

The storm barreled down on Jikun, hurling his block of ice haphazardly across the foaming crests. A crack of lightning flashed in the sky and an image was briefly illuminated to his left—a pillar of stone jutting from the crashing waves, a ripped sail tangled across the jagged surface.

There came a sudden, fervent cry. “Jikun?!”

Another blaze of lightning and Jikun caught a glimpse of the pale skin of the Helven, his body gripping the debris of the ship. He vanished under a massive swell and reappeared in a frantic struggle for air.

“Over here!! Left!!” Jikun hollered. He swung his hand into the water, trying to propel himself forward. As though mocking him, a gentle wave knocked him farther away, and a ripple of thunder cascaded like laughter across the sky.

He saw Navon’s head turn toward him, his hollow cheeks lit by a brilliant flare of light. His fingers were like bones clutching onto the cracks of the wood, his fingernails clawing at the surface.

A wave barreled into Navon from the side. With a terrified cry, his companion vanished beneath the water, swallowed with the remnants of the ship.

STEPS OF POWER

THE KINGS

Kings or Pawns

Heroes or Thieves

-UPCOMING-

Gods or Men

Princes or Paupers



HEROES
OR
THIEVES

THE KINGS: BOOK II

JJ SHERWOOD

EDITED BY ALEXANDRA BIRR

Heroes or Thieves

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When we gather in that special place all adventurers do—that clamorous tavern that only mercenaries, soldiers, and that one town drunk seem to utilize—you eight would get the special table. Not the one that’s lopsided. Not the one stuffed in the dark and dusty corner. Not the one where the seat is forever sticky no matter how hard that generously endowed barmaid scrubs.

The one reserved for the best of the best—inexplicably clean, polished, and already set with eight *clean* mugs topped with the best ale this side of the Windari Channel.

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PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

a – rack e – wet i – miss o – lock u – fur ee – seen
 ah – far aw – call ey – came ahy – right air – fare uh – up
 oo – soon oh – rope

Note: the “**h**” in all Sel’varian names is pronounced “breathlessly”: fi

Note: the “**d**” in all Sel’varian is quick and almost “silent”

Note: **ʒ** is pronounced as a rolling J (*jsh*), as in the name “Jacques”

Aersophyla	air-soh-FAHY-luh	Lardol	LAHR-duhl
Adonis	A-duh-nis	Liadeltris	lee-uh-DEL-tris
Alvena	al-VEE-nuh	Makados	MAH-kuh-dohs
Cahsari	CAH-suh-ree	Mikanum	mee-KAH-nuhm
Darcarus	dahr-CAHR-uhs	Navon	nuh-VON
Darival	DAIR-i-vawl	Noc’olari	no-koh-LAH-ree
El’adorium	el-uh-DOHR-ee-uhm	Relstavum	rel-STAH-vuhm
Elarium	el-AHR-ee-uhm	Rulan	ROO-lahn
Eldaeus	el-DEY-uhs	Ryekarayn	RAHY-kair-en
Elvorium	el-VOHR-ee-uhm	Saebellus	sey-BEL-luhs
Emal’drathar	e-MAL-druh-thahr	Sairel	SEY-rel
Ephraim	EF-reym	Sanas	SAH-nes
Erallus	e-RAWL-luhs	Sel’ari	sel-AH-ree
Eraydon	e-REY-duhn	Sellemar	SEL-le-mahr
Esra	EZ-ruh	Sevrigel	SEV-ri-gel
Fildor	FIL-dohr	Taemrin	TEYM-reen
Geldin	GEL-din	Thakish	THAH-kish
Hadoream	fiAH-dawr-uhm	Tilarus	ti-LAIR-uhs
Hairem	fiEY-rem	Tiras	TAHY-ruhs
Hazamareth	hah-zuh-MAIR-eth	Tsuki	SKEE
Heshellon	he-shel-LON	Turlondiel	tur-LON-dee-el
Ilrae	IL-ruh	Turmazel	TOOR-muh-zel
Ilsevel	IL-se-vel	Valdor	VAL-dohr
Itirel	AHY-ti-rel	Vethru	VETH-roo
Jerah	ʒAIR-uh	Wratherus	RA-thur-uhs
Jikun	ʒEE-koon		
Kaivervi	KEY-ver-vahy		
Kevus	KEY-vuhs		
Kisacaela	ki-suh-CEYL-uh		
Laeris	LEY-ris		
Laethile	LEYTH-ahyl		

RACE PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Darivalian	dair-i-VAWL-ee-en
Eph'ven	EF-ven
Eph'vi	EF-vahy
Faraven	FAIR-uh-ven
Faravi	FAIR-uh-vahy
Farvian	FAHR-vee-en
Galwen	GAHL-wen
Galweni	GAHL-wen-ee
Helven	HEL-ven
Helvari	hel-VAH-ree
Helvarian	hel-VAH-ree-en
Lithri	LITH-ree
Malraven	mal-RAH-ven
Malravi	mal-RAH-vee
Noc'olari	no-koh-LAH-ree
Noc'olarian	no-koh-LAH-ree-en
Ruljen	ROOL- ʒen
Ruljenari	rool- ʒe-NAH-ree
Ruljarian	rool- ʒAHR-ee-en
Sel'ven	SEL-ven
Sel'vi	SEL-vahy
Sel'varian	sel-VAH-ree-en

GLOSSARY

Aersadore — the world on which Ryekarayn and Sevrigel reside.

Darcarus — second prince of the True Blood Sel’vi, purportedly a relentless troublemaker.

Darival — the freezing tundra of Sevrigel’s north, recently besieged by an upsurge of the bestial white thakish. Home to General Jikun Taemrin.

El’adorium — the speaker of Elvorium’s Council of Elves.

Elarium — Sevrigel’s affluent capital of the south, site of the obliteration of General Jikun Taemrin’s army by the warlord Saebellus.

Erallus — Hairem’s personal guard and heir to the throne. He allowed himself to be surrendered by Sellemar to Ilsevel in order for Sellemar to gain the queen’s favor.

Eraydon — the great hero of Aersadore who, 9000 years ago, sacrificed his life to vanquish the dragon god’s forces.

Farvian massacre — the horrific slaughter of Sevrigel’s entire Farvian population by their own Mad King.

Galway — the god of seafarers and water.

Hadoream — the third True Blood child of King Silandrus, remembered amongst Elvorium’s palace servants for possessing a mischievous, kind, and free-spirited nature.

Halls of Horiembrig — Sevrigel’s uninfluential capital of the West, which was captured by the warlord Saebellus during General Jikun Taemrin’s occupation in the Sevilan Marshes.

Iira — the neutral god of healing. A great number of his followers are the Noc’olari.

Ishkav — a dark god of death, worshiped by cult followers and fanatics.

Itirel — the tranquil, gifted Noc’olarian healer who assisted Sellemar in the rescue of Lady Ilsevel.

Kaivervi — a Darivalian hunter of great skill. Has romantic interest in Jikun and he in her, but due to Jikun’s inability to commit, they remain apart.

Kamora — a goddess of beauty and nature, commonly worshiped by the Faravi and Sel’vi.

Lardol — the former head servant of Hairem’s palace and Alvena’s personal “tormentor.” Helped Alvena escape after she witnessed Hairem’s murder.

Madorana — the former head cook of Hairem’s palace.

Malranus — the god of dragons, rival to Sel’ari. Worshipers are often secret in their religious practices for fear of persecution.

Murios — a powerful necromancer from Darival who prophesized the fall of a kingdom at the hands of a Lithri.

Necromancy — magic that harnesses the spirits of the dead to cleave living souls, animate dead corpses, or even resurrect dead mortals to life; its use on Sevrigel results in the death penalty.

Nilanis — Ilsevel’s father and the previous El’adorium. Ilsevel had him executed as revenge for his secret murder of her brother, a loyalist to Saebellus.

Noctem — the god of the night and minor god of deception. Rival of Sel’ari. Worshiped primarily by the Noc’olari.

Phantom Isles — the islands to Ryekarayn’s southwest, territory of monsters, demons, and all manner of bestial legends.

Royal Schism — the division 300 years past in which the True Bloods departed for Ryekarayn and the previous El’adorium, Liadeltris, ascended Sevrigel’s throne.

Ryekarayn — the western continent of Aersadore; previous homeland of the elves before they departed to Sevrigel following the humans’ betrayal of Eraydon. The continent is vastly untamed and now primarily civilized by humans and dwarves.

Sairel — king of the True Blood Sel’varian Realm upon Ryekarayn; commanding and studious in nature.

