been a coward. It is about your brother."

Etel stopped breathing as the world suddenly stood still. Nazaire has not spoken about his brother or even mentioned him since the incident.

"What about Élie?" He asked, his blood heating up.

"Before I tell you I want to prefix that it was all your Father's idea." Nazaire began.

My Father? What does he have to do with it?

"We were not supposed to be there that day, I had warned Élie but he would not listen." Nazaire continued.

"Wait, wait, wait. Begin from the start. Tell me what happened that day!" Etel raised his voice at the commander.

Nazaire paused for a few moments before sighing.

"Becoming a Commander had been my dream since I had been a child...the thought of protecting one's nation, the courage it took to fight on the frontlines. So when I had been a lieutenant in your brother's squadron, I became obsessed with being promoted as fast as I could...my family had been struggling to provide for themselves, and I thought if I had gotten promoted my wage would be able to stabilise my family. I then reached out to your father, we had been on good terms because of my friendship with Élie. Your father had told me, if I did a few jobs for him, that he would ensure that I got the promotion I had been wishing for. Therefore I had begun working for him."

"What kind of jobs?" Etel asked.

"The illegal kind, under the table, trades with members of Cognizance's High Board and various families in Adhu Aqua. It had seemed Commander Etienne had done this for

quite some time as well, all parties were well acquainted. Your father made quite a fortune, he had one day intended to undermine The Umbra and claim Porffor his own." *This cannot be true. The honourable Commander Etienne...my Father. The reason Élie and I became soldiers.*

His eyes were wide with shock.

"What does Élie have anything to do with this?"

"There had been a shipment in Trois that was headed for Arstutia. Your father's plan was to stage an attack, everyone involved was aware. No one was supposed to actually get hurt, Cognizance soldiers dressed as pirates would ambush the ship and steal the goods without harming anyone. The soldiers at Trois were paid to not do a thing about it. On that day...Élie made a sudden decision to visit his father in Deux. I did my utmost to stop him but he kept saying it had been urgent. I prayed and prayed that once we had passed Trois the plan had already been completed."

"It hadn't...Élie saw the pirates...and he attacked." Etel finished. His fists had been clenched, his anger immeasurable.

"To avoid suspicion on your father...I...I helped the pirates...kill the...the entire squadron...including Élie."

Etel's hands moved immediately to his twin scimitars, he unsheathed them in a flash and attempted to slash Nazaire. His blades ricocheted backwards as they hit the orange-glowing runic armour of the commander.

Etel could not think straight and began his assault. He slashed furiously at Nazaire, who had his orange-glowing gauntlets meeting every strike. He could see that Nazaire had been trying to speak to him but he could not hear anything. Bloodthirst had taken over his mind, all he had wanted was to see the man before him perish. Showing no signs of letting up, he began chanting, he saw the look of shock on Nazaire's face. His cheeks began swelling as a disgusting fluid began entering his mouth. He never enjoyed its taste but he could not deny its usefulness. Once his mouth was filled he dropped his filtration mask and spat the liquid out towards Nazaire. The liquid was dark and had a greenish tint to it. Once the liquid left his mouth he quickly moved the mask back to his face and breathed. Nazaire attempted to block the liquid with his arm but as it struck his right gauntlet, the gauntlet began to melt off of his arm. He heard Nazaire scream in agony and curse. He used the moment to dash towards Nazaire, his blades at the ready to slice the man in two. Nazaire turned his back towards him at the last moment, his chest piece glowing orange. A large green shell suddenly formed from the back of Nazaire's armour, Etel crashed against the shell and it propelled him backwards with much force.

He landed roughly on his back. *How could I forget about his Tortoise stance? I had seen him fight many times. You need to focus, Etel.*

"I do not want to fight you Etel. I came to atone, apologise, and repent. Your father is the one who needs to pay for his crimes."

"You are not beyond fault...your ambition caused you to betray your best friend. My father may be despicable but you are just the same!" Etel yelled as he got to his feet.

Nazaire fights best in close combat, his Phen nature allows him to block most attacks. I can win if I can strike him once with my poison casts.

"If that is the way you see it, then you leave me no choice." Nazaire got his fists up in a stance Etel had seen quite often. Nazaire's fists were close to each other hovering just over his chest. He then began to sway from left to right. Nazaire began closing the distance with cautious steps forward. Etel cursed knowing what was to come. He charged Nazaire trying to slash upwards with his right scimitar. The blade narrowly missed as Nazaire swayed in the opposite direction. He expected a counterattack and immediately put up a guard, he felt his legs part a bit further than what was comfortable. Nazaire had used his large legs to kick at his legs, throwing his balance off. The pain in his lower thighs and pelvis burned. He was thrown off guard and could not react to the wide right-handed swing of Nazaire. The force threw Etel backwards as the commander landed the strike firmly on the left side of his jaw. He felt the crack as his world went white for a split second.

How could I forget about his tricks and monster strength? You need to focus!

He landed hard on his bottom but immediately got up and backed away from Nazaire.

"We do not have to fight, Etel. Your brother would not have wanted this." The commander stated.

Etel began laughing uncontrollably, his jaw paining but he did not care. "You know nothing about my brother. Élie was an honourable man, someone like you could not even scrape the dirt off of his shoes. You know nothing of what my brother would have wanted!" He began chanting.

"Your poison will not work if you cannot touch me!" Nazaire warned as he calmly waited for Etel.

He was well aware of the situation but he could not simply give up, he had to find an opening. He had to, for his brother and for himself. His twin scimitars shone red. He felt the harsh wind on his back, it pushed him forward as he charged the man. As he got ready to strike, Nazaire already had placed a pale yellow barrier around himself. Just when Nazaire expected his blade to bounce off of his barrier, he took a sudden step backwards. He then bashed his blades together, placing them together in front of him. He briefly vanished from Nazaire's vision before reappearing as both blades struck the same spot on his barrier. He watched as the barrier cracked slightly and Nazaire coughed. Spittle mixed with blood flew from Nazaire's mouth. Etel moved backwards avoiding a sudden counterattack.

He saw that he did not do any significant damage to the commander.

He has to get rid of his barrier.

"Using your brother's techniques against me...You have grown, Etel. But that will not be enough to beat me." Nazaire said as he slowly walked up to him, his fists up in his stance. They had continued this dance for hours it seemed. The light of the Twin had begun to colour the sky. It was only a matter of time before the streets were filled. He was exhausted; he could barely stand anymore. He could not do any significant damage to Nazaire but in his favour, Nazaire did not land any hits on him as well. It had turned into a battle of endurance, a battle he knew he would lose. Nazaire had many years of training over him. He also knew that Nazaire had grown tired too, holding a barrier that long would have exhausted most Phen users. They had long since stopped exchanging words. He knew he only had one more attack in him. He began to whisper a cast when in his vision a man walked up between him and Nazaire. Etel recognised the man, he was dressed in a dirtied white dress shirt and black trousers. The man had a filtration mask on his face, as he looked toward him.

"Alaric Burchard...this is not your fight," Etel said.

"I know but I am indebted to you Captain Etel, and it seems you cannot fight any longer," Alaric replied to him.

"Alaric Burchard? Are you dealing with wanted men, Etel?" Nazaire asked.

He ignored the commander and looked at Alaric fiercely.

"He killed my brother...I need to be the one to beat him-"

"Then get stronger." Alaric interrupted him. "Get stronger and try again, I will make sure that he will still be breathing for your rematch."

Etel did not care for his words and began slowly inching his way toward Nazaire.

"Don't, Captain Etel. Any moment now, the townspeople will be out of their houses.

What Porffor needs now is not a civil war!" Alaric warned. His words stuck with Etel as he stopped moving.

He watched as Alaric faced Nazaire. The commander clearly analysed the unknown man before him. He watched as the Alaric began chanting. He did not understand any of the words the man was saying.

"Our reports place you as a fellow Phen type...Phen types do not typically use chants to cast." Nazaire said looking a bit bewildered.

Etel watched as Alaric's smile never left his face as he ended his cast.

"Casters from this generation will not understand," Alaric said with a smirk as he moved towards Nazaire. Nazaire wasted no time and erected his barrier. Etel watched as Alaric aimed a punch at the barrier, Etel was in disbelief as Alaric's arm phased through the barrier. His fist collided with the shocked-looking Nazaire's face. Nazaire's barrier dissipated as the man was pushed backwards by the force of the punch. Alaric looked smug but incredibly focused at the same time.

"Impossible!" Nazaire shouted as he got to his feet. His left eye swelling incredibly fast. Alaric wasted no time and dashed forward.

"Watch out for-" Etel yelled to warn him.

A large green shell began forming in front of Nazaire. He expected Alaric to collide with it but fierce winds then formed around the man forming a barrier of wind. Nazaire's shell then retracted, Nazaire was about to smile but saw that the man in front of him stood unharmed and gasped. Alaric moved in immediately with kicks and sporadic punches at the commander. It had not been long until Nazaire lost consciousness. Alaric held the man up by his neck. He then turned to Etel.

"What shall I do with him?" He asked.

"He shall pay for what he had done to me...but not today." Etel began to softly chuckle.

Alaric then dropped the man to the ground and walked over to Etel. He helped him stand and moved him into the house, where Savia had been watching the exchange.

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Alaric slowly opened his eyes as he awakened. He felt fresh and a bit hungry. The ceiling was unfamiliar to him but his view was suddenly invaded by a worried-looking Savia. He wasted no time and grabbed her and pulled her close to his chest. He expected some resistance but she did not show any as she rested her head on his chest. He felt her trembling and looked downward. Her tears hit his chest as she quietly sobbed into him. He did not say much instead held her firmly and moved his hand on her back rubbing smooth circles.

"It has been tough..." He whispered softly.

"But you are here now...that is all that matters." She whispered in return.

They stayed like that for a few moments. He heard muffled sounds and looked out of the only window in the room. At the front of the house were two men having a conversation. One had been dressed in runic armour while the other was dressed in a purple robe.

"Where are we?" He asked.

Savia then explained the situation to him, and how she ended up escorting him to Porffor.

"I apologise, Savia...if only I was not so helpless."

"There is nothing to apologise for...you have saved us on more than one account...and-and I...I thought...you were...not-"

He held her more firmly. "I know...I am here now, no need to be afraid."

Savia composed herself and wriggled out of his grasp. She then sat on the edge of the bed, not facing him. Alaric sat up and moved himself to sit next to her.

"I suppose we need to talk." Savia began.

"About us? Or about something else?"

"Before us, I would like to ask about your mother...What happened to her?" She asked, looking at him.

He sighed before beginning to explain.

Seventeen Years Prior

He smiled with childlike glee as he attempted to read the book. He sat on his mother's lap, he kicked his feet playfully under the table as he asked his mother what certain words meant and how to pronounce them. With a calm smile, his mother would help him. He had loved his mother's tender touch, she held him gently. He had always felt protected in his mother's hold. He was excited to read this book, it would be his first 'big person book' as he called it. It was not that the book itself had been interesting, it had been quite drab, it was the fact that he could learn about matters that existed beyond the castle's walls. He had only been allowed outside once, it had been two years prior and he did not enjoy it very much. He was placed on a large stage that had been

dragged through the city, he sat next to his father. People cheered and watched him, it made him uncomfortable. He wanted to return home but he had known better than to disobey his father. His mother was not allowed to participate in the parade, his father had told him it was due to her life being in danger. He did not understand why anyone would want to hurt his mother. She had always been kind to him and the staff and soldiers that worked in the castle. Reluctantly, he had to leave her with Ivo. Throughout the entire parade, he had been jealous of Ivo wishing it had been him that was paraded around. Alaric knew his place in the world even at such a young age, his father made sure he understood. He had been powerless, the mysur child of the most powerful caster of his generation. Though he had been powerless, his father still insisted that he trained him. Training would be a generous word for what actually happened. Three rapt knocks at the door broke him out of his reminiscing. He felt panic as he hopped off of his mother's lap. She lifted up the hem of her large white dress, he understood what he had to do. He crawled and hugged his mother's legs. She dropped the hem, the dress covered him as his vision darkened. He heard the door swing wildly open and then came the footsteps. The sound of metal on the stone floor, and the steps were slow and methodical. He knew it had to have been his father.