Sel'ari — the goddess of justice. She is a righteous, fierce warrior who brought the mighty dragon god, Malranus, down for her elven people. Primarily worshiped by the elves, especially the Sel'vi.

Sevilan Marshes — the swamp in which General Jikun Taemrin's army contracted the Marsh Plague while attempting to battle the centaurs.

Sevrigel — the eastern continent on Aersadore, home to all races of elves.

Silandrus — the traditional, devoted king of Sevrigel who abdicated his throne and established the True Blood realm on Ryekarayn.

Thakish — the ferocious beasts of Darival's icy tundra. They have three eyes, white fur, six legs, and fingerlike structures upon their backs. They hide within the snow and devour unsuspecting passersby.

Tiras — the most powerful necromancer Aersadore has ever seen and one of Eraydon's legendary companions. After being blinded in the Last Battle, he vanished, leaving behind a legacy of magic but only two written tomes.

True Blood — the elves (excluding the Faravi who were massacred prior to the event) who fought in Eraydon's battle and did not abandon Ryekarayn when their human allies turned on them.

Vale — Saebellus' crude and rowdy captain who Sellemar stabbed during his rescue of Lady Ilsevel.

Windari Channel — the channel separating the continents of Ryekarayn and Sevrigel.

Zephereus — god of the sun and glory. Righteous, but merciful, and primarily worshiped by humans.

RECAP

- ✦ An era of corruption reigns over the country of Sevrigel, led by the people's elected Council of Elves. After years of failing to cure the degradation, the True Blood King Silandrus departed the land with his three children and tens of thousands of followers. They established a new kingdom upon the continent of Ryekarayn that became known simply as the Sel'varian Realm. Until their former home purifies itself of its iniquities, they have refused interaction with Sevrigel.
- ✦ The previous leader of the Council of Elves, the El'adorium Liadeltris, ascended the Sevrigelian throne and became the first king of non-royal blood. However, after a 300-year reign and as a result of failing to appease corrupt wishes, he was assassinated by the very council who appointed him.
- ✦ Liadeltris' son, Hairem, was thenceforth crowned in a time of tumultuous politics and uncertain loyalties. Hairem was young and confident, but ultimately naïve; he held the belief that he could reform the council's policies.
- ✦ Hairem's visionary leadership quickly threatened to shift the balance of the council. In direct response, several of his loyal council members were assassinated. These attacks were secretly orchestrated by the new El'adorium, Nilanis, in order to retain a majority vote to support his policies.
- ✦ During the chaos of these brutal murders, General Jikun Taemrin returned from war to Sevrigel's capital of Elvorum. He had won yet another victory over the rebelling warlord and ex-general of the Sevrigelian army, Saebellus. While Saebellus had won no battles himself, his tactical genius and demonic beast persistently wreaked havoc on Jikun's army. In his first meeting with the newly appointed

King Hairem, Jikun believed the king's words that his priority was the military's success.

- ✦ But Jikun's success was not the priority of the council. Nilanis, attempting to gain further control over the king, invited Hairem to dine with his beautiful daughter, Ilsevel. While initially rebuffed by Nilanis' blatant attempt at matchmaking, Hairem soon believed Ilsevel to be a lady with fire and firm political opinions aligned with his own.
- ✦ While Hairem struggled with the council's attempts to control or ignore his wishes, Jikun returned north to visit his icy homeland of Darival. There he joined his comrades in a hunt of the predatory thakish, whose aggression had risen to unprecedented heights since his last visit. He expressed affection for his childhood friend Kaivervi, but was unwilling to commit to her.
- ✦ Jikun's trip was cut short by the council's demands. Upon their order, he moved his army south to the Sevilan Marshes, where the centaurs' burial grounds encroached upon the territory of the Sel'vi's phoenix. While King Hairem opposed this ruling to relocate the centaurs, he nonetheless complied with what he believed to be a wholly selfish decree. He furthermore denied Jikun's request to aid Darival against the thakish, stating that more troops could not be spared.
- ✦ While both internal and external conflict raged, a mysterious foreigner named Sellemar arrived in Elvorium. By night, he hunted the enemies of Sevrigel under the name of Ralaris, hoping to gather evidence to reveal the council's immorality.
- ✦ However, neither Hairem's disagreement with the council nor Sellemar's attempts to remove them had any effect on Jikun's fate. In the long weeks within the swamps, a plague swept through Jikun's ranks and devastated his soldiers. All military action ceased and the troops were forced to eat their own dead to survive. It was Jikun's first military defeat. The horrific event cost him the lives and health of a crippling portion of his troops.
- ✦ During the Marsh Plague, Hairem became engaged to Ilsevel. He swiftly used his new political leverage with her father to recall the army from the swamps.
- ✦ Due to Hairem's show of defiance—and in utter disregard for Nilanis' disagreement—the council ordered the assassin to kill the king. Hairem and his personal guard Erallus managed to fend the assassin

off and send him fleeing. Realizing the fragility of his own life and reign, Hairem named Erallus his heir in the event that he should die without a child.

- ✦ Finally receiving the order to return, Jikun surrendered to the centaurian leader. His army was forced to relinquish their armor and weapons. On the return journey to the capital, Jikun's defenseless division was attacked by Saebellus' Beast. Their survival was owed entirely to Captain Navon's forbidden use of necromancy.
- ✦ Upon their return—battered, ill, and near death—Jikun and his troops were quarantined outside the capital. This final indignity escalated Jikun's emotional distress and he attempted to strike the king. Mercifully, Hairem allowed the incident to pass unaddressed.
- ✦ While Hairem focused his new political hold on amending his errors, Ilsevel planned a visit to an ill relative outside the capital. During the journey, she staged her own capture by the warlord Saebellus. She used the encounter to express herself an ally and discuss with him the fall of the elven nation.
- ✦ Sellemar, hearing of Ilsevel's capture, revealed to the king and council his identity and close relationship with the True Bloods. He informed them that she was being held in the Halls of Horiembrig, an old city Saebellus had seized during Jikun's occupation in the swamps. After expressing his intent to rescue her, he was joined in his venture by Erallus.
- ✦ Along with Sellemar's mysterious companion Itirel, he and Erallus used the True Blood tunnels beneath the old eastern capital to retrieve Ilsevel and escape. During the venture, Sellemar both killed Saebellus' lieutenant, Kraesin, and severely wounded his captain, Vale.
- ✦ Meanwhile, Navon was attacked by Saebellus' Beast while praying in the temple of Sel'ari. He was forced to use his necromancy to compel the beast to retreat. Yet despite his triumph, Navon was imprisoned for the crime of using the forbidden magic and sentenced to execution.
- ✦ Shortly after Navon's imprisonment, Ilsevel was returned to the capital and wed Hairem. As she had planned with Saebellus, she offered intelligence of the warlord's movements toward the southern capital of Elarium.

- ✦ Hairem immediately sent Jikun to “thwart” Saebellus’ victory. However, Jikun refused to lead the army without Navon, thus forcing Hairem to relent and pardon the captain for his crimes.
- ✦ Jikun consulted with Sellemar regarding the secret True Blood tunnels. The information led Jikun to believe that they had finally found a way to corner and defeat the warlord.
- ✦ Sellemar returned his attention to the council. Informed of his intent to reveal their crimes, the council made a grave miscalculation and sent the assassin to murder the warrior. Sellemar easily dispatched the human and threw his body into the canyon.
- ✦ Meanwhile at Elarium, Jikun found Saebellus’ troops pinched between him and the city. After a careful scouting of the area, Jikun’s army rained down upon Saebellus’ seemingly unsuspecting troops.
- ✦ However, a large faction of Saebellus’ army—soldiers Jikun believed to still be at the defense of Horiembrig—appeared suddenly and inexplicably from the previously scouted hillsides: leaving Jikun surrounded. Saebellus had formerly used the magic to vanish after every defeat, yet never once—in all their battles—had he chosen to demonstrate its power to appear. Stunned and unprepared, Jikun’s troops were utterly defeated.
- ✦ Finding Jikun terrified on the battlefield, Captain Navon ordered his general to flee. When he discovered that Jikun was severely wounded, he pulled him from the bloodbath. Together they fled across the Windari Channel toward the human continent of Ryekarayn.
- ✦ Hairem received news of Jikun’s defeat, yet he remained hopeful of Elvorum’s success. He turned to Ilsevel for comfort—and she drew him close and slit his throat.
- ✦ Hairem’s mute handmaiden, Alvena, witnessed the murder—a fact made known instantly to Ilsevel when Alvena, horrorstruck, burst into the room where Hairem lay dying.
- ✦ Alvena immediately fled and escaped the palace with the help of Erallus and the head servant, Lardol. She was taken to Sellemar’s estate where he revealed yet another True Blood tunnel. With Sellemar’s letter promising safe passage in hand, she travelled through, intent on reaching the True Bloods on Ryekarayn.
- ✦ Knowing Erallus would never ascend the throne, and with the heir’s compliance, Sellemar turned the former guard over to Ilsevel in order to gain her favor.

- ✦ Days later, Saebellus arrived to the bridge of the capital. The council feared for its own safety and threw wide the gates for his arrival. Saebellus then gave the council an ultimatum: Ilsevel would marry him and make him king, or he would war with Elvorium and kill them all. Ilsevel feigned distress and accepted his terms in order to “save the people.”
- ✦ They were immediately wed and Saebellus was crowned King of Sevrigel.
- ✦ The shroud of benevolence cast aside, Ilsevel’s first act was to murder her father for his secret assassination of her brother, a male who had nearly tarnished their family name when he joined Saebellus’ cause. She then informed the council that “the reign of kings has returned.”





DARIVAL

* KAIVERVALE

GULF OF SARAVI

N
+
-

SEVRIGEL

SCARLET BAY

W
I
N
D
A
R
C
H
A
N
N
E
L

* SELVARIAN REALM

YISLAVAL MOUNTAINS

* IRONWATCH

* HEMSKEP

* SANAE

REDBERN FOREST

PASS OF THE DEAD

MAKATAI DESERT

* DAHEL

DRAGON WING

* MARLORE

SEVILAN MARSHES

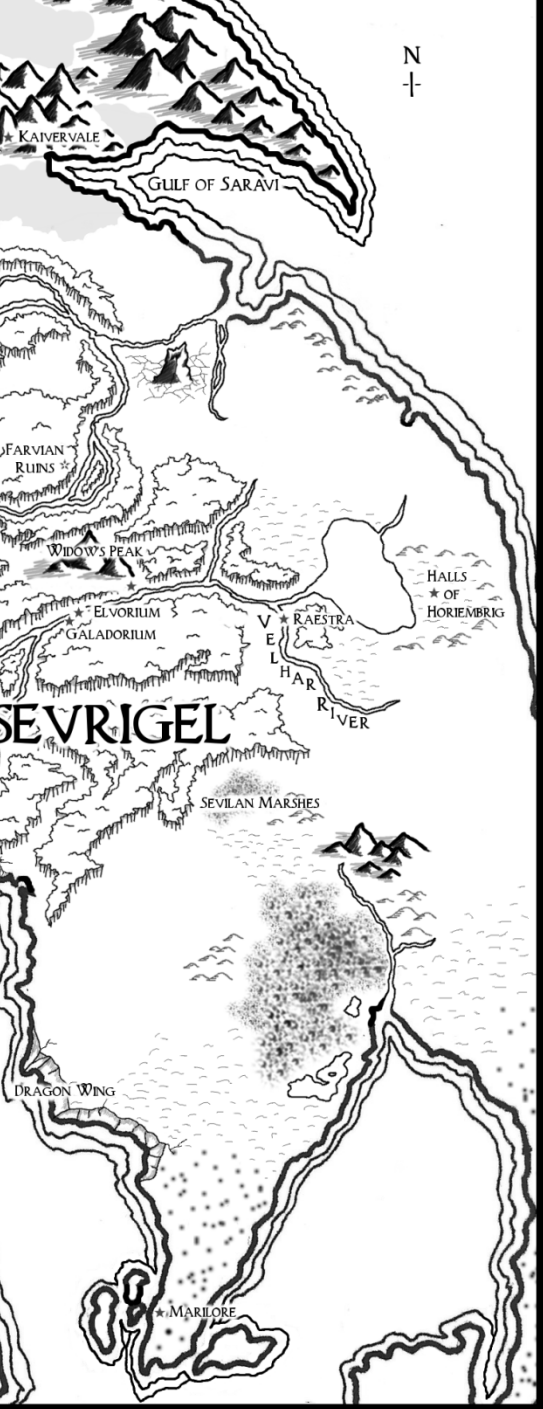
VELHAR RIVER

* ELVORIUM

* GALADORIUM

* RAESTRA

HALLS OF HORIEMBRIG



PROLOGUE

The human drew closer, his body growing to fill the empty street with his every step. His breath was audible, heavy and thick, as though his lungs strained to expand within his hulking chest. Another boot thudded across the frozen earth—to Jikun’s tensed ears, it fell like a distant toll of thunder, heralding the coming of a treacherous storm.

Jikun hovered one hand above the hilt of his sword while he lifted his other slightly in the air. He felt the faint tingle of ice, dull and throbbing, as it flitted across his fingertips.

A whisper of fabric grazed his skin, and he was abruptly aware of Navon’s presence at his side. The Helven’s pale face was shrouded in shadows, hollow and sunken in the dim moonlight. “Jikun, turn away from this,” he pleaded. “The hour is not yet late—we can join the war and stop Saebellus! *Do not let your pride destroy you!*”

Their Sel’ven companion seized Navon by the shoulder, shoving the coward back into the darkness.

“*Silence!*” Jikun hissed again. The brand marking him as *cattle* seared across his arm in a reminder of the degradation of his current path. *Pathetic.*

The time for speech was at an end. Borin had reached the alley.

Jikun’s fingers spread above the barren earth and a shaft of ice erupted from beneath, raining dirt and stone as it slammed into Borin’s side and hurled the half-giant into the alleyway. Despite the speed and force with which he had been thrown, the man let out no more than a grunt as he careened past their bodies and sprawled into the dust.

“*Be still!*” Jikun snarled, sprinting forward. Cold water pulled from the soil and hardened, piercing the air to halt a hair’s width from Borin’s chest. Here, in the shadows of the alley, they were nigh-invisible daggers—poised to strike at the human’s slightest movement.

As though grasping his situation for the first time, Borin's head jerked wildly up and around, absorbing the three elves surrounding him. His broad hand fell slowly to his side. "...What is this?" he growled as the silence settled. "An ambush?"

"Gods show mercy," Navon seethed. "*We should walk away from this!*"

Jikun stiffened and threw his shoulders back.

"Yes, this is an ambush," the Sel'ven interjected smoothly.

Jikun dislodged his captain's admonishment with a defiant strut forward; a crackle of ice glittered into being, forming a short barrier between the immense arms and Jikun's polished boots. "I want the information you withheld concerning Relstavum. And if I should find it less than I desire..." The ice lengthened and caressed the weathered leather strapped across the giant's breast.

Borin's nostrils flared. With startling speed, his fist flew outward, shattering the ice as though it were merely glass. He snagged the hem of Jikun's cloak, tearing it from his tall, lean frame.

"*WHO?!*" Then Borin's eyes widened with incredulous recognition. "I know who you are," he spat, flinging the cloak aside as Jikun hastened to restore his dominance upon the man. "You're the greedy elves from earlier today—the war criminals who figured they'd poke Balior with a stick. Twenty thousand in debt, aren't you? *Malranus' fire could not have burned you more thoroughly.*" He laughed then, a mocking, hollow laugh, as though the bodily threat to him—gleaming a mere fraction away—was gone. "You failed to defeat Saebellus with an army and now you want to face his forces without one? Relstavum is the man's *beast.*" His laugh intensified, threatening to reach Emal'drathar to mock Jikun with the gods.

But Relstavum was not Saebellus' Beast.

He was far worse.

"Silence!" Jikun snarled, the spears of ice diving through the man's rich clothes to prod beneath his bronze-hued flesh. He snatched his cloak from the earth, aware of the soft, white rays that exposed his unique features. It was too late to withdraw—he was too deep along his path. "I won't ask kindly again, human," he growled.

The Sel'ven gave a sharp, encouraging nod. *Do not forget what brought us to this place,* it said. He leaned forward, flicking a piece of rubble casually from Borin's shaven crown. "Answer the question, Borin," he repeated. The smooth nail left a streak across the silver stubble.

“You’re fucking mad,” the man swore, and the ice crackled once in warning. “Mad—!” But Borin’s howls subsided, his chest quavering as it attempted to retract from the perilous daggers. “Your warlord has created an army within a single man: Relstavum is soul harnessing, though I’m certain none of you god-damn fools has any idea what in the Nine Realms that is. But you *should* know who *Tiras* is; Relstavum has *Tiras*’ necromantic writings from *Vise* and he can *use* them. You can’t have the mission because it’s beyond your fucking abilities. Laeris has invested too much money in you to throw you to Saebellus’ dog! Right now, there isn’t a mercenary company alive that can contend with his might—and the man is only growing more dangerous. *This* is a matter for kings and armies! By Malranus Almighty, Relstavum levels *god-damn cities*.”