"What a wonderful surprise, dear. Have you come to visit me?" His mother asked in a polite tone.

"I will only ask this once, Argenta. Where is the boy?" He heard his father's rugged voice.

"Alaric? Usually, at this time of day, he should be out training with yo-" His mother did not finish her sentence when he heard a loud smack. His mother's legs trembled slightly. He knew his father had hit her. He held his mother's legs firmly as he clenched his teeth. Tears were flowing out of his eyes.

"You must think I am some sort of idiot...to believe that you are sitting in the library reading..." His father paused for a second. "History of Hominus Volume 3: Nations lost in a calamity. You could not even read a few years ago when you begged me to teach you so that you could read to Alaric." He felt his mother jolt as another smack echoed in the library. He wanted to reveal himself, he could not allow his mother to get hurt anymore but he had been scared. His father said a few more vulgar words and gave his mother one last smack before he left the room. Once it had been quiet he crawled out from under his mother's dress. He looked toward her, the left side of her face had been red and was swelling slightly. The sight broke his heart and he began to sob loudly. His mother did not cry, she smiled at him gently and picked him up. Consoling him as if he had been the one that had been hurt.

"I will..go to training tomorrow." He told his mother between sobs.

"It is okay, my precious boy. You do not have to do anything...just always be my ray of sunshine in the cold downpour of Adhu Aqua." Were his mother's words as she rocked him to sleep in her arms.

That evening, he woke up in his personal chambers. The rain had crashed especially loud that evening. He rolled out of his bed. He flinched as his feet touched the cold ground. He softly made his way to the door. He opened the door, already knowing that there would be guards on the outside. What he did not expect was that his guard was Ivo. The older boy looked toward him with concern.

"You should not be out of your room, Al," Ivo whispered.

"I need to see my mother." He responded, trying his best to look determined.

Ivo's face was stern but after a few seconds, he broke by sighing.

"Just this once, and if Lord Jerial finds out about this I will be the one that's punished, me and your mother," Ivo said as he grabbed his hand.

Alaric gave a slight smile as they quietly made their way through the silent halls of the castle. His mother's chambers were not far but there had been a singular guard that stood on the outside of her door. Ivo told the guard that Jerial had ordered that he brought Alaric to his mother. The guard did not question it as he simply gave way to Ivo.

"Remember no word of this to anyone," Ivo whispered to him.

He nodded, before he opened the door he could hear his mother wailing on the other side. He mustered up his courage and softly opened the door. The room was dark, his mother immediately wiped her tears. She was sitting upright in her large bed. Once she had noticed who had been at the door smiled softly. He closed the door behind him and rushed toward the bed, he climbed on top of the bed and gave his mother a tight hug which caused her to chuckle.

"What are you doing here? Your father will not like this." She said while she held him.

"I could not leave you by yourself," Alaric said, his eyes welling up with tears.

"Oh...my precious boy. It will be okay. I will always be here. You will have to tear the heavens apart to separate me from you." She kissed him softly on the head. He giggled.

"Even still...mother...I will not allow you to get hurt again." He said with confidence.

"My hero, my precious hero." She smiled as she began to tickle him. He began laughing and pleading with his mother to stop. That night he slept blissfully alongside his mother.

The following morning came and when it was time for training he did not hide, he walked to the barracks to meet his father. *I have to protect her.*

The other soldiers watched him as he entered the barracks. Ivo gave him a worried look. He knew Ivo did not wish for him to be there.

"It is about time we began your lessons again, son," Jerial said as he looked toward Alaric with pride. He walked up to his father putting on his bravest face possible.

"You sure are determined." His father laughed. Jerial then led him and Ivo to a special room. He had known that his father did not participate in regular training and that he would only train with Ivo and himself.

"Since it seems my son has finally decided to become a man, Ivo you will just keep watch for today," Jerial ordered the young man. Ivo nodded and moved to stand close to the entrance. His father put away his blade and began taking off his black runic armour,

which left him in a loosely fitting cotton shirt and tight tan trousers. He told Alaric to take off his shirt. Once they had been prepared the training had begun. It was more of a beating than it had been training. His father tested his limit with a variety of kicks and punches that tossed him around the room. By the end of the session, his body had been beaten black and blue and blood leaked from his mouth.

"Tomorrow again." Was all Jerial said as he left the room leaving him alone with Ivo. The older boy helped him to his feet and returned his shirt to him.

"Not a word to my mother," He told Ivo. He saw the conflict in Ivo's eyes. Jerial had purposefully avoided striking him in the face. He struggled but he walked out of the barracks attempting to hide his limp all the while. A maid had gone to him and told him that his mother had wished to see him. He ignored her and went straight to his chamber. Once he reached his chambers he let out all of his suppressed emotions.

The training had continued for months, he had learned to hide his pain more effectively over time. He visited his mother, less, he did not want her to see him in this manner. She was the reason he had been doing this, he did not want her to feel guilty. When they were together, he kept up positive pretences. He was not sure if she believed him or just played along. The last few months had been difficult but Ivo had helped him get through it. The two boys bonded well and he felt like he found himself a brother. It was a regular evening when a large siren rang through the city. He hopped out of bed and winced at the pain before dressing. He opened his door only to be held back by a group of soldiers.

"Your father ordered that you stay put until he arrives." One of the soldiers told him.

"He was about to ask what had happened when his father's voice ran through his head.

"People of Adhu Aqua, it is I, Great Lord Jerial. It seems that the group of radical heretics known as the Scaev have infiltrated our city. They have attacked the outskirts of the city and are currently roaming the entertainment district. Their numbers are between fifty and one hundred. And at their head stands the criminal, Able Cornexia. Do not fret, however, I have sent capable men to combat them, at the forefront my right-hand man, Ivo will deal with it. Please stay safe in your homes and do not venture outside."

Scaev? What is happening? I need to get to Mother!

He attempted multiple times to pass the guards but each time pushed him back into his room. He saw the irritation in their faces at his actions, he did not care. He had to go see his mother. He tried one last time before he ran straight into his father's iron-covered kneecap. He fell backwards on his buttocks, rubbed his aching nose and looked upward to the disapproving look of his father. Jerial bent down and grabbed him by the shirt, his father held him up with one arm as his legs dangled in the air.

"Men, I shall be in the throne room. If I do not exit within the next hour, please look for me. That is all, you are dismissed!" Jerial ordered. The men saluted their understanding.

His father walked with him through the castle halls.

"Father, should you not be fighting against the scaev?" He asked.

His father did not answer and just smirked. Jerial carried him all the way to the throne room, surprisingly there were no guards around. His father had opened the doors and tossed him across the floor. His ribs began to hurt as he crashed harshly onto the floor.

"Alaric!"

He heard his mother yell. He immediately got up and searched for her. Sitting next to his father's throne was his mother, she had been sitting on a wooden chair that she had been tightly tied to. He could see that she had been struggling, tears streamed down her face as she called to him. He attempted to run to his mother when he was suddenly grabbed by the hair. He winced, he looked up and saw his mother's horrid look.

"Ensuring my future, Argenta." His father smiled. "The truth is that I am dying, and tonight will be the night that I die."

His mother looked confused. Then she began to plead. "Leave Alaric out of your schemes, I am begging you, Jerial!" His mother was crying and struggling against her restraints.

"I cannot do that, he is the most important piece! He is the future of Hominus!" Jerial began to laugh. Jerial then moved to the centre of the room, dragging Alaric along all the way. His father ignored the shouts of his mother. Alaric then looked down and saw that the floor changed. The cobblestone floor had red paint on it, symbols he did not understand were painted on the ground. The symbols were drawn in a circular fashion all across the room with them conjoining in the centre of the room. His father stood in the position where all the symbols conjoined and lifted him into the air. His father began speaking in a tongue he did not understand. The symbols all over the room had begun to light up. Alaric struggled to get out of his father's grip, his father had simply been too strong.

Then came the pain.

He screamed. His head felt as if it was being split in two. He screamed until no sound exited his body. His father's beating did not come close to the pain he had been experiencing now. He heard his mother in the background. He opened his eyes and locked it onto hers.

"Whatever happens, I will always love you. Remember that my precious boy." His mother told him.

At some point, the pain had stopped and he felt nothing. He had been floating in nothingness. He could feel every sensation and could see what his body had been seeing but he did not feel in control. Next to his body was the lifeless form of his father. Great Lord Jerial had become an empty husk, his body pale and his eyes white. As a snake shed his skin, life was shed from the strongest caster in history. He felt his body beginning to laugh. His body then turned to his mother who had a bewildered look on her face.

"Alaric? My boy?" She asked.

He yelled out to his mother but his voice did not reach her. Instead, his body began to laugh maniacally. His body then moved to a small table that had been placed next to the entrance of the room. The table had been cleared of everything except a small dagger. He picked it up as he slowly made his way to his mother.

He screamed in protest but his body did not listen to him. He had expected to see a scared face from his mother but she had just smiled softly at him. Just as she always did.

"I know this is not you, my precious boy. You will always be my precious hero." Was his mother's final words as his body stabbed the dagger into his mother's chest.

Through despair, you shall grow strong! Grow stronger, Alaric!

He regained control of his body. His mother's blood had stained his hands crimson. He looked at her now pale face and saw she had died with her soft smile intact. He screamed.

The next moments had been a blur for him. He remembered a man had entered the room. He claimed that his name had been Priest Able and that he would bring him to safety. Alaric did not care for anything, he let himself be led away by the strange man. He felt numb as the rain of Adhu Aqua hit his cold body.

Present Day

Savia did not say a word, he understood her position. It had been the first time he had ever told anyone what had happened with his mother.

"She must have been an incredible person," Savia said. She did not cry for him and he had hoped that she would not. He would not seek pity over his situation any longer.

"She was...and she would have liked you." He said. Savia looked shocked at his words which caused him to chuckle.

The moment turned slightly awkward and he decided that it was time he spoke.

"Savia, we have to talk-"

He was interrupted when she thrust herself towards him, her lips crashed into his own as he was pushed onto his back onto the bed. He allowed himself to reciprocate his feelings for her through his actions.

They had both come to the same decision that evening. He gave himself to Savia while she had allowed herself to love him.

The only thought in his mind was how two broken people could find themselves whole with one another.

He laid on his back a light sheen of sweat covering his naked body. Savia had been lying at his side, his arm over her as he pulled her close. They did not speak for a while, noise could be heard outside.

"What happened to your amulet?" She asked in a small voice as her hand tentatively moved to the stone that had been embedded in his chest. He smiled softly at her sudden shyness.

"An old friend helped me remove it...I am just a regular caster now...well a regular caster with a stone in his chest." He chuckled at himself. The silence then returned.

"You have learned about my past, I feel I know next to nothing about you," He said.

Savia was silent. He briefly thought she would not tell him. Then she explained her life in Isern to him. He was shocked and angry, he felt her tremble slightly. He kissed the top of her head to reassure her.

"I will find her...that is my reason for going to Meinspir," Savia said.

He did not understand why she would be looking for the mother that had abandoned her but he respected her wishes.

"And what will you do once you find her?" He asked.

"I am not certain...a part of me wants to confront her but another part of me wants just to be with her once again."

He pulled Savia on top of him and placed a kiss on her lips.

"We shall find out together then." He smiled as she smiled softly back.

"We need to gather information about your mother if we are to find her, what was her name?" He asked.

"Soren."

Alaric froze.

58.

The trek towards Deux would have been a long and silent one if they had not been travelling with Tatienne. The overzealous woman kept speaking to poor Florian who at first seemed to want nothing to do with the woman, eventually giving up and indulging her. Tatienne did not seem like a bad person but rather one that had grown up spoiled and with a lack of real-life experiences. Much like her before the past year. Her life changed rather drastically from living carefree on Diable Island to attempting to overthrow the King of an Empire.

How did I get here?

She remembered how she vehemently rejected Alaric's plea for help for his bold plan. Yet she got sucked in anyway. She wanted to blame him, she really did, however she knew she could not. Her older brother has a strange method of bringing them together, and if they were together they could accomplish anything they set their minds to. She wanted to see it.

Her brother standing at the top of the world, and alongside him would be Florian, Savia, Yves, Priest Able and herself. Fixing Hominus' deep-rooted issues.

A farfetched dream she was sure but if there was one to show her that it could happen it would be Alaric. A fact she was more certain of now than before, she had seen his power first-hand. He had been capable of moving them out of the Nix in a split second as well as surviving against the catastrophe nixum.

"What is your business with Damiana?" The sudden question broke her out of her thoughts.

It had been the fierce-looking Commander Sybille that had asked the question. She had looked much better in the past few hours, Everard had claimed that the toxins had left her body but he had still been healing her to take precautions. Sybille had looked directly at Ashe when asking the question.

I guess I am the impromptu leader since Alaric and Savia are gone.

"To offer her our services...I guess." She answered.

"Services?" The commander looked puzzled.

"An army to aid her as well as enough sentz to satisfy her needs," She explained as she pointed to the two large sacks filled with sentz and various other trinkets.

"But why?"

"We require Great Lord Damiana's help, we knew of her plan to attack Meinspir through..." She pointed at Yves. "Since our goals align at the moment, we decided to offer an alliance of sorts."

"Going after Godric as well I assume, since your leader is the most wanted criminal in all of Hominus at the current moment. Alaric Burchard, son of Jerial Burchard. A dangerous man to let run loose, I wonder who would be stronger...Alaric Burchard or me."

"Most probably you," Yves answered.

Sybille was slightly bemused at Yves' answer.

"Rick as well as the rest of them has only been casters for a singular year. Any well-trained caster will be able to defeat them quite easily." Yves explained.

Despite the truthfulness of the answer it still made Ashe feel slightly angry. She had known about their weakness, she could not do a thing to help Savia against Lyall back in Cognizance. If it hadn't been for Yves then Florian and Savia would have lost to Charna is what she had been told. Within the Nix they could not do anything as well, none of them were strong enough to beat Shammoth and without Alaric's presence, they would have been killed by Habbeo.

"How did they survive all this time?" Sybille asked.

Yves pointed to his head. "By the grace of Rick's mind," he then pointed at his chest.

"And by his great character." Then Yves chuckled. "Maybe a bit of luck and divine intervention."

Sybille chuckled. "As long as Damiana leaves our city, I do not care what you do.

Perhaps I get to see Jerial's infamous incitatio again."

Ashe was about to correct the commander when the carriage was pulled to a stop.

Lieutenant Joelle yelled from the front that they had arrived. They then began to exit the carriage. Etel's soldiers surrounded them to ensure that they did not escape. It had been late afternoon when they arrived. They stood before an extremely large garrison that made Commander Sybille's base look tiny in comparison. They were escorted toward the front gate of the garrison. A small group of casters were awaiting them, at their head was a large dark-skinned man dressed in runic armour that looked quite familiar. The soldiers stood before the gates and saluted the man. The man eyed Sybille. Tatienne ran up to the man and gave him a hug which he returned.

"I am glad you are safe, Tatienne." The man said.

"I had a great time, Father. I even..."

The man did not even allow her to finish when he spoke up. Ashe saw the frustration on Tatienne's face.

"Commander Sybille, it is rare for you to visit Deux! Last I heard you were ill." The man said.

Sybille kept a smile but Ashe saw how her fists clenched.

"Commander Etienne, it is wonderful to see you too. My visit may be rare but I am on the way to Un, I have a matter that may concern The Umbra."

The man nodded. Ashe realised this man had to have been Captain Etel's father, they looked nearly identical and their mannerisms were similar.

"Then you do not have to travel far, The Umbra is here," Etienne revealed. "Lieutenant Joelle, I take it these are the prisoners Etel mentioned in his letter." His eyes then moved to Everard. "King Godric's son...you are very far from home." Were his final words before he ordered the men to open the gates and allow them inside. As they

walked toward the large stronghold, casters and Ysgafyn men were watching them closely.

They entered the large stronghold, Etienne then requested that his men seize the two treasure bags.

"This was not a part of the deal!" Ashe protested.

"And what deal is that girl...One you made with my son and not with me." Etienne then turned to his men. "We only require Godric's boy, the rest throw them in the dungeon!" Ashe and Florian attempted to break their restraints but were stopped by Sybille. Yves, Florian and herself were dragged by soldiers and led away. Tatienne's protests could be heard as they were whisked away. They reached a staircase that led downward to an underground section of the stronghold. As they descended the steps the smell had gotten fouler, she had to hold her breath until she could not anymore. Eventually getting desensitised to the smell. They were led to three small jail cells which were unoccupied or had been previously occupied if the randomly placed bones and remains were to be believed. They each occupied a singular cell.

"What shall we do now?" She heard Yves say out loud.

"Wait for Alaric, as we always do," Florian said in a soft voice. Yves laughed loudly at the answer and she was pleasantly surprised at her brother's remark.

Everard walked nervously behind the tall and broad man as he and Sybille were led to a room. They entered and the room seemed to be used for strategy, books lined the walls and maps were found on the tables. The room had initially held two people. An Ysgafyn man that wore an eyepatch, and a short woman with red hair and green eyes.

Commander Etienne bowed before the woman. The woman did not even look at the commander, instead, she locked eyes with Everard. Everard then realised he had seen this woman before. A year before, his father had called a meeting with the Great Lords. This woman had been there, she had been Great Lord Damiana or The Umbra as they called her.

Everard then felt a slight breeze in the room, the breeze came from behind him and he turned around. The maps that had not been pressed down began to fly around the room. Sybille had a fierce look on her face as she stared Damiana down.

"Commander Sybille...what a pleasant surprise!" Damiana said with a bright smile.

The wind in the room grew stronger.

"What? Found out about the poison? Took you long enough!" Damiana laughed. "You are powerful, you might be even more powerful than me...but you are not foolish enough to attack me here. Not when it will be three-on-one." Damiana mocked Sybille. The winds stopped suddenly.

"All this for a disagreement? Cause I care about the wellbeing of our citizens and will not send them out to a war where countless innocent lives would die for nothing!"

Sybille was visibly angry as spittle flew from her mouth.

"Our citizens? That is where you are wrong Sybille, they are not my citizens. These low-born peasants...I will not roll in the mud with such kind. They are merely tools to be used to complete my goals." Damiana explained.

The wind began once again.

"You could have been my strongest tool, Sybille. But you had to be blinded by your patriotism, a shame for one as talented as you." Etienne unsheathed his blade and the Ysgafyn man got into a strange stance as he held a vial with white powder in his hands. The wind stopped immediately.

"Good...you know your place! Now return to Sept where I do not have to see your ugly face." Damiana ordered.

The door opened widely and an exhausted-looking soldier stood with a letter in his hand. The man bowed before The Umbra before speaking.

"Urgent news for The Umbra. It comes from Commander Nazaire, it seems he has been defeated by a man called Alaric Burchard. Alaric Burchard wishes to negotiate the release of his friends." The soldier announced.

Damiana cursed. "Negotiate? What does Jerial's son have that we have not seized!"

"It says he holds the secrets of Commander Etienne." The soldier stated.

Damiana's eyes filled with rage as she turned to Etienne who looked bewildered.

"What secrets are you hiding?"

"I swear nothing!" Everard saw fear in the commander's eyes.

Damiana then began spewing expletives as she threw the books and maps off the table.

"They must be bluffing, Umbra please!" Etienne begged.

"Bluff or not...you are aware we cannot take that risk, Commander! When will Alaric Burchard arrive in Deux?" The Ysgafyn man said.

"Commander Nazaire was last seen in Cinq...I suspect within the next half day." The soldier stated.

"Everyone out! Everyone except Godric's boy!" Damiana yelled.

59.

The talking had long since died down as Yves sat in his cell wondering about the future. *What does the future hold for me? Do I return home? Do I stay and fix the issues here?* The hair on his arms stood up as he felt a presence. It felt familiar. The person had been using a High Light Ability that masked a person's presence, much like he had done to Rick back in Cognizance. Yves got up from his seated position and made his way to the iron bars, he placed his hands against the bars and listened carefully. He analysed the light pattern that emanated from the person, a technique only known by high-ranked officers. The person had tried their best to masquerade their light pattern but Yves was better than that.

"Jahdiél, is that you?" He asked.

Out of thin air, a man appeared before the iron bars. He looked largely similar to before but Yves could not take his eyes off of the eye patch that covered his left eye.

"Staring at your handiwork?" Jahdiél asked. He sensed no humour in his words. "Chief Yves, I had thought you had run back home. Instead, we find you here with Hominus-kind." He continued.

"I could not just leave things be, you know that better than anyone! You are the one allying yourself with the enemy." Yves retorted.

"And on whose orders was that, Chief?"

"You understood I had only meant to open Hominus borders to our kind. But a war, Jahdiél? Our kingdom is not yet built for such a circumstance!"

"You are nothing but a coward! Godric had planned to invade our land, we have to move before them. Get the upper hand and fight back!"

"And where have you obtained this information, I wonder?" He gave Jahdiél a frustrated look.

"Damiana. She is an incredible ally to have, she shall one day rule the Zidal Empire and our nations can live in peace. Just how we envisioned it as kids, Yves!"

"She is using you! Get that through your skull, or I will have to blow another hole through it!"

Jahdiél began laughing. "You hit me with a cheap shot that time. She is not using me, I can see through her manipulations. You are the used...Alaric Burchard, you would rather ally yourself with criminals."

"The only crime Rick has committed was being born of the same blood as his father!" He sensed Jahdiél's outrage at the name.

"You call him...Rick! What a mockery! You disgrace our brother's name by comparing him to criminals!" Jahdiél had his hand on the iron bars. Yves knew that he was capable of easily passing through the bars since he was capable of escaping as well. He expected Jahdiél to enter so he grabbed his last vial of light and held it.

Jahdiél spat out curses in their native tongue before storming out. He sighed before walking toward the back wall of the cell and slumping to the ground. He half expected the others to say anything but they had remained quiet.

I guess I have made my decision.

"Will the letter work?" Etel had asked him.

"Most probably."

"My father is...was a quite honourable man, he would have respected your friend's request for an audience with The Umbra." Etel retorted.

"Control! All Great Lords desire it and Damiana will look for complete control. Just as Godric, Amos and my father. The letter is simply a trick to waver Damiana's trust in her own men. Your father will do everything to not let his secrets slip out so he will attempt to kill Nazaire...which is your issue." Alaric explained.

Etel nodded. "I see how you became what you are today."