The Sel’ven lurched forward without warning, slamming his foot against the slick ice bearing down upon the giant’s shoulder. His hair had unraveled from its elegant braid, the strands swirling about his contorted lips. “And if this man continues to breathe, he will cost my brother his life and Aersadore her freedom. So *I’ll ask you one more time, human!*”

The ice prickled as Jikun adjured, “Now, Borin!”

The half-giant bared his massive, grey teeth, etching a meager show of defiance across his insolent face. “You want to get yourself killed?—fine, *elf*,” he jeered. “Relstavum was in Ironwatch two days ago, heading north. But you’d better vanish into the nearest god-damn mountains, because when I’m free of this, the Brotherhood will send mercenaries to hang you by your entrails whether or not you succeed. Who in the Brotherhood did you think you were questioning?” His voice was rising in fury and Jikun could almost feel the sound penetrating the nearby walls. “I’m not a god-damn commoner. I’m not a god-damn mercenary. I’m—”

‘*Laeris’ Sword...*’ Jikun stilled, mind whirling at these new threats. His feet felt leaden, weighing him inescapably to the frosty earth. He had considered the torture. The necessity of using force to extract the withheld information. Even how the gargantuan man might retaliate with his own might. But Jikun had not reflected upon the *others* that existed beneath Borin’s whip. How could he have forgotten that?

‘*You’re slipping, Jikun.*’

Borin’s voice was mounting to a roar, now. “—Geldin Laeris’ elite. I control every damn mercenary you could ever *think* to know. I have seen your face. *I know your kind*. If you think Relstavum is your enemy... You just

opened the god-damn Gates. You won't get two cities from here before the Brotherhood will have blades in your back!"

Jikun's knees threatened to betray him and he clutched at the cloak in his pale hands.

"Even without our brand, your appearance is blood in the snow! If you think we won't find you before dawn, you—"

Navon interrupted with a vociferous cry. "Jikun, I advised you against this! *Soul-harnessing?! Join the king's war—by Ramul, you are a soldier! Release him now and perhaps we can bart—*"

Borin laughed, the sound a cavernous boom that rattled the icicles dangling from the nearby wooden eaves. "*Barter? There is no bartering, elf! You will be lucky to die by Relstavum! The Brotherhood will hunt you down and we will rip retribution from your bones until your screams deafen the god—*" His voice strangled off with a soft gurgle.

There was a suffocating silence. Navon uttered a choking gasp.

From the midst of the chunks of ice and earthen debris, the man's fist tightened once and then fell limp.

Jikun stared blankly at the daggers that had ruptured through the hulking human... that had pierced through his vital organs and crushed his burly throat.

Jikun's palm opened and the ice melted away, leaving the man sprawled across the earth.

With a casual hop, the Sel'ven freed himself from the proximity of the encroaching sludge. "...Well done. We have what we need."

"*Jikun, by Sel'ari, WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?!*" Navon finally managed to scream, his azure eyes wide with horror. He sprinted toward the corpse, as though there remained some hope that the human had endured. That he might yet be saved.

But Borin was dead.

His sacrifice was necessary.

This was Jikun's last chance to abolish Saebellus' tyranny before Ryekarayn was lost. And Sevrigel forever with her.

CHAPTER ONE

41 Days Earlier

A fire of red and orange ignited the western sky where the sun had descended below the horizon. Her flames seemed to lick the darkness that followed in her wake, bathing the underbellies of the clouds that had rolled in from the north. They were lighter now, their great weight of snow dropped on the mountain peaks in Arisfare—the continent’s first snowfall of the winter. They would carry on to the south, relinquishing what remained as heavy showers. Then, as they reached the base of the Aenid Mountains on the edge of the Makataj Desert, they would fade entirely.

Into that sky’s darkness, a great, winged silhouette rose above the Sel’varian Forest with two figures hunkered against its spine. Below them, upon the bed of an empty room, only the elegant handwriting on fresh parchment remained in explanation.

My dear father and brother,

I have seen the enemy swell in number these last few weeks, but today I have witnessed its effect upon my very blood. Darcarus’ wound at the hands of these villains has opened my eyes, and I have realized we can no longer protect even those of our own royal family.

I am no fool. I am aware of the years Relstavum has labored to build a force that could contest with us. That would even dare to do so. Nor am I blind to Relstavum’s ability to devastate this continent by his own hand.

We can no longer turn aside from the evil spreading in our land! In shunning the truth of our necessity to act, we have allowed Sevrigel to fall. What her people have tasted in defeat, we soon shall share. And while the conflict at our gates may be designed merely to lead us from the source of its command, its attacks shall cripple us all the same.

Thus, it is with clear conscience that I have resolved to act before more blood is spilt. I shall not let the land of our brethren be lost!

I urge you to join me. Sevrigel will never rebel against Saebellus to save herself, but behind your towering walls, you are not helpless: urge the humans' king to intervene. Or please, Father, break your stringent vow to never return, for the people are in dire need: end the separation between our worlds with our own military strength.

If you forbid Sairel to lead the force, Darcarus or I would gladly stand in his stead.

By the time this letter finds you, Darcarus and I shall be long gone. Do not fear for my safety for it is you I shall fret over every night. I shall miss you dearly.

Hadoream

Yet the dancers below the vanishing trio were wholly unaware of the farewell. Surrounding their fluttering feet, a quick and jovial tune persisted, eloping with the cool breeze of the evening. It wound its way across the bustling gardens beyond where the dancers swept across the cobblestones and twisted about the gleaming fountain. The warm, yellow light of the garden orbs seemed to bob along with the melody, stretching and shrinking their merry shadows.

From the palace's tower high above them, King Sairel unfurled a small scroll of parchment, scrutinizing the tiny scribbles scrawled haphazardly across the page. His lips drew tight as he noted the dwarven seal embedded neatly at the bottom: the only legible mark on the page. He dropped it irritably to his left, licking his index finger to pull the next ivory sheet from the stack.

There was no time for gaiety and childish tunes. And yet, before he had the opportunity to dissect further legal contents, music drifted in from the courtyard below, determined to contaminate his quiet abode.

“‘Dance!’ cried the prince.
‘I’ll dance!’ cried the tree,
And it danced and it cried
To the music’s melody.”

Sairel squinted irritably at the notice in his hands. Only when he had nearly blocked the ruckus out did a song seem to sweep all the more forcefully into the warm air of his vast office. And these words, imparted in the Common Tongue, grated with particular affliction upon his ears.

“A terrible, terrible, terrible lie.
As the mad king lives,
His people die.”

Sairel rubbed a hand against his twitching eye and slid his chair back forcefully. The fire in the corner sparked, cracking as it bit into the newest log and showering the fireplace with orange, mutually annoyed sparks. *‘They are going to give me an ulcer...’* Why ever the humans had contrived a *nursery rhyme* out of the slaughter of Sevrigel’s Farvian people across the channel, he could not fathom. He stalked to the door of his study, pushing it open a crack.

The guard before him turned quickly at attention. “Is there something wrong, Your Majesty?”

“No.” Sairel waved a hand dismissively. “Just order them to cease those dreadful human... *songs*, if that is what they indeed are.”

The guard hesitated, sliding his palm anxiously across his helmet. “Yes, Your Majesty. It’s the human’s Winter Festival in the capital. Veacerel took the servants out today to see it. It—”

Sairel heaved a sigh, muttering below his breath. *‘Sometimes Veacerel panders to the servants as though he may one day end up as one... Which he shall do if I keep hearing this song!’* he thought sourly. “Never mind, let them carry on. *Someone* should at least enjoy themselves while I labor.” He closed the door before the guard’s opening mouth, stepping briskly across the room to the balcony. He shut those doors as well, relieved that the melody was reduced to a low hum outside the thick glass.

The mahogany chair creaked as he settled back into it, and he slid the completed parchment to his left. He pulled the next one off his stack, scanning it and flourishing his name across the bottom. He pressed the seal of a phoenix into the corner and waved the parchment briefly in the air to dry. Then he discarded it to his left.

It was a brief glimpse of progress.

There was a hasty knock from the hall beyond and Sairel pursed his lips, throwing a hand into the air. He had just hushed the external ruckus and now the internal din was ready to be employed. "Can I not work?" he demanded.

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty." The door opened and closed promptly to admit a male dressed in dark greens and browns, a silver pin of office fastened to his breast. He was holding a small, cream-colored parchment. "I'm afraid you must read this..."

Sairel glanced sidelong at the teetering papers on his right and the mound growing on his left. "If I was offered a gold coin for every instance in which those words were uttered to me, I would be richer than all the dwarves of Ryekarayn. Combined." He waved a hand, beckoning his advisor forward. "Hand it over, Veacerel."