They were close to Deux; they rode here on horseback but switched to on foot as they neared the garrison. Savia walked alongside him slightly closer than usual, he avoided looking at her, for when each time he did his heart melted. He felt giddy, emotions he never knew he was capable of were exposed to him each time he looked at her. She avoided his glances as well, whenever their eyes met she would hastily look away. Etel held the restrained Nazaire, the commander was bloodied and bruised. He never spoke a word since they left Cinq.

"Damiana will still assume she holds all the cards. She has all of our capital and holds Godric's son. What could we possibly offer? That is when I use my trump card!"

"Which is?" Etel asked.

"I will reveal the true nature of my father." Alaric smiled. He felt Savia tug on the sleeve of his dirtied shirt.

He gave her a comforting smile and she just nodded.

The garrison began to break through the trees. He whistled his appreciation for the large stronghold.

"It was my dream one day, to become a commander just like my father and run this place," Etel said.

"Not your dream anymore?"

Etel shrugged. "I am not too sure of myself anymore."

"That is okay...dreams can change. Why not become a commander but not like your father? Become a commander and be a man your brother will be proud of instead. Your lineage does not need to stand in the way of your dreams. Trust me, I know that better than most."

Etel chuckled at his encouragement. "Perhaps..."

The large gates of Deux stood open and before the gate waited a small group of purple-robed soldiers and one woman in runic armour. They were waiting for them, it

seemed. It had been quite early and the Twin had not reached full mast yet. A woman ran up to Etel and saluted.

"Captain Etel, we have been awaiting you!" The woman said. The woman then looked at the beaten Nazaire.

"Joelle, things have turned for the worst," Etel said.

The woman nodded. "I know, Alaric Burchard's friends have been imprisoned and The Umbra have locked down the entire stronghold. Commander Sybille is outraged and needs to be calmed down, she threatens to kill The Umbra."

"Damiana is here?" Alaric asked.

Joelle looked to Etel for affirmation that she could answer his question, Etel nodded.

"Yes, she waits for you," Joelle answered.

Etel handed Nazaire to Joelle.

"Make certain he does not escape. If you do not hear directly from me do not do anything with him, just keep him safe." Etel ordered Joelle who saluted.

Etel and Alaric were about to enter the garrison when the armoured woman stopped before Alaric.

"Alaric Burchard." The woman said.

"You must be Commander Sybille, I have heard much about you." He responded.

"And I of you. I have learned of your plans through your companions and I have a request."

He cocked his eyebrow up.

"I wish to eliminate Great Lord Damiana." The woman said fiercely. "I am aware that goes against your plan."

"Then you are aware that I cannot allow you to do that...I require Damiana's ambitions and soldiers if I am to make a move on Meinspir. Commander, what are your reasons for getting rid of Damiana?"

"It is quite simple, the people of Porffor have suffered enough under her rule. I have quelled uprisings against her for a long time and she has thanked me by poison. All I wish for is the protection of my people." She explained.

He thought for a few moments, Sybille groaned in impatience.

"This is perfect." He eventually said. He received confused looks from the soldiers that surrounded him as well as from Sybille and Etel.

"Damiana and her forces will join us on the way to Meinspir. After the day is over I presume Damiana will only have one remaining Commander under her rule." He explained before patting Etel's shoulder.

"That will be you, Commander Sybille. If you play your cards correctly Damiana will be forced to bring you along. Where either you can eliminate Damiana yourself or protect as many of your soldiers as possible. The choice lies with you, Commander." He continued.

"You are a cruel man, Alaric Burchard," Sybille said in a light-hearted manner.

"Porffor's goal in my plan is not to throw their lives away but rather to cause distraction and chaos amongst Godric's men. Porffor will continue to live as I will need it once I become king." He said before his vision whited for a split second. He became slightly dizzy and swayed on his feet. Savia caught him and gave him a worried look. He smiled brightly in return, though she could not see it through the mask. He then leaned in and whispered in her ear. She nodded and broke off from the group. He then asked to speak to Sybille alone, where they discussed a plan.

Satisfied, Sybille as well as Etel and his men walked forward into Deux. Working soldiers and lazing Ysgafyn men whispered amongst each other as the group walked on the paved road to the stronghold. He noticed most looked at him, when he looked back they avoided his gaze.

I must be becoming quite famous.

About halfway to the stronghold, Etel ordered his men to hold Nazaire somewhere else and they broke off, leaving only him, Etel and Sybille. In front of the stronghold stood who he assumed was Commander Etienne by the way Etel had been reacting. Alaric attempted to comfort the man but he just brushed him off stating that he felt fine. Sybille gave the Captain a worried look as well but trusted his words.

The trio stopped before the angry-looking commander. Etienne gave the group a once-over before locking eyes with Etel.

"Son...I have given you everything! And you frolic around with criminals!" Etienne yelled.

"I am sorry, Father...it must be a trait I have inherited from you," Etel said to his father. Etel nudged him and told him to enter the stronghold.

"That fool Nazaire must've told you...damned fool." Was the final words he heard before he and Sybille walked into the stronghold. They were met by an Ysgafyn man, who wore an eyepatch. He looked directly at Alaric with a mean expression. Sybille removed her mask as they entered the building and Alaric followed suit.

"Jahdiél, relegated to escort duty?" Sybille asked the man. The man just frowned and turned to Sybille.

"And why have you returned, Commander Sybille? I fear The Umbra does not wish to see you." The man said with a heavy accent.

"Sybille is to join me. If The Umbra does not like it, she will have to live with it." Alaric said firmly.

He saw Jahdiél attempting to hide his fury.

"Very well!" The man eventually said before escorting them through the stronghold. Alaric assumed they were going to be brought into a small room with just themselves and Damiana but he had been wrong. Jahdiél had brought them to a large room that had seemed to be used for training. In the middle of the room stood Damiana, she seemed to be pacing around. At the borders of the room stood dozens of soldiers staring at him.

Damiana stopped pacing as she noticed him.

"You are him? I expected someone more...menacing." She said,

He just smiled and said. "I had the same thought."

She scoffed at him. "What brings the devil's incarnated son to my city?"

"You have received my letter, you are aware that I have come to negotiate," He said confidently.

"And why should I? You are in no position to negotiate, I have seized your finances and captured your friends. What can you offer that will satisfy me?" Damiana said.

"I fear we may have begun on the wrong foot. Let me introduce myself, as you all are aware I am Alaric Burchard, Blood of the Merciless. I have unjustly been hunted by King Godric due to my blood and his hatred for my father. All I want is for King Godric to stop hunting me so that I can live a regular life out of the public's eye. It was during my hiding in Cognizance that I became aware of your scheme of attacking Meinspir with the help of allies from Ysgafyn. I sensed an opportunity, so I began my own scheme. I will not bore you with the details, we have all heard what had happened in Cognizance. I journeyed here to gift you, Great Lord Damiana, great wealth and assistance from my men. For our goals have aligned."

Damiana smiled at him. "I have seen your kind come and go. They attempt to trick me...this will not work out as you expect. I hold your friends' lives in my hand. Your life will soon be forfeit too, one snap of my finger and these men will attack you. I do not care how skilled you are, you cannot beat all of them."

He sighed. *You intend to threaten me then.*

"I had thought I was speaking to an intellectual woman," He said. Damiana looked angry at his comment and held her hand up ready to snap her fingers.

"Let me threaten you in return. First off, my friends are okay. Your men have already been dealt with. Secondly, *they* are here...amongst your men. I will not die today." Alaric said. He analysed her face and saw that her eye twitched slightly.

She knows about the scaev, that was a gamble.

"I am certain you know that my father lives yet, Godric would have told you," he added. Damiana lowered her hand and began cackling.

"You are the one who sent the scaev ship...you are quite interesting. It does not surprise me that Godric has held your uncle up for execution. I sense Cressela instated you as one of her commanders to hit back after what Godric had done to Adhu Aqua."

Alaric tried to keep a straight face but new thoughts hit him.

My uncle? What have you done, Cressela?

"I sense that you only told one lie," Damiana said.

Alaric raised an eyebrow.

"That you will not die today!"

He felt a presence at his neck, he could not move fast enough and remained standing. At his neck was a scythe made of pure light. It had been millimetres from his neck

threatening to remove his head from his body. Wind entered the room. Before the blade of the scythe touched him, the ground collapsed from underneath him. He fell downwards, he heard shouts coming from above. What he saw above him was surprising. Yves floated in the sky, he had wings protruding from his back. Wings of pure light as he held onto Jahdiél. Jahdiél held the scythe and was struggling to break Yves' hold. Rubble was falling around him and he heard shouts from below. It had sounded familiar but he did not have time to listen as a strong gust of wind hit his back and he was propelled upwards. He floated through the hole he had fallen down and returned to the large room. He had unknowingly cast a barrier around himself. He fell to the floor and let his barrier dissipate. He heard people crashing behind him and he saw that Florian, Ashe and Savia were now in the room as well. Sybille's armour was glowing red and he felt the wind had originated from her. There had been no sign of Yves and Jahdiél in the room other than the large hole in the ceiling.

The soldiers inched closer as they held their weapons in their hands.

He looked to Damiana who had been red in the face with rage.

"EVERYBODY OUT!" She yelled leaving the soldiers confused. "DON'T MAKE ME REPEAT MYSELF! AND NO ONE TOUCHES ALARIC BURCHARD'S FRIENDS."

The soldiers left hastily, and Alaric motioned for his group to leave as well. Savia was the last to leave, giving him a worried expression. He smiled at her and then turned to face Damiana.

"This has become quite messy, would you not agree?" He smiled at Damiana.

She had calmed down a bit but was still red in the face.

"I would agree...I could not lose more men here. We are both aware of that. So how about we become allies." Damiana stated.

The quickness of her change of mind raised his suspicion.

"That is all we have ever wanted," he said.

"Then how about a test first...a test of strength," Damiana said as she chanted a few words.

The room around Alaric changed. He no longer stood in Deux. Rain poured harshly down on him. He knew this place. He stood on the bank of a lake, the lake was unmoving. As if frozen in time. He turned his back to the lake and the large castle took its place.

He was back.

Adhu Aqua.

Final Act
The Shadow Emerges

60.

"This has nothing to do with Nazaire, he may be a fool but his sins are his own. You must atone for yours." He said to his father.

"And what are my sins...doing the utmost so that you and your sister can live your lives in a proper manner," Etienne responded.

"At the cost of your own son...at the cost of my mother!" Etel's hands rested on his scimitars.

"Élie should never have been there. I had to live with myself knowing that his death was a product of my own actions...is that not enough atonement? And your mother...I did what was right, she had lost her mind."

"The only thing Mother had lost was her son...you put her under and manipulated me into thinking it was the right thing to do."

Etienne sighed. "Believe what you want to believe...I knew you still held some resentment for me since I had left your mother for Hadrienne. I sent Tatienne along with you, to mend your relationship."

"This has nothing to do with Tatienne or Hadrienne. This is between you and me!"

"You are just being unreasonable, we shall talk again once you have calmed down."

That was the last straw for Etel, he withdrew his blades and charged his father. Alaric had given him advice, he had said that 'when facing opponents that are more skilled than you, you have to give them no chance to rest or think.' His father had unsheathed his longsword. Etienne blocked his attack quite easily. His father wanted to speak to him but Etel cut him off by dropping his mask and spitting in his eye. He swung his elbow across his father's face. His elbow collided with Etienne's cheekbone. Etienne recoiled to the side and cursed. Etel acted immediately and attempted to slice at his father's armour when Etienne twisted, blocked his attack and headbutted him. Etel's forehead pained as he was forced backwards.

Do not forget, he is still a Commander! Cool your emotions.

"Come one, Etel. I do not want to kill another of my children." Etienne stated smugly.

"You do not have to, you can die instead!"

He charged once again, he noticed his father's armour glow red and a green mist surrounded Etienne's body.

He recognised the technique, and both his father and brother used it often.

He could see the outline of his father slightly in the mist. The mist swiftly moved towards him and a long blade stabbed through the mist and toward him. He narrowly dodged it and dashed away from the mist.

I cannot stay too long in the mist.

"You are already affected." Etienne laughed. "My poison is much more potent than what Élie had."

He did not want to believe his father but when he had wanted to move forward, his body did not listen to him. Instead, his body took a step backwards.

Inversion, a cast our family is well known for. I must become accustomed to it before he gets the upper hand.

He began chanting and his scimitars began glowing red.

"You place Inversion on your blades and it takes effect once you cut your target, a very inefficient manner of attack," Etienne explained.

"I had to learn by myself...you were too busy with other things," He said in return.

Etel attempted to move backwards but his body moved forwards towards his father.

He had to think carefully of his every move, this made his movement very slow and

Etienne had easily dodged his onslaught. The green mist made it difficult to see.

Etienne had every opportunity to hit him in return but he did not attack.

He is playing with me. I have to show him, I am not that weak.

He then backed off from his father and cut a bit of skin off of his forearm. He practised, moving forward and back.

"Using Inversion on yourself to cancel out my own Inversion...I admit, a smart move.

You should understand our level, I do not need Inversion to beat you." Etienne boasted

as his greaves glowed red. The ground below Etienne's feet melted slightly and his

father slid across the ground. Using the ground to glide towards him. He was fast.

Etienne thrust his blade at his head. He ducked and kicked at his father's legs.

Etienne predicted this and jumped. His father twisted his body in midair. His right gauntlet glowed and his arm elongated unnaturally. Etel did not have time to dodge.

Etienne's longsword pierced his left shoulder. He screamed at the pain.

His father stood above him, his elongated arm still attached to the blade that was stuck in his shoulder.

"Right where I want you," he whispered as he lowered his mask. His cheeks expanded and he spat a green liquid at his father. The liquid collided with Etienne's elongated arm.

The armour melted off and burned the skin of his arm. Etienne hissed as he pulled his

sword out. Etel cursed. He took his right blade and stabbed it into his father's arm.

Etienne aimed a kick at Etel's head, drawing blood from his mouth.

Etienne pulled Etel's blade out and his arm began to retract to its original length. Etel

slowly got to his feet. His shoulder pulsing with pain as blood poured down his arm. He

dropped his second scimitar to the ground. In return, his father's arm was a bloodied

mess as well. His father still held his sword in his injured arm.

"You used Inversion on me, impressive," Etienne said.

He did not respond, he could not, he had been in too much pain.

Etienne charged towards him.

Is he not under Inversion? He could not be moving at this speed. He is a monster.

Etienne swung his injured arm wildly at Etel. He blocked the onslaught of wild attacks from his father. It was the most he could do to stay alive.

Etienne laughed as his blade clashed with his son's.

"Inversion is a technique I have mastered. I have taught myself how to think and act as if I was under its influence. A tool you could have been taught if you were not so insolent."

He is too strong. Sorry, Mother. Sorry, Élie.

Etienne continued his onslaught.

A shout broke his concentration. He immediately jumped backwards.

A force passed between him and his father. Dust filled his vision. He awaited his father's attack. An attack that never came.

When the dust settled, a dark burgundy filled his vision. Between Etel and Etienne, stood Tatienne. In her hands was a spear. He had recognised the spear as Alaric's sister's spear.

Etienne stared at his daughter, his face soft.

Tatienne had been crying.

"This stops now!" She yelled.

More presences arrived and moved to his side. He recognised Savia, Ashe and Florian. Ashe had helped him to stand. Savia had her daggers out and Florian held his crimson blade.

"This is my fight, Tatienne," he grunted.

"No! Élie was my brother as well." Tatienne responded.

"You know..."

"I told her," Savia said.

"I do not want to hurt you, Tatienne!" Etienne begged his daughter to move.

"Hurting Etel...is what is hurting me!" Tatienne was enraged as tears spilled from her eyes.

"You never liked each other! He is barely your brother." Etienne attempted to move past her but she stabbed the spear forward causing him to back up.

"We were never allowed to like each other...you made certain of that. I apologise Father, but I will not allow you to tear our family apart any longer."

Tatienne continued to thrust her spear recklessly forward. Etienne dodged with ease.

Tatienne thrust one more time but her spear was caught. She looked back and saw Etel holding the back of the polearm.

"Let's finish this!" He insisted. "I will not allow you to kill your Father." He smiled at Tatienne who looked at him shocked.

"It is over, Father...we outnumber you!" Etel shouted.

Etienne hesitated for a moment before thrusting his blade forward. He was going to pierce through Tatienne to get to me, he realised. He did not have time or the energy to move out of the way. A sharp gust of wind rippled through his robe. His father's blade fell to the ground, alongside it was his forearm and hand. Etienne screamed as he held the edge of his severed appendage. Etel noticed that Florian stood close as the wind

swirled around his blade. Savia was missing too, she had somehow gotten around his father and placed a dagger at his throat. She did not kill him, instead looking to him for permission. He shook his head as he walked toward his father. He stopped before him, looking at the man writhing in pain.

“You shall pay for what you have done...but in the right manner. Live in your sin, I will not allow you the pleasure to die.”

61.

I do not have enough Light to fight! He thought as he dragged Jahdiél to the flat roof of Deux. He threw the man unceremoniously onto the stone roof as he stayed floating. Jahdiél landed in a grunt and swiftly recovered to his feet. Jahdiél began spinning his light scythe around impressively.

"Are you certain this is a fight you want to partake in, Chief?" Jahdiél asked.

"No...but it is a fight I *have* to partake in," he replied.

Jahdiél snorted before his back began to convulse. A pair of wings made of pure light began to protrude from his back, mirroring Yves'. Jahdiél took flight. He was fast, much faster than Yves.

I must be out of practice.

Jahdiél went straight for his head as he swung his scythe. Yves leaned back until he was completely horizontal and parallel to the roof. He hooked his foot between Jahdiél's chest and the scythe and attempted to kick it out of his hands. When he tried the scythe dissipated causing him to kick at the air. The scythe then reappeared in Jahdiél's hands. Yves chuckled at his own foolishness as he regained his composure and floated backwards, allowing some space between him and his opponent.

"You were the one to teach us how to fight dirty," Jahdiél stated.

"That I did! I might regret that."

Jahdiél vanished from his sight, he concentrated on finding Jahdiél's presence. Jahdiél left small clues that hinted at his presence. Yves was confused, and in a flash Jahdiél appeared before him. His scythe threatened to separate Yves from his left arm. Yves snapped his fingers. His entire left arm disappeared before Jahdiél's scythe reached it. A small ring of light hovered around his left shoulder.

Yves' wings disappeared as he began to fall harshly onto the ground. His body landed and grunted at the pain. His arm began to form once again as the light ring disappeared.

"I forgot you could do that," Jahdiél admitted. He floated above Yves. "I had wondered why you haven't used your Lightcane, you haven't got any Light left."

Yves cursed as he got to his feet. The white paint on his head did not glow and his eyes reverted back to its dull grey.

"You are right," he admitted. He only had one more trick up his sleeve. It was forbidden so he knew Jahdiél would not see it coming.

"This makes it easier then...send Rick my regards!" Jahdiél said as he flew at incredible speed towards Yves. Yves felt the pain as the scythe pierced his abdomen. He was face to face with Jahdiél. Jahdiél smiled as blood poured out of his old ally. The smile turned into fear as Yves leaned forward towards him and held him. Yves was fading but he knew if he could last for the final gamble he could win. He grabbed Jahdiél's arms tightly

and leaned his head forward. Jahdiél struggled but it did not stop Yves. He reached Jahdiél's neck and bit into it. His fangs pierced the man's skin and then he felt it. Light poured from Jahdiél into his body. His eyes began to glow and his head shone bright.

The brilliant light returned to Yves.

127 Years Earlier

Yves stood trembling in a dark alley in The Dark City of T'ma. It had been cold, the rags he called clothing did not offer enough protection. He feared he may die of the cold but he had bigger issues. He had been hungry. Dangerously so, he had not eaten for the past three days. Not after the last fiasco. He had no parents, at least he had thought so. His first memory had been in these streets surrounded by garbage and the large rats that roamed the alleys. T'ma had been a large city, he suspected his parents did not want to deal with the repercussions of having children so they had abandoned him. There had been many kids like him in the city. Kids that were thrown to the wayside by the harsh rulings of T'ma. He did not get along with any of the other kids. He had been smaller than them despite being around the same age. That allowed the kids to beat him if they got the chance. This did not get him down, he would retaliate by spitting in their eyes, throwing dirt in their face or kicking them in their nether regions. He had to survive, he just had to. Everywhere he looked was darkness, this was not a shock but rather a constant. The entirety of Ysgafyn had been covered in darkness, he had been told by a previous mentor. Ysgafyn-dweller's ability to see within the darkness had been a gift granted through the blessing of the Light. Yves looked to the sky and saw a thin beam of pure light that descended from the sky and landed on the large palace that sat in the middle of T'ma. Yves' goal, he had been drawn to the light. He tried persistently to sneak into the palace to no avail, it had been heavily guarded.

He was brought out of his trance by the sight of his current target. A large and plump man walked through the markets of T'ma. In his hands, he carried two bags. One was filled to the brim with pastries and the other was filled with bread products. This man walked this path every six days. Yves watched this man religiously for a month, he knew the man's supply had run out and he refreshed every six days. Yves was not an evil person, at least he thought that. Even he did not believe that by goodwill his stomach would fill itself. This was the only way that a kid like him would be able to survive. He aimed for the bag filled with pastries, he knew that the bread was the man's main seller and he would not deprive the man of his sales. Yves made his move, he stuck to the outskirts of the open market. The market was filled to the brim with people. Stalls were placed everywhere and people shouted constantly attempting to make sales. The market of T'ma sold anything and everything. From clothing and food to vehicles and technology. This made it a hotspot for thieves such as himself. As he made his way closer to the pudgy man, he swirled the object in his hand between his fingers. When he

deemed himself close enough to the man he squished his hand around the object. When he felt the familiar click of activation he tossed the object into the closest stall. He counted to ten in his mind as he was right behind the pudgy man. Then came the yell. The stall he had thrown the object was lit up in all kinds of blues, reds and greens. People screamed as Yves used the moment to grab the bag of pastries from the pudgy man. The man was distracted momentarily but realised what happened when the bag slipped from his grasp. The man yelled and ran after Yves who was weaving his way through the crowd. He knew the colourful light show had already concluded as the people now paid attention to him running past. The object he had thrown earlier had been a device he had created himself. He found a kid's toy that shot out a colour as well as imitated the Light of Ysgafyn. He tinkered with the device and with some residual Light Dust that he stole from an officer, he created what he called the 'Faux-sploder'. He admitted to himself that his method of naming things was not particularly great but it had been the first name to have come to his head. He was creating distance between himself and the pudgy man, when out of nothingness a woman appeared before him. Yves crashed into the woman's legs as he fell backwards on his buttocks. He looked up at the woman and knew it was his demise. The woman was shaved bald and had white streaks on her head, her eyes a dull grey. She had been a Lighteater. People usually referred to them as officers, citizens who pledged their lives to the protection of Ysgafyn. Working directly for the Dark Emperor, they were the only ones who legally were able to use the Light of Ysgafyn. The woman was dressed in a tight black suit and had gold chains that hung across the front of her blazer.