Veacerel strode briskly across the room and set the letter down, stamping his finger onto the unmarked and broken seal. "I whisked it away before your father could discover its arrival, but I'm afraid Darcarus seized it first. It's from Sellemar."

Sairel picked up the parchment immediately, flipping open the coarse paper. It was sweeter than Ryekarayn's, taken from the Maisprings along Sevrigel's coast. He could still catch the faint scent of the ocean rising from beneath the thin, scratched ink.

Sairel's heart tightened. The script lacked the usual elegance of the writer; instead it was swift and jagged, the ink bleeding heavily into the adjacent letters.

Hairem is dead. General Taemrin and his army have been annihilated. Saebellus has already seized the capital and he marches on his brothers at this hour. Ilsevel says "the reign of kings has returned," but what she intends to do is far from our True Blood cause.

All of Sevrigel has come to war. I fear, with Saebellus' tactics, you shall not be long to feel the ripple of their effects.

Sairel's annoyance faded. His grasp tightened as he reread the six short sentences. The words of the song drumming outside the pane clashed with striking relevance. "When did this arrive?"

"Not an hour past," Veacerel replied stiffly. "Magically relayed by Tilarus, I assume."

Sairel turned to the window. The night god was rising, cloaked in the endless mantle of stars. His eyes swept east, to where Noctem's darkness engulfed the narrow channel separating Ryekarayn from Sevrigel. "Tell Darcarus his lips are sealed or I shall seal them myself." He looked down, regarding the letter stoically, but beneath his impassive expression a sea of emotions roiled. It would have been hours—maybe a day—since the letter had been sent. Saebellus was still solidifying his grasp... Yet already Ryekarayn was buckling beneath the mere ripples of war.

The warlord's distractions for the human lands were well-formed—as cunning as his strategy that had produced Sevrigel's defeat: the elven nation would find no aid so long as such diversions remained unbroken.

Sairel's grip tightened on the parchment until his fingers grew white. "An empire is emerging from within the ashes of Sevrigel's ruin. I believe the struggles of Ryekarayn are now intertwined with our brethren's fate. Aersadore," he spoke gravely, "is at war."

CHAPTER TWO

The war had been lost and Ilsevel had raised a dagger against Alvena's king. Raised a dagger against her king and slew him!

And Alvena had run. Beyond the palace. Beyond the city. Beyond even the canyon wall. The days had blurred together and she could not be sure a time had ever existed when she had *not* run.

She had left the slimy egress of the True Blood tunnel far behind, and somewhere within its gem-encrusted, gold-flaked walls, her urgency remained to gather dust. Now her ankles were raw; the sleeves torn from Lardol's shirt had held his large shoes to her tiny feet, but only just!—They popped and clicked away from her every weary step, dragging her further toward the cold, damp, dark of the forest floor where she might finally find respite.

'You need to stop. You need to rest,' she chastised herself. She certainly could not sustain this ridiculous pace all the way to the coast!

And to bestow further misery upon her tired and raw body, her hair was wet. A river had intersected her path and she had been forced to flounder her way across stark naked—her shoes and clothes stuffed beside the provisions in her oiled sack. Sellemar had said nothing of such an obstacle between her and the northern route. Admittedly, only the frogs nestled in the mud had spied her climbing awkwardly from the shore, but they would surely spend the whole night croaking about it!

'How could a seasoned warrior like Sellemar forget such a crucial detail!' Or perhaps it was *because* he was seasoned that the obstacle never even flitted across his mind.

The journey would be full of such unpredictable obstacles.

Alvena huffed. She dropped her sack beside a great oak and stubbornly wiped her eyes with the inside of her tiny wrist. *'So you have to be strong. Like him. And Hairem. And Erallus. And Lardol.'*

She raised her chin against the gloom of the canyon's forest floor, but nobody was present to admire her resolve. Abandoning pretenses, she instead shamelessly huddled down into the dirt at the tree's base and swept great piles of leaves over her body for warmth.

Those peeping frogs had to have a better idea for survival than she did.

Next she opened her sack, relieved to find the contents dry, her letter safe, and food with which to sate her ravenous hunger. Sellemar had said the nearest city was only a few days north, but her paltry reserve of provisions would not last that long!

She stuffed her mouth full—that was about the only thing her rationed meal would fill—and nestled her head into the crook of her arm. *'I wonder how many bugs are in these leaves?'* she found herself thinking as her eyes closed. *'How big are they? ...Are they beetles? Maybe some of them are spiders?'* Her eyes shot wide. *'Gods, they could be huge...!'* She promptly wiggled free of the leaves and dirt and hastily smacked the remnants from her nightdress. She shivered with cold and disgust. *'Tck tck tck!'* She stomped about the tree, taking deep and noisy breaths. *'Tck!'*

The chilled wind did not wait for her to finish.

'Alvena, you'll freeze!' she scolded herself as her skirt batted against her bare legs. She tried to picture Sellemar lying in the dirt, covering himself with leaves for warmth.

It was impossible to imagine.

'There has to be another way!' she thought angrily. Why had the gods made those creeping, scuttling creatures?! She shivered, hopping from foot to foot.

Still... She blew out her cheeks. Sellemar was probably not running about in the wilderness half-naked. She balled her hands into fists and lay back down in the leaves, trying to think about the saltiness of the meat she had just consumed and not the scratchiness of the bug-infested leaves.

Not long ago, she would have been sleeping with her head on feathers beneath sheets of silk. How fast life could change.

*

Alvena yawned, stretching her arms above her head. The sunlight was harsh this morning. It penetrated the chiffon curtains dangling delicately before her balcony doors, piercing straight through her eyelids. She nestled

further into her covers, frowning slightly at their scratchy interior. Ugh, and her bed was really uncomfortable.

She sat up abruptly, her eyes flashing open. *'By Sel'ari! Hairem! Why didn't Lardol wake her up?! Hairem was probably wondering where she was—!'* An ancient tree came into focus above her and a chilly bead of dew rolled down her breast.

She tore her mind immediately from Hairem's visage, grabbing her sack and withdrawing her breakfast. *'The food is wonderful, almost as good as palace food. How generous of Sellemar. I love strawberries. I wonder what I'll have for lunch,'* she carried on to herself, but it was not long before her enthusiasm dwindled. Was that *mold* on her bread? How long had Sellemar kept these in his cupboards?! She stuffed it back into her bag. *'...Gods, I really have to pee...'* Her eyes flitted southward in concern. What if some elf with really really *really* good eyes looked down into the canyon's leafless canopy and saw her squatting behind a tree?

She clasped a hand to her mouth, mortified. *'Gods, I certainly hope not!'*

She made her business quickly, strutting away and hastily adjusting her nightdress. If *she* was an adventurer, she determined, she would make sure her party took routes that stopped at towns along the way and was not reduced to stooping behind bushes like common men. *'Unbelievable,'* she grumbled. How much longer did she have to endure this discomfort? Would Sellemar's letter truly barter for a ship away from all these trials?

Forgetting that the parchment had been moved to the sack, she patted her abdomen once.

"Stop that!" she heard a distant echo of the Common Tongue.

Alvena's hand dropped from her dress and she scuttled behind a tree. *'Who?! I wasn't doing anything!'* She peered wide-eyed out from around the trunk, her heart nearly leaping from her breast.

Only a pale, red leaf tumbled out into the surrounding crest of hills.

'Maybe a miner!' she considered warily. The journey north *had* brought her close to a new face of the canyon wall and she had heard stories of the excavation for the precious *kisacaela* housed within. The miners called it "elf's eye" when they sold it for exorbitant prices on Ryekarayn, claiming homeopathic remedies to every illness under the sun. Lardol used to talk about it. He had an enormous, polished stone in his room that Alvena used to sneak in to admire.

But perhaps that was why he was so old.

A musty breeze tugged Alvena's matted hair free to whip little, knotted twigs against her shoulders. In her paranoia, they felt like little gnarled fingers, tapping her dirty skin, urging her to look around. She snatched her hair and plastered it firmly against her head. She was not afraid. She had heard plenty about humans. *Humans* were the reason for all the corruption and vices in the world—all that her people valiantly struggled to remain above. But they were slow of wit and body, hardly more than taller, less malodorous dwarves.

The auburn leaf twirled once and alighted upon a mossy stone. *'Move along!—You can't stand here all day!'* She stepped slowly from around the tree and crept up the next hill.