Yves stood up just as the woman pulled out a vial containing a white powder. He knew he was dead, so he began filling his mouth with pastries. If he was to die he would not die hungry. He almost choked when he felt a pull on the cloth that he called a shirt. It had been another kid, older than he was but not by much. The kid dragged him away from the Lighteater who now shone brilliantly in white light. The kid was dressed similarly to him and weaved through the market. Yves wanted to speak but his mouth was filled. People began looking upward and he followed, seeing the Lighteater flying above with two wings. The Lighteater scanned the market for the two boys. The other kid planted Yves' head to the ground and spoke. "Don't breathe or move." The boy's voice was a bit squeaky. He did what he was told and he saw the other boy close his eyes. The next thirty seconds felt like a lifetime. The Lighteater flew above searching before seeing something and flying away. The other boy exhaled loudly before whispering "You can breathe now." The other boy grabbed Yves and more calmly began to walk away from the market. Yves kept his eye to the sky looking for signs of the Lighteater. The other boy led him through the alleys of T'ma but not before stealing a pastry from Yves' bag. Yves scowled at the now smirking boy. They did not travel far before the boy led him to a strange hatch in the ground that was covered by a few barrels. The kid let Yves climb down the hatch first. A foul smell began to fill his nose. It

was pungent and he knew they had been in the sewers below T'ma. The boy followed Yves, seemingly not bothered by the foul smell.

"Come on, it is not far now." The boy said.

Yves reluctantly followed the boy, there had been a broken-down section of the wall ahead. The boy beckoned him through it. Yves climbed through and his eyes widened. He stood at the entrance of a large room, there had been a few spongy beds that looked slept in. There were weapons and bags of food and clothing strewn all over the place. On the wall opposite them were two words written in pink paint.

'RICK'S HIDEOUT'

The words were stylised by someone who was not particularly talented.

"My name is Rick, and welcome to the headquarters of the 'Thieves of T'ma'!" The boy said proudly.

"That is not our name!" Another boy said as he entered from behind them. The new boy looked frightening with his large build compared to Yves.

"Let Rick have his fun, Jahdiél!" Another new voice.

It belonged to a girl with long blonde hair. She smiled at Yves as she entered.

"Well said, Eleonara! And thank you guys for distracting the Lighteater back there." Rick said.

Jahdiél scowled as he stared at Yves.

"And welcome to our new member..." Rick paused waiting for Yves' to speak.

"Yves."

Present Day

Jahdiél had lost his Light. His scythe dissipated into the air and he scrambled to get a vial from the inside pocket of his suit. In a flash, his wrists were tied together with a chain made of pure light. Yves groaned as the wound in his abdomen began to heal. His skin patched itself back together. Wrapped around his arms were chains, they stopped at his wrists and fell to the ground in a loud clattering.

"It has been some time since I used my Lightcane," He said softly

Jahdiél cursed loudly as he tried to physically break out of the chains.

"Jahdiél...you know that is not going to work."

"You're going to kill me...for doing what's best for our land!" Jahdiél was furious.

"I never planned on killing you, I have tried convincing you...I have tried everything to get through to you. But as usual...you have never listened to me." Yves explained.

Jahdiél began chuckling. "Killing Rick was not enough for you? Or turning Eleonara into that...You are a despicable man, Yves. I never liked you!"

His chains began moving, the two ends moved incredibly fast and pierced Jahdiel in the chest. The chains around Jahdiel's wrist constricted until the man's hands fell to the ground in a bloodied mess.

Yves sighed before reaching into the inside pocket of his suit. He felt around until his hand collided with an object, he lifted it out of his pocket. It had an old pocket watch. He remembered stealing it as a kid. He opened it. The watch has long since broken but he kept it because of the old image that he kept inside. It had been a black and white photo. He stood next to Rick and Eleonara, with Jahdiél standing on the other side of Rick scowling. They all had been kids.

“Just me and you...Eleonara, if only they had listened to us.” He sighed as he shed tears for his fallen brother.

62.

Alaric let the rain pour down on him as he stood at the lake.

This is not real. One of Damiana's casts. He thought to himself as he waited. He did not know how long he had been standing there. He got fed up and headed toward the castle. There had not been anyone around and there had been strange pink marks that marked a few walls that he passed. *Leading me somewhere, Damiana?*

He followed the pink marks as they led him through the castle he knew so well. The pink marks led him to the throne room. He opened the large doors expecting to see an empty room. In the middle of the room stood his mother. Her hair had been dishevelled, her pure white dress had blood staining it as blood poured from her chest. She held a dagger, it had been the same dagger that Alaric, no, his father used to kill her.

He stepped into the room and his mother noticed him. Alaric expected her usual soft smile but was surprised by her new expression. She had smiled but it looked sinister, the way she stared at him gave him a chill.

"My precious boy!" She said inching closer to him while holding the knife towards him.

"Mother..." He began.

"I have always hated you...Jerial forced me to bear his child...and you were my reminder of that every single day. I remember the relief when you stopped wanting to visit the library with me or when you stopped sneaking into my room. Jerial he hurt me...because of YOU!" His mother spoke frantically

He had been shocked at his mother's words but he kept his calm. He thought that something about her voice did not sound quite right.

She was getting quite close.

"All of my pain just for you to kill me!" She had been right upon him and was about to stab him with the dagger.

This is not real! He thought to himself as he was about to let his mother stab him. *Or is this the trick?*

The dagger had almost pierced his drenched suit when he grabbed his mother's arm in panic. His mother's fair skin where he grabbed her was suddenly replaced by a purple cloth. Then it clicked for him, he tossed his mother to the side as he moved away from the dagger.

His mother then began to laugh maniacally.

"Such tricks will not work on me, Damiana!" He exclaimed.

His mother suddenly transformed as her skin melted off and was replaced by a smug-looking Damiana.

"I am impressed, most do not make it past the first phase," Damiana said as her body changed once again.

This time she made herself look identical to Savia, she wielded her twin daggers as well.

"I am sick of always following your insane plans. I have never liked you...you are just like the others who used me." Damiana spoke in a perfect rendition of Savia's voice. He wondered briefly how Damiana was able to perform such a cast. Savia then rushed towards him with her daggers low as she kept her body low.

Savia fought in the same manner as she had always done. Her acrobatic and nimble movements made her a tough opponent. But he had fought her countless times and knew all her weaknesses. He had to imagine Damiana's face as he dodged the false Savia's strikes. He attempted to cast a barrier but swiftly realised he could not cast as Savia's right boot connected with his sternum and he was pushed backwards.

How is she doing this? She is changing my cognition and messing with my mind.

He attempted to counterattack but found himself involuntarily holding back some strength.

Yves, who do I trust when I cannot trust my senses?

The answer came to him when Savia spoke once again.

"That night in Isern I should have killed you when I had the chance!"

Her voice was strange, it sounded like her but at the same time, it sounded like a different person.

His mind was working as he thought of all the possible reasons.

It is me! I am the issue!

He covered his ears with his hands, closed his eyes and began to hold his breath. After a few seconds, he opened his eyes and saw that he returned.

He stood in the middle of the room in Deux. Damiana was opposite him looking frustrated.

"Interesting," she said.

He noticed a sheen of sweat that covered her forehead.

Alaric charged the woman. Damiana blew out a pink smoke from her mouth. He slowed his approach, being weary of the smoke.

He suddenly felt himself sinking into the ground. The ground felt wobbly and he struggled to pull his feet out from under him. The room began to spin until the four stone walls disappeared. At first, he was suddenly under water then high in the sky. The world twisted around him in odd shapes. He felt the bile rising from his stomach into his throat. Blood began to trickle from his nose. In an instant he found himself floating in the void that surrounded the realm. Darkness enveloped him, a faraway light could be seen but he was harshly brought back into the room with Damiana. He began coughing up blood and bile.

"Did you enjoy that little-" Damiana was interrupted as a small tornado formed between Alaric and herself.

The tornado travelled towards Damiana as she cursed and began to move away.

An angry-looking Sybille flew past Alaric in a flash.

Damiana cursed as she made her way to the far left corner of the room. She placed her hand on the wall and quickly chanted.

The room itself began to turn. The floor Alaric stood on began to tilt. He hurriedly looked for something to grab onto. When he found none he began slipping down the now-wall as he crashed harshly on the new floor. The tornado dissipated and Sybille chased Damiana who expertly dodged her wind strikes. In her hand, Sybille carried a cloudy sword that seemed formless. Sybille kept floating midair. Damiana kept changing the dimensions of the room, which caused him to thrash around. She could twist the room to her will. She made it larger, smaller, longer and wider at a whim. Alaric would have been impressed by the intricate casts she had been performing if it had not been affecting him as well. He struggled to find his balance as he watched the two high-ranking casters clash with each other. He realised that Sybille would beat Damiana in a contest solely on power. Damiana had been trying to outlast Sybille.

When Sybille was about to strike Damiana, Alaric swiftly cast a barrier around the Great Lord. Damiana was surprised by the action, the moment of confusion was enough for her to blow her pink mist onto Sybille who fell to the ground in a scream. He watched Sybille who was not moving, her eyes were not focused. The room reverted to its original state, which nearly caused him to vomit once again.

Damiana stood over Sybille looking at the woman in disgust.

"It is a shame I cannot kill you just yet, you can still be useful," she said to herself.

"Did I pass the test?" Alaric asked.

She looked at him smugly. "Just about."

He felt a bit dizzy but slowly walked over to Damiana. They were interrupted when a figure descended from the hole in the ceiling.

It had been Yves, in his arms he held the lifeless form of Jahdiél.

He heard Damiana curse.

"I apologise, Great Lord Damiana. I am afraid your partnership with Ysgafyn is now concluded." Yves said.

Alaric realised a slight difference in Yves' tone, he had seemed slightly sad.

Damiana looked ready to explode, Alaric placed an arm in front of her more so blocking Yves from her.

"A wise decision. If our plan was to falter slightly, we would not want a war between our continents." He said. He looked at Damiana who mumbled behind him.

Yves smiled at him before exiting the room.

"It looks as if we need to discuss strategy, Great Lord Damiana." He mockingly bowed before her.

"Indeed but not tonight. In the morning and after we travel to Trois to meet with your scaev friends." Damiana said as she stomped out of the room. Alaric stayed with Sybille.

When Damiana made the first step out of the room, Sybille's eyes came back to life as she began to cough out blood and bile. He soothed her by rubbing her armoured back. When she had recovered, she looked back at him and smirked.

"Any later and I would have been a dead man." He told her.

She chuckled. "Had to give her some false confidence."

He grabbed her arm and helped her to her feet.

"Time to work on you becoming the next Great Lord." Alaric smiled.

"By killing Damiana in Meinspir!" Sybille proudly stated.

63.

After the fiasco with Etel and his father, the rush slowed down. Etel called his men and detained his father and another commander that Florian did not know. Tatienne began hanging onto him and cried into his chest. He did not know what to do, but in the end, he gave up and consoled her. The last few hours had been strange, he was feeling like himself once again. Gaile had completely disappeared and the strange pain in his leg vanished. He could think clearly for the first time in months. Not long after their encounter with Etel's father, a call rang out through the garrison. It had stated that The Umbra and Alaric Burchard have come to an agreement and have formed an alliance. Ashe smiled at the news and Savia just sighed heavily but he saw a small smile from her lips. Memories began to replay in his mind. All the horrible decisions he had made during their time in Cogniance and The Nix. How terrible he treated the others.

"What is wrong?" The girl in his arms asked as she looked up to him.

He shook his head.

"Do not lie...I can feel it." Tatienne said as she wagged her finger in his face.

He sighed. "Guilt."

Tatienne did not say anything in return, just held onto him tighter.

Yves was the first to exit the stronghold, he carried a fallen Ysgafyn man in his arms. Screams all around from the other Ysgafyn men could be heard. Yves grew his wings and flew into the sky, dozens of his kind followed him to the sky as they flew away in the distance. The next to exit the stronghold were Alaric and Sybille, they were followed by a small group of soldiers. Savia moved first and jogged toward Alaric. She immediately hugged him.

"Wow." He heard Ashe say beside him.

He noticed the smile on Alaric's face as he looked at the normally reserved woman.

"I knew it by the way she glared at me in the carriage." Tatienne chuckled.

"We all knew for the longest time," Ashe responded.

"We did?" he asked, which made him receive less than stellar looks from the two women and some from Etel's squad who remained with them.

Alaric made his way over to them.

"We will remain here, for now, tomorrow we head out toward Trois. A scaev ship seems to be awaiting us." He informed them.

Ashe's eyes lit up. "Wait does that mean-"

"We cannot be certain just yet." Alaric tempered her expectations. "It is just as likely that they want revenge for what we have done to Jinny but we should use the fact that they cannot or refrain from doing any harm to me." He further explained.

Ashe nodded weakly. Alaric's eyes then wandered over to him then to the girl that hugged him then back to him.

"We have some business that needs to be dealt with...later." He said.

"Yes, we do," Florian responded.

Tatienne raised her hand in greeting. "I am Tatienne, Etel's sister! And betrothed to Florian over here."

Alaric met her hand with his own. "And did Florian have anything to say about that?"

"Well...not exactly." Tatienne chuckled. He noted the smile on Alaric's face.

"Speaking of Etel, where is he?"

"He went to imprison our father for his crimes," Tatienne answered.

"And you are okay with that?" Alaric asked.

Tatienne shyly nodded. "Not certain my mother will be."

After a few moments of catching up, the soldiers insisted on escorting them to the rooms that they would stay in. He was surprised when Alaric had insisted that he and Savia would share a room. He then noticed a slight blush on Savia's face. Ashe could not stop teasing Alaric about it who remained tight-lipped and stoic. Much to his surprise, Tatienne did not attempt to stay in his room rather choosing to stay with her brother.

Once his body landed on the soft bed he immediately fell to sleep.

The following morning he felt refreshed. He had not slept in a bed in months. When he left the room he had been told that Alaric and Great Lord Damiana had already been in a strategy meeting. He met up with Ashe, Savia, Etel, Tatienne and Everard. They were fed and treated decently well. The table they sat at was quite awkward but it did not stop Tatienne from trying to speak to everyone. Even Savia, who was normally reserved, spoke more casually.

"Calm before the storm." Ashe suddenly said, causing everyone at the table to look at her.

She apologised quickly. "It is just...this is it. All we were told when we left Diable Island was to travel to Meinspir. We are on the cusp of reaching our goal, it feels unreal."

Florian reached to the inside of his robe and felt the battered envelope he carried. It was given to him by Priest Able on the day of their departure.

Your mission will be simple: find a way to infiltrate the city of Meinspir and then cast the spell within that envelope. Were Able's words to them.

"What are your plans after?" Etel asked.

Ashe was silent, he did not know what to say either.

"Seek out my mother and then aid Alaric as much as possible," Savia said.

The rest of the table looked at the two siblings.

"I am certain they will figure it out." Alaric interrupted as he walked up to the table. He called out a shocked-looking Everard who followed the man away.

The rest of the morning, Florian spent walking around Deux along with Ashe and Tatienne.

"When you return, we should have a large wedding. The castle in Un is massive and there is-" Tatienne was lost in fantasising about the marriage between herself and Florian. Ashe chuckled and gave a few ideas herself much to his irritation. He did not know how to feel about Tatienne, she was usually overbearing but she had a keen sense of his emotions. She could see right through him and pick up on his mood fluctuations. It had scared him, he had to admit. She was not harmful and if you stripped off the extravagant there was a kind person underneath. She refrained from speaking about her father and she had seemed to be closer with Etel. Her brother had asked her to return to her home but she ignored him and chose to stay.

"How should we react when we see Priest Able again?" Ashe asked during a break in conversation.

Florian shrugged.

"Who is Priest Able?" Tatienne asked.

"The man who raised us. The leader of the Scaev." Ashe answered.

"He never told us who he truly was...and he forced this on us." Florian showed the Rixa amulet that hung from his neck.

"He never forced it on us...Priest Able cannot be a bad person, I will refuse it until my last breath." Ashe mumbled the last part.

"Your belief is commendable. A part of me feels the same but another thinks he was the cause of all of this." He looked at Ashe and saw her eyes waver slightly. "It is good to be optimistic, we will soon have our answers regardless."

They walked around for a few moments longer before making the way back to the stronghold. When they reached the stronghold's entrance, Alaric had been waiting for them there.

"I think it is about time we had that talk." He looked directly at Florian. Florian nodded and excused himself from the two ladies. He followed Alaric through the stronghold.

"This should be interesting." A familiar voice rang in his ear. He looked around for signs of the man wrapped in shadows. He felt his left leg pulse in pain.

Not now, please!

"Now is the best time." Gaile mocked.

Where are you?

"I keep telling you...I am you!"

He watched in horror as shadows began to engulf one half of his body. Gaile's laughter was all he heard.

A shake on his shoulder made him look up. Alaric stood close to him.

"Are you okay?" Alaric asked.

Florian looked at his body and everything seemed normal.

What was that?

He could still hear Gaile's laughter in the back of his mind.

"Florian?" Alaric asked.

"I am...okay?" He answered.

Alaric gave him a concerned look before waving him on to follow him. They reached a small room that was seemingly used as a study. He beckoned Florian to take a seat.

They sat opposite each other.

It was quiet for a few moments, he could feel the awkwardness in the air.

"We have not spoken since...the first incident," Alaric stated.

Florian remembered the fight they had in Cognizance, how he had nearly killed Ashe, Savia and Alaric.

"I was also told what had happened in The Nix...we are all concerned." Alaric continued.

"Hate me," Florian told Alaric.

Alaric's eyes widened at this.

"I have done so many bad things...hate me." He began to plead with his older brother, who remained silent.

"You were always a much better person than I could ever be." Alaric began. "I use people to get what I want, I am prepared to put innocent people's lives in danger to reach my goals and I have killed people before. All things you have said about me...and all of it is the truth. You have heart and a kindness that seems to have been overshadowed by what I put you through. The difference between me and you is that I know myself. Learn who you want to be, Florian. Only after you gain the understanding will the path open up in front of you." Alaric ended by saying, "So I will not hate you...not yet at least."

Florian looked up toward his brother. Another figure stood behind Alaric. Gaile had his shadowy hands around Alaric's neck. Mockingly strangling him as he chuckled.

"Is this not what you want to do?" Gaile asked. "He is spouting all this nonsense, what does he truly know about you?"

Tears burned down Florian's cheeks.

"He is here..."

He heard Alaric asking "Who?"

"Me!"

64.

Godric stared at the bruised man who sat on his knees on the execution platform. Two of his personal guards stood next to the newly skinny man ready to stab their long spears into the man.

"It has been months, Father. Are you certain Alaric Burchard will show?" Lyall asked from beside him.

It had been months of waiting, keeping Lloyd Burchard alive and bringing him to the execution square every day. After the first week, the people of Meinspir had stopped coming to the platform. He was certain Alaric and his little band of misfits would come. He had not heard anything since Alaric had left Cognizance. Not a rumour or a sighting. It made him suspicious. Then there were the assassination attempts that have increased tremendously over the last two months. Each attempt was made by his own men. He tried to find the cause but he came up empty. He felt as if he was one step behind in every avenue. Lloyd Burchard was his last chance.

"He will be here!" He exclaimed.

He spent his time training Lyall and Charna, he was sure this was going to be the battle they had hoped would occur. Both had been humiliated in Cognizance and were waiting for their chance at revenge.

"Your Majesty!" He heard Anselm's voice behind him.

The man bowed before the Adalbert trio that stood before him.

"News has come from our informant in Porffor! There has been a civil war in the Great City. Great Lord Damiana has lost two of her Commanders in the war. She requests reinforcements from Meinspir as she struggles to deal with the rebellion." Anselm explained.

He began laughing. "Damiana wants my help?" Then he continued to laugh, his two children joining in this time.

"Send word back to Damiana, King Godric will not waste his time with issues that are beneath him." Lyall mockingly told Anselm. Anselm did not look too pleased he had noticed. Then he remembered that Anselm had been born in Porffor.

Anselm locked eyes with him and smiled. It was a sinister smile.

It was you!

"Very well, The Umbra sends her regards!" Anselm exclaimed as he pulled out two small contraptions that he threw to the ground. The execution platform exploded into pink dust. Godric coughed and cursed. He heard the guards panic and his kids calling his name. Then the execution platform vanished.

He was no longer in Meinspir. He stood on flat ground, the dirt below his feet and the forest in the distance. He knew this place all too well. This place has haunted his mind for the past twenty-two years. He had heard screams in the background and he had smelled smoke.

He saw a familiar face standing a few hundred metres from him. A man dressed in black Runic armour.

He was back.

The King's Rite.

65.

He had calmed a very distraught Florian down. He tried to get Florian to talk about who he had been talking about, however, Florian was a mess. He cursed. He knew that they did not have much time, they needed to head to Trois. Florian's eyes did not focus on him, instead, he seemed to be looking past him. He noticed Florian's hand slowly making its way to the sword that hung from his back. Alaric moved fast and grabbed his hand. Florian's skin was hot to the touch. Then he felt a force on his neck. He saw nothing but felt as his throat began to constrict. He let go of Florian and everything returned to normal.

What was that? Alaric coughed.

"His name is Gaile," Florian mumbled. "He is in my mind, I cannot stop him."

Gaile?

A knock at the door shocked both of them. One of Damiana's soldiers stood behind the door. He called for them as the carriages were prepared for the trip to Trois.

"We shall approach this 'Gaile' issue later." He told Florian, who nodded shyly.

They headed out and caught up with Ashe, Everard and Savia. Etel waited in front of the stronghold for them, alongside Tatienne and his lieutenant Joelle. Etel walked up to him.

"This is farewell, Alaric Burchard." Etel raised his hand in greeting. Alaric met his hand and shook it firmly.

"Are you not joining us in the raid?" He asked.

"Porffor requires some to stay behind and I fear I need a break from all the chaos."

"You are a good man, Captain! Take care of your mother and your sister. Your sister is sure to miss my brother." Alaric chuckled as Tatienne had Florian in a tight hug.

"That she will!"

"This city will prosper as long as it has people such as you in it. May we meet again in the future, Captain Etel!"

The two men nodded at each other before parting ways. The soldiers showed Alaric to his carriage. He rode with Damiana and Sybille. The atmosphere in the carriage was cold, Sybille and Damiana did not speak to each other. They have reluctantly decided to work together. Sybille had been Damiana's last remaining commander and since losing their Ysgafyn allies the strongest member of the raid squadron. Damiana made peace with Sybille since she believed that she would not remain in Porffor if their plans worked.

The journey to Trois was not a long one. The view was breathtaking. The carriage was ridden on the Question Road, the coast became visible between the trees. Bluewater crashed against the pearly white sand. The sight made him reminisce of old times on Diable Island. Ships could be spotted in the distance on the waters as they travelled

away from Porffor. It was early evening when they had arrived at the large harbour town of Trois. The town was quiet, the odd soldier or drunkard roamed around. Damiana led them straight to the empty harbour. A large group of soldiers met them there as Damiana pointed out to a large ship that stood still about a few thousand metres off the harbour.

"Have you sent word to them?" He asked.

"I have sent one of my men, he has not returned," Damiana answered.