To her initial relief and subsequent consternation, it was not humans that waited for her. *'Oh, great. Another river,'* she muttered as she trudged to the murky waters. *'That's your second offense, Sellemar.'*

And worse, this one was wider and teeming with little white crests that broke angrily against the shore. She paced down the shoreline, vehemently hoping for a bridge to manifest itself. Maybe the miners needed one to cross the river...

But a good march later, Alvena had nothing to show for her efforts. How could she reach the coast when she could not ferry herself across the damn river?! Anxiety clutched at her throat and a stinging tear rolled down her dirty cheek. She slapped the underbrush violently and gave the nearest bush an embittered kick. Nothing! Her short journey was an embarrassing—if not predictable—failure!

'Ouchchch!' she gasped as she tripped on a nearby log that snapped her toe askew. The pain released her well of emotions in full. *'Damn it! Why her?! Why Hairem?! Why were the gods punishing them?!'* She leaned down to clutch her throbbing toe.

And stopped.

A long, sturdy canoe peered out from under a bush, paddles resting in its belly. Alvena's face lit up. Sel'ari *was* looking out for her! *'Perhaps the miners use this?'* she pondered as she heaved it toward the shore with little grunts.

As the front end slid into the water, the boat twisted unexpectedly in the current and was nearly swept away. Alvena dove into the hull, clambering into the belly... and dropped one of the paddles into the water. *'Oh no! Did I need both?!'*

With a little bob along the waves, it nodded its goodbye and sailed down the river without her.

'...*Oh well...*' she initially dismissed, but the strenuous rowing quickly made her regret her clumsiness. By the time she reached the opposite shore, she wished she had done more at the palace than brush the king's hair and fold silken shirts. She tumbled onto the muddy shore and scrambled for the bow.

Her fingers grasped only air.

Relieved of her weight, the boat too had been wrenched askew in the current of the water. Bobbing its final farewell along the white crests, it sailed off to join the lonely paddle somewhere in the distance.

Alvena stood in the mud and looked down at the last paddle resting in her grimy hands. She dropped it into the water. It seemed appropriate that all the pieces go off together.

She turned around and started.

A short ways into the tree line, staring perplexedly back at her, were half a dozen tanned faces. Brawny... rugged... *hairy*... They could only be...

'*Humans!*' she realized, her spine stiffening.

"How's Dane an' Rulf suppos' t' get back now?" a grubby man at the front demanded, but he was quickly shoved into the back of the gawking horde.

Alvena found herself momentarily stunned, both in surprise and indomitable curiosity. Never had she seen such a variety of shapes and physiques! Some of the humans were lanky and muscular, some burly and broad, others squat and terribly disproportioned. But they all fashioned themselves in dirty cotton garments and thick-soled boots—not at all like the rich men who had stalked about the palace of the king.

A spindly man in the front struck a sudden grin, his eyes canvassing her slender body.

Alvena's curiosity withered.

'*They're just harmless scavengers,*' she assured herself, hastily averting her gaze as though her lack of vision would likewise inhibit theirs. She clutched the sack to her pounding chest and found her feet carrying her swiftly away. '*Don't run. Humans are like dogs, Lardol said—they'll chase you if you run.*'

A malicious voice pursued her, snapping at her heels. "That's a Sel'ven," it growled, and she imagined the lips curling into a venomous sneer.

"Damn bastards," another rejoined.

Alvena glanced over her shoulder to find that the humans had closed the distance. The icy wind flung itself urgently against her back and she quickened her pace. *Why were they coming closer?!*

“Where do you think you’re going?!” a sweet voice rang.

But the rest of the men’s faces had grown dark and hard.

Alvena’s stomach dropped and she broke into a run. Her hair whipped behind her, the little twigs scratching frantically against her neck. ‘*Sel’ari protect me!*’ she yearned to scream, the massive shoes flapping against her feet. Yet she didn’t dare pause to fling them free. She had to run! She had to reach the coast—!

A large hand seized her by the shoulder, nearly yanking her off her feet. The humans were terrifyingly fast—not at all as the scholars had depicted them!

Alvena gave a cry, tugging desperately against his iron grasp. Tension had never been so high between their races that a human would dare lay hands upon an *elf*!

Yet the wide fingers tightened, digging into her flesh with jagged fingernails. “Stop your struggling, elf” the human snarled, drawing her close. His breath reeked of something smoked and greasy—concurrently sour and sweet—and Alvena envisioned a rotted carcass roasting over a flame. She tried to wrest her face free of the stench, but his hand swept into her tangled hair and squeezed. “Sel’ven bitch, *where do you think you’re going?*”

‘*What do you want?!*’ Alvena shrieked, twisting her face into confusion. She struggled to elevate her skull to her tearing roots. ‘*Let me go, let me go, let me go!!*’

One of the gangly humans sauntered to their side, rubbing the flaking skin from a sun-burnt ear. “Let *this* be a personal message for your bastard king!” he raised his hand and brought it down across her face.

“And your bitch queen!” shouted another brute from the trees. A chorus of agreement rallied with his anger.

Alvena’s lip burst and her eyes welled. ‘*Hairem?! What had Hairem—No... Saebellus? Saebellus? Why—?*’

A third human gnashed his teeth together furiously. “Don’t look innocent,” he spat. “We know what you are!”

‘*What I am?*’ Alvena panicked. *A fugitive?!*

The first man wrenched her upward, shaking her with violence. “And even if you aren’t no spy—”

Even as Alvena’s head snapped atop her spine, her fear fell away to bewilderment. ‘*Spy?!*’

“—you’re just as guilty as every other fucking Sel’ven—just standing by while they hunt us down. As if right now we didn’t have enough god-damn trouble in our homeland!”

And before Alvena could decipher his words, the second attacker lifted his fist again, slamming it down across her nose. She felt a rush of blood flood her face, running along the crack in her lips as she opened her mouth to wail. What spies?! *What laws?! What hostility had Saebellus and Ilsevel bred in mere days?!*

She tried to shake her head, opening her mouth to protest. *She had nothing to do with them!*

But the humans had deduced otherwise. The large man threw her savagely into the dirt, kicking out and catching her in the side. She tumbled across the damp leaves and mud, dashing her hip against a rock. She scrambled toward the water, tears streaming silently down her swollen cheeks, her ribs reeling from the blow.

‘The coast... the coast! I have to make it—!’ She plunged her hand into the water, grasping for anything to hang onto.

A hand caught her ankle, jerking her across the river sludge and flipping her viciously onto her back. The ruddy, bearded face loomed above her, pores gaping, scars snaking over his bulging veins. “You elves nipped the tail of a dragon. We *humans* aren’t afraid to get our hands sullied with your holy, *righteous* blood.”

‘I didn’t do anything!’ she screamed, flailing wildly for the safety of the white crests. *‘Nothing! Noth—!’* She stilled suddenly, feeling a hand catch the hem of her nightdress.

“I saw her first!” the second man growled, shoving the first aside.

Alvena grasped for her oiled sack, smashing the piddly contents into the human’s sneering face. She kicked free, hurling herself toward the waters.

As she fell short of the icy waves, a thud struck the muck beside her throat. Alvena froze in horror, the arrow’s brilliant plume of feathers grazing her neck.

‘Gods...!’

Instantly, the two men fell on her, slamming her legs and arms aside, swearing and striking one another as they battled for the hem of her dress.

‘STOP! STOP! HELP ME!!’ she wailed. She caught a glimpse of the crowd gathered behind to *watch*, grinning like a horde of goblins.

The lean man was lobbed into the water and a roar of laughter split their party.

“Oh, Davon!”

“Show her, Gurnam!”

Alvena felt her dress rise up to her belly, her last grasp on the silk failing beneath the man’s strength. ‘*Stop...*’ she sobbed as he reached his hand up her thigh and trailed it along her pelvis.

A new voice ripped suddenly across the canyon. “GURNAM. WHAT IN ZEPHEREUS’ NAME ARE YOU DOING?!”

Alvena’s cries lodged in her throat as her hair was sharply released. She shot up, drawing her legs tightly against her chest, and heaved for each choking breath.

Gurnam lumbered to his feet, grunting out his disdain. Beside him, Davon had dragged himself from the river and retreated to the obscurity of the dense underbrush, highlighting the large human as the cause of the scene.

Alvena followed their gaze. The crowd had parted, casting themselves aside sheepishly as a dark-skinned man dressed in vibrant, dirt-spotted colors strode through their midst.

His hardened eyes locked upon her two attackers. “Didn’t I order all of you to bathe? Is *this* bathing? In any way, shape, or form, *is this bathing?*” The new human advanced briskly to stop a nose-width before Gurnam, strands of his coarse, black hair breaking free from his slicked mane. His voice lowered into a dangerous timbre. “Get into that water and if you come out before you smell like a vase of Starfarian lilies, I’ll drown you.”

“Fuck you,” Gurnam muttered as he swung about, wrenching his boots off and lugging them down beside Alvena.

She flinched, wrapping her arms tighter about herself.

“AND *the rest of you!*” the human bellowed.

“We found her,” Davon dared to explain, wringing his soaked shirt into the mud. “She came steeled in Dane and Rulf’s canoe... She probably killed them. We didn’t take her from the city. We’re not *stupid*, Sanas.”

Sanas regarded him cynically through his narrowed, green eyes. “You think *that* killed Dane and Rulf? You think she’s out here alone? A Sel’ve in the canyon, *alone?* In a *nightdress?* No, you’re not *stupid*, Davon. You’re a fucking imbecile.” He reached down, grabbing her roughly by the forearm, and snapped her to her feet. “Where is your party, elf?”

Alvena wrapped her free arm across her breasts as the thin strap of her nightdress slid away. ‘*I don’t have a party, I don’t have a party, I don’t have a party!*’ she sobbed through her shaking breaths.

“You won’t tell me?” Sanas demanded, his calloused hand tightening. “Do you want me to throw you back to these savages?”

Alvena’s knees crumbled beneath her and she clutched at his shirt. *‘No, please!’* She pointed to her mouth desperately as she opened and closed it soundlessly.

She felt his grip slacken. “...She’s a mute.” He regarded her for a moment in silence, wild strands of raven hair folding into the crease of his brow. “Tie her up. I don’t know if there is a party of Sel’vi nearby, but we’re not letting her run back to spread word of our location. When you’re done bathing, Davon, go find the others. The rest of you: hurry up and finish the work on the cliff. We’re moving out as soon as the crater is through.” He whirled, pointing at two of the humans in the front of the group. “Watch her,” he barked, shoving her toward them. “And don’t touch her. Sel’ven women go for a hefty purse and I have to make back what I lost when Vethru ran off with half of our stash. If she gets away as well, you’ll be begging Ishkav to smite you.”

Alvena felt any remaining color drain away.

“And get her something to eat. It’s a long way to the Noc’olari.”

Alvena’s ears twitched, the pain throbbing across her bruised face momentarily subsiding. The Noc’olari? What could her brethren have to do with these beasts?!

Sanas lifted a hand to rein in the loose strands of his greasy hair. “They’re a lot more compassionate than your kind,” he continued spitefully. And then, to her consternation, stepped past her, stalked through the group of solemn men, and vanished into the foliage.

‘Don’t leave me with them...’ she whimpered, sinking to her knees.

The two humans lingering to fulfill Sanas’ command strode to her side, both grumbling about their appointed task. “Tie her up but don’t touch her,” one of them muttered.

“He means don’t *fuck* her, idiot,” the other growled.

“I know that, you ass,” the first retorted.

Alvena was hauled up and steadied on her feet before a sharp nudge directed her forward.

“Damn you, *walk*” the first man snorted. “We have a lot of work to do and I don’t fancy being your wet-nurse.”

Alvena dragged a foot, aware for the first time that Lardol’s shoes had come loose in the scuffle. The mud was cold beneath her toes as she shuffled into the tree line amidst the venom-filled complaints of the throng around her.

“*Damn Sel’ven,*” one hissed. “*Murderer.*”

The walk to the encampment of the miners was brief—they had pitched their tents along the shoreline of the northern canyon’s final channel. Alvena could see a half-dozen canoes, much like the one she had used and lost, bobbing gently in the water. The vessels offered easy access to a small mass of land just opposite, rich with *kisacaela*.

But here, on the southern side of the little river, there was no beauty. A dozen dirty tents were arranged in two rows in front of a smoking fire. The half-rotted carcass of her imagination was still strung up above it and a nearby line of damp clothes flapped balefully in the greasy breeze.

The taller human surveyed their encampment, mulling over the small selection of half-grown trees budding beneath the protection of the massive elder trunks. “Here is as good a place as any,” the first human was saying as he crouched beside a scraggly trunk. He raised a coarse rope, pointing a gnarly finger in her direction. “Sit down, woman,” he barked.

Alvena did not have the courage to resist, though she felt briefly ashamed at her compliance. But what *could* she do? She was weak. Just a handmaiden.

And so she sat, wiping a hand across her bloody face.

The second human pulled it down, pinning it beside her stinging hip. “Now tie her *tight*, Lukai.” he ordered reproachfully.

“What do you mean, *Mobart*?” Lukai retorted. “Are you saying something?”

“You know what I’m saying,” Mobart sniffed.

Lukai scoffed, wrapping the rope around her body and giving it a final jerk to pull it tight. Then he tramped behind the sapling to finish the knot. “Now if you have to piss, holler,” he grunted, pushing off his knees. “*Stay there.*”

‘Holler...?’

Alvena watched as the two men sauntered toward the river, clambered into one of the canoes, and pushed off toward the canyon wall. Near its base, a small crater had marred the surreal surface. There, the cascading trail of blue gems, glittering in the dying light, was abruptly cut short by the humans’ rampant greed. The valuables had been stripped and only a gaping hole of grey rock remained.

Valuables... Alvena started, head whipping about. What had she done with her sack?! *‘Sellemar’s letter!’* She looked up frantically, straining in Noctem’s consuming darkness. There her bundle lay, discarded in a heap amongst the humans’ dirty clothes.

No! They had it! Even if she broke free, she would never reach Ryekarayn without Sellemar’s letter!

CHAPTER THREE

The low creak of the door echoed softly through the cellar, causing Jerah to raise his head. Cutting through the silence was the sound of faint footsteps on the stone of the narrow, winding staircase. Gradually the sound grew louder as the elf descended to him with softly padded feet.

The torch swept into the room before the male and Jerah squinted his eyes against the foreign light.

“Good evening, Jerah,” the male hailed as he settled the torch into its holder along the wall. A dozen spiders scuttled away from the sudden brightness and into the crevices of the stone. They were likewise blinded by the awful glare. As the elf approached, he stumbled slightly beneath the weight of the package he carried. “You look well,” he offered vaguely, recovering himself.

Jerah held his hand up against the light, watching the shadows dance across the elf’s face. He looked well? What did that mean—to look well? He had seen his own reflection once and thought he had looked quite unlike the elf. Perhaps the elf, then, was unwell. Perhaps he should mention just how unwell the elf looked.

He considered this as the elf dropped the package before him. It caught the chain connected to his wrist as it fell, jerking his hand from his eyes. He closed them, turning his head from the light. “You look unwell,” he replied quietly.

The elf paused a moment and then let out a soft sound that was mimicked in an unsettling echo. “The proper response, *Jerah*, is ‘thank you, my lord,’ or ‘and you as well, my lord,’” he replied, his tone reflecting his mild amusement.

And something else. Jerah did not know what to call it—this other tone that inevitably revealed itself whenever the elf spoke to him—but he had not heard the tone used on anyone else. Pieces of it lingered behind in the walls as

it bounced about the little room. There was something about it that aggravated him—made his skin crawl with irritation and his strong jaw flex.

“Jerah!” the elf reprimanded him sharply.

Jerah’s grip on his chain loosened and the metal fell with a loud clank to the dirty, stone floor beside him. The sound crushed the hunger of several nearby rats and they too vanished into the cracks along the wall. “I apologize, my lord.”

The elf ignored him, sauntering through the darkness toward the back of the small, webbed cellar. “Where is your pail?” he asked, his hand tight across his nose and mouth. “Gods, does it reek of shit in here. Sometimes you hardly seem worth the effort.” He was muttering to himself now, his free hand sweeping the darkness to repel any loose web strands.

Jerah shifted uncomfortably on the stone. His master must think him as pathetic as the humans of Ryekarayn. He seemed to curse them as much as himself, at least. His dark eyes followed his master as he bent down and, with a grunt, lifted his waste pail. Then his master jerked unexpectedly and released the handle, wiping his hand across his arm. “What in the name of the—”

“Water, my lord,” Jerah informed him. “It leaks over there. That’s the place that you said you would get fixed and that I should remind you of...”

“I said that? Yes... well, I’ve been very busy with the regime change, Jerah. But I’ve not forgotten about you—couldn’t if I tried.” He added the last words below his breath and Jerah felt an unpleasant feeling settle in his stomach at the tone. Then the elf continued at a normal volume. “Matters are changing. It’s hard for Saebellus to find a use for you right now, but perhaps you’ll be allowed out again.” He left the torch as he moved slowly out of the cell. Then he vanished around the bend in the stairs to leave Jerah in his cold, damp quarters.