"Something is coming!" Sybille warned as she floated above.

The Porffor soldiers were on guard as the shadow-like blots moved through the sky towards the harbour. As they got closer, he noticed that it had been three large bird-like nixum. The two birds landed elegantly on the pier. Four figures removed themselves from the backs of the nixum. Three of them he had recognised. First was a man he knew well. He wore a long black robe. He carried a spear that Alaric recognised had been a part of Heinzidal's arsenal due to the gold and crimson nature. Priest Able smiled brightly at Alaric. Next to him was a younger girl, who eyed him with curiosity. Behind them walked two others. He recognised them as the twins who they had met in Diable, Eros and Anteros were their names. Alaric broke from his group and went to meet his guardian halfway down the pier. Behind him, he noticed that Ashe, Florian and Savia followed.

He stood face to face with the man who raised him. Able and the rest got on one knee and bowed before him. This came as a shock to him before Able's words shook him more.

"Praise our founder, for we are reunited with him. And from him, the day of Reckoning is upon us." Able said.

"Founder?" He asked.

"Jerial, my master! The man who founded the scaev. I fear you have not embraced him fully yet." Able pointed at the golden band that was wrapped around Alaric's forearm.

"My father...founded the scaev?"

Able got up to his feet and the rest followed.

"Together we had a plan, a plan for this world to become what it has always been destined to be!" Able explained.

"And what is this world destined to be?" He asked.

"A playground for calamity!" Able chuckled. "But that is not what is important at this moment. Despite not allowing my master to take over your body, you are still crucial to our plans!"

"And so are you," Alaric stated hesitantly.

"It was true then," Ashe spoke from behind him. "You lied to us from the beginning."

Ashe walked in front of him.

"Ashe, my dear." Able said lovingly. "I never lied to anyone, I cared for you three. You most of all."

The girl next to Able looked angrily at Ashe.

"Where are our...true parents?" Ashe asked, Alaric could hear she had been crying.

"Both you and Florian were born in the home of the scaev, Elisium! Your parents had given you up, for you were chosen as Lectus." Able must have sensed their confusion and continued to explain. "Lectus is those chosen to guide our leader" Able gestured to Alaric "to the site of reckoning."

"Are we going to learn what this reckoning is?" Alaric asked.

The twins spoke in unison. "Perhaps it would be better if you did not know."

He heard a sharp gasp and turned to see Florian shivering, he pointed a finger past them and toward the stationary scaev boat on the sea.

"Gaile, have you not tormented the boy enough!" Able asked into the air.

Gaile?

Alaric watched as Florian reached for his blade. Florian got his blade halfway out before screaming in agony.

"I control you, boy. You do my bidding." The words rung through the air but no one had said it.

Alaric jumped into action, closing the distance between himself and Florian. Alaric stopped in his tracks as an elongated crimson spear appeared between him and Florian.

"I said stop, Gaile!" Able warned.

"I give in! I give in! I was just having a bit of fun." The voice appeared once again. "But the boy does have something that belongs to me."

Florian writhed in agony before grabbing his left leg. Slithering its way out from the bottom of Florian's trousers was a long brown whip that had red runes etched on it.

A whip?

"That was Chapman's whip!" Everard exclaimed.

The whip made its way into Able's hands. "You must know how infuriating it was for me to be attached to this fool since you all left Adhu Aqua." Gaile began laughing before Able's warning came once again. Alaric helped Florian stand.

"That was how you kept observing us. I had thought it had just been Jinny." The realisation set in for Alaric.

"Enough of this...we do not have any time to waste. We are here for a reason." Able insisted.

Alaric reluctantly agreed and gestured to the scaev to move along the pier to meet Damiana.

The introductions went smoother than he had expected. Able had brought five thousand men, only half were casters and the rest were mysurs. Porffor had a smaller number of soldiers but all were casters. Able, Damiana and Alaric decided that the following day they would strategise. Able had suggested a celebration for the newly formed alliance

but both he and Damiana had voted against it. Damiana had organised accommodation for the night, as they would return to Deux in the morning.

He slept calmly. Savia was curled up next to him. He woke up when he heard a faint *swish*. He slowly got out of bed trying not to wake Savia. It was fruitless when Savia stirred immediately as he moved. She looked up at him groggily. He mouthed a few words to her before she nodded and turned around. He placed his filtration mask on and exited the room. The breeze outside had been cold. The only sound in the town was the waves that crashed.

"This is twice that I have now noticed you...Yves." Alaric said into the air.

His friend descended from the sky, his two light wings disappearing as he reached the ground. Yves smiled at him as they embraced each other.

"I still do not understand how you do that, Rick."

"Me neither." Alaric laughed. "The Ysgafyn forces have withdrawn from Huit, why are you still here?"

"I could not possibly leave without saying goodbye to my dear friend."

"If you had left I would have been on my journey to Ysgafyn already." Alaric joked. "Will I see you again, my friend?"

"If you find yourself on the Light Continent, I shall be the first to seek you out, Rick."

"Take care, my friend! You have done more for me than you realised." Alaric patted Yves on the back.

"I have a feeling you will pay it back tenfold but alas it is not that time yet." Yves reached into his pocket and withdrew a small brown box. He moved to place the box in Alaric's hands. "Habbeo called it a 'seal breaker', we do not know what it does but I believe you would figure it out."

Alaric fiddled with the box without opening it.

"Keep believing in yourself Rick, you are the future of this land." With those final words, Yves' wings appeared and he took off into the night sky.

Alaric smiled softly and whispered. "Until next time...my friend."

66.

Alaric's stomach was in knots. He was rooted to the gooey creature but he still felt as if he could fall at any moment. Below them were ten thousand metres of nothingness before they would reach the Fractal sea. It had been early in the morning. Savia's hold on him kept him grounded but he in return was almost crushing her hand in his. They were flying a spliefil as he was told they were called. On the spliefil was Ashe, Florian, a girl called Cessair, Savia and himself. They closed in on the large floating city in the sky. The city was about twice the size of Adhu Aqua. It had been the 'Day of Reckoning' as they now called the raid. From their position, they saw the spires that made the city seem threatening. What was threatening was the blue lightning that sparked constantly around the city. A small portion of the lower side of the large city had been illuminated with orange flames. A higher portion of the city was covered in a familiar pink mist.

Able had kept to the plan so far.

"The Execution platform is on the third highest tier! We have to land from above!" He instructed Cessair.

The moody girl just rolled her eyes. She directed the spliefil to ascend and they were raised above the city. The spliefil then descended rapidly toward the city's third tier. He noticed the swirling concentration of pink mist and pointed toward it. Cessair nodded. He placed his filtration mask on and the rest followed.

"First descent is all you, Ashe!" He yelled.

He made out a few figures standing around the execution platform. Cessair slowed the descent as they flew parallel to the platform.

Ashe ran and jumped off of the spliefil, her spear elongated and stabbed into the very top of the platform. The two guards that framed Lloyd were shocked at her appearance as she shrunk her spear allowing her to land safely on the platform. She swiftly kicked one of the guards off of the platform and the other she traded blows with him before bumping him against the chest with the butt of her spear. The guard yelled as he fell off the platform. She spun her spear around and cut all of Lloyd's bonds as she grabbed the weak-looking man by the shoulders.

"Why...did...you...come?" The man asked. His voice was hoarse.

"I wish it was just to save you but it is so much more," she told him while looking for a way off the platform.

The wind generated by the spliefil's wings cleared a lot of the pink mist. In front of the platform, he saw King Godric. Bordering him were his two children, Lyall and Charna as Savia pointed them out. The trio did not move. Ahead of the trio was a man who laughed maniacally. He assumed it had been the man Damiana told him about. All was going to plan already, the Meinspir soldiers would be distracted by the sudden invasion

of the scaev. This left Godric vulnerable to attack, as was the plan. Damiana warned that her illusion magic would not last long against Godric and other strong casters, therefore they had a small window. They would either kill Godric now or stall until Damiana's forces arrive. Cessair landed the spliefil on the cobblestone ground in front of Godric. They hopped off the nixum and Cessair took flight once again.

"The end of your reign comes today, Godric!" The man shouted then laughed maniacally. The man then turned to Alaric, Florian and Savia. "They are all yours!" The moment he waited for had arrived. He took a few steps forward but was pulled back. Lightning struck the space between him and Godric. He looked back and saw that it was Savia who pulled him backwards.

"Would it be so simple to kill me?" Godric's eyes were focused on him. A wry smile on the man's face as he rubbed the ugly scar across his nose.

"Alaric Burchard it is about time we met." Godric's gauntlet shone blue as silvery metal formed out of his gauntlet forming a sharp grey blade. He tossed the blade forward and in a flash, it pierced Damiana's man. A loud boom resonated slightly after he threw it as if thunder crashed down on the man.

"For The Umbra..." The man whispered before he fell lifeless to the ground.

"You have no idea what it means to be King of the Zidal Empire! It means to be the strongest!" Godric formed another blade and threw it towards Alaric. Alaric cast a barrier, and as the blade hit his barrier he was flung backwards. Both his barrier and Godric's blade vanished. Alaric cursed.

I knew he would be strong but this is ridiculous.

His legs were shaking as he struggled to his feet.

"Then should my father...not be King?" He asked.

Godric feigned offence. "But I do not see the old fool anywhere...do you?"

He moved his hand over Habbeo's seal.

"No, Alaric!" Savia yelled.

Godric formed another blade.

Everyone stopped when a small piece of parchment floated softly into the air between Alaric and Godric.

He recognised the envelope as it burnt to a crisp in midair.

The bright sky darkened immediately as the day had suddenly turned to night.

The ground began to shake.

"What have you done?" Godric asked.

"On this day, every soul on Hominus heard the screech. A screech of a disaster that slept for thousands of years." A familiar voice said. "The Angh lives again! Master, we have finally done it!" Able appeared before Alaric. He had been crying but he did not look upset, it had seemed like the opposite.

"Able Cornexia! This is your doing?"

"What a joyous occasion!" Able ignored the King.

The ground began to shake more vigorously. Screams could be heard all over the city. To their left, a building collapsed as a sharp black tendril exploded through the ground. Alaric knew this feeling, he felt it in The Nix. He looked toward Savia who had already been looking at him. Then he yelled. "RUN!"

He ran away from Godric and Able. Meinspir had three exits he was aware of. They all existed on the lowest tier of the city. It had been difficult to keep his balance as the ground shook. More tendrils began appearing all over the city. A quick glance saw that Savia and Florian followed him. He looked for Ashe and spotted her ahead of them carrying an injured-looking man. He was about to call for her when he heard a familiar scream behind him. He turned and his heart sank. Everything went cold.

Savia screamed his name as black tendrils coiled around her waist and wrapped around her lower body. He ran towards her but the tendrils dragged her down into the cobblestone ground. Her beautiful black eyes were the last he saw of her before she vanished before him.

"SAVIA!!!!!" He kept yelling. He did not know when the tears appeared. Florian tried to get him to keep running. He did not feel like running any longer. He saw Ashe ahead of them but she no longer held the man. Instead Able held her by the throat as he carried her away.

Florian ran towards them but was stopped by a bolt of lightning that struck just in front of him.

"Running away, Alaric? You have made allies with the wrong people. That is what you get when you are playing at heroes." Godric mocked him. Godric held a decapitated head in his hands. It was Lloyd Burchard's head that dangled from the king's grasp. Alaric's hand found the gold seal.

"Run, Florian!" He removed the seal as he lost control of his body.

Purple met blue. As Jerial faced Godric.

It had begun. The moment that changed Hominus forever.

The people had called it, Reckoning.

The End

The Reckoning continues in the Final Book