Sitting back, facing away from the light, Jerah settled down onto his rump. He leaned against the wall, rubbing his arms against the chill that spread from the stone and into his body. Then he opened his sagging package.

The first smell that greeted him was familiar: there were at least three pounds of dried meat. Jerah ate one as he picked up a long, white rag and a bar of soap. He set these aside hurriedly as the light caught the gentle curves of the last dozen items. These were round, smooth stones about half the size of his fist.

He picked them up one at a time, allowing the orange glow of the torch to play off of their shiny surfaces. There were hues of purples, blues, and greens on some, and oranges, yellows, and reds on others.

Something to occupy his long nights of loneliness.

By the time the last stone had been set aside, the pound of dried pork had been eaten. He reached a long nail into the space of his teeth, picking at it absentmindedly.

He made a face and raised his hands, narrowing his eyes against what now seemed a dimness of light. Still, he could distinguish the brown caked beneath his fingernails.

He reached for his white cloth, laying it in the puddle that had formed beneath the leaky ceiling. He wrung it once and then began to scrub beneath his nails, watching the brown stain grow rapidly across the cloth. *'I hate this part.'*

Dimmer and dimmer the light became until it vanished entirely. The cloth dropped from Jerah's hands and he wrapped his arms around himself, acutely aware of the silence that manifested in the darkness.

It would be dark for a long time now if his master no longer had a use for him. The cell would grow hot and sticky, freeze, and then repeat before Jerah might again see the white torch that shone in the void outside his cell.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Tie them up,”

The voice echoed from some crevice deep within Alvena’s mind.

“*Now.*”

Abruptly, Alvena sat up, nearly smacking her head on the bench of the canoe. How could she have forgotten about the abominable craft for even a moment? She felt as though she had wallowed in it for a lifetime. The travel with the humans had been a slow journey—from the day they had finished poking holes in the cliff face to the tedious bob of their canoes along the northern canyon river.

But if they were stopping, the Noc’olarian city had to be close! This was to be her first step toward freedom.

Or rather, it *had* been.

“Come on, hurry up!” Sanas yapped.

Her captors grumbled their complaints of sleep and food deprivation as they hoisted their supplies and hauled themselves across the dark shore. They were remarkably loud, snapping twigs under their feet and grunting about the treachery of the forest’s root system. Alvena wondered why the Noc’olari bothered with the warning orbs floating atop the river when the humans made their whereabouts so easily known.

But then the trees broke away and her appalling captors were forgotten.

A massive, white tree stood in the center of the vast clearing: grander and larger than any tree Alvena had ever *dreamed* could exist—the tips of Elvorum’s palace towers would have had to stretch to reach its mid branches! A dozen open doors were carved into its base and pearlescent staircases wound endlessly around and up into its lush, silver canopy. Blue-white orbs hung in the air all about it, casting the entire tree with a soft and iridescent glow.

'It's amazing,' Alvena breathed. Elves were majestic crafters, gifted with a surplus of age and magic, and this...

This embodied all of their experience and splendor.

Her toes curled, and she became aware of the warmth beneath her feet. Winter grass overlay the ground, dotted with white mushrooms and lilac flowers that glowed with an inner light. Clusters of these lined a wide, mossy path that branched into the great tree.

Marring the beautiful landscape, however, were countless white tents. But she did not see other humans. Instead she beheld the Noc'olari themselves. They were as majestic as she remembered—refined and pale, with skin that glowed in the moonlight. Their hair was as unique and as startling as their eyes: some touted bold hues of blues and purples, while some boasted vibrant silvers or teals. They were striking in their strange beauty, and yet blended seamlessly into the surreal colors and glow of their landscape. Ageless. Yet not one that Alvena could spy looked as young as she!

"More refugees," she heard a Noc'olarian female speak mournfully from nearby.

"Tragic..." another lamented, kissing the back of her thumb and lifting it to the star-speckled sky.

'These men are no tragedy,' Alvena quickly recalled, and scowled at her captors.

They merely shoved her deeper into their horde, blocking her view as they swept her toward the assembly of tents. "Move yer ass," Mobart growled.

The uncouth tongue drew the glare of a Noc'olarian male as he hastened across the mossy way. Alvena could see that one hand was covered in something dark while a clean, white linen was draped neatly over his arm.

Then he doubled back, rounding on them sharply. Incredulity rushed across his features as though he had not first absorbed what he had glimpsed.

"Wait," he ordered, reaching out and catching Sanas' sleeve. He was as tall as any of the humans and more powerfully built than any Sel'ven. Why, Alvena was quite certain he could fit two of her in the expanse of his regally rigid shoulders! Yet he was lean in his muscular physique. His skin reverberated in the moonlight, making the liquid on his withheld hand seem to shimmer.

The miners drew to a slow stop, looking to Sanas for direction.

Their leader cocked his head. "What is it?" he began cautiously, shifting his gem-filled sack. "You *are* still offering aid, aren't you?"

The Noc'olari ignored his question as he pushed the humans aside. Alvena found herself suddenly exposed before him, locked in his vivid, violet eyes. They gave her a swift and pointed scan. "What in Ilra's name are you doing with this girl?" he demanded, his accent almost fully concealed. But not well enough for Alvena to miss the similarities to Sellemar's.

She heard a chuckle sweep through the men about her, their response extenuated by a gust of wind. Sanas' slick hair slumped downward, quivering about his harsh, dark face. "This girl is a Sel'ven," he scoffed, rolling his shoulders as though the response was sufficient.

The Noc'olari was not swayed. He dropped Sanas' sleeve forcefully, then extended his clean hand out to her. "Come," he spoke in softer command.

Alvena took a hesitant step and the humans closed instantly in front of her, their barricade of backs nearly blocking the Noc'olari from view.

"Wait a minute there, elf. She is *ours*." Sanas grunted as Alvena punched his broad back furiously with her bound hands. He remained otherwise unfazed, but Mobart gave her a solid slap. "We found her scouting for her party of butchers in the canyon—and we never found the men whose canoe she stole. She deserves her fate. You worship Sel'ari, do you not?—this is Sel'ari's justice on their despicable crimes!"

The Noc'olari's chin tilted back as he laughed in disbelief. He wiped his hand on the white linen and Alvena could see a red stain left behind in the threads. "Scouting for a group of Saebellus' soldiers... *in a nightdress?*"

The humans exchanged an uneasy glance and once more turned to their flushed leader for a reaction. She saw his jowls quivering, his fist tightening, and she thought for sure he was about to strike the elf... But then he stilled, seeming to rethink his actions. Alvena wondered if he too had heard the tales of the Noc'olari's strange magics and ghoulish dances beneath the unseen moon. "Do not mock me, Noc'olari," he ventured through clenched teeth.

The Noc'olari's strong jaw hardened and he drew his body up before the herd. They shuffled back as he snapped a long, calloused finger toward the sky. Their eyes shifted upward, and Alvena was quite certain that some calamity was about to rain down from Emal'drathar. "I worship *Ilra*, human. If you want justice, you'll have to look somewhere else. Surrender the girl to me or you can find your own way off Sevrigel. Does my threat ring clear?"

It undoubtedly did. Sanas flung the rope from his hands as though it burned. "Her ugly face would have been lucky to be fed to a dog," he finished, jerking his head at the men about him. "Let's go."

Alvena looked down at her muddy feet and stained dress, but was too relieved to be offended by his remark. *'I'm safe!'* she breathed. Then her head snapped up and she pointed hurriedly at Sanas. *'My letter!'*

The Noc'olarian male followed her finger and his gaze set. *"I assume you have something of hers. I will not ask twice."*

Sanas' eyes narrowed and he sent his sack crashing to the ground at his feet. He reached down, undoing the leather tie and producing her now-crumpled and dirt-covered parchment. *"Here—"*

Before he could finish, Alvena darted forward and snatched Sellemar's letter with her still-bound hands. The men returned a single, dirty scowl before they stalked stiffly away.

Alvena hardly noticed. She had done it. She had reached the first city!—albeit a little unconventionally. The journey had certainly been more challenging than Sellemar had suggested, but perhaps the just and noble True Bloods were indeed on her horizon!

The Noc'olari crouched down and Alvena remembered the present. The male had drawn a silver blade from the side of his boot and ran it swiftly through the cord. *"I am Itirel. You are?"* He took her wrists, rubbing them gently with one hand as he gathered the broken cord in his other. She saw his eyes flicker across the parchment, a hint of curiosity barely concealed beneath.

Alvena opened her mouth and closed it, her grip on the letter tightening. *'Don't trust him, Alvena,'* she warned herself.

The Noc'olari smiled suddenly, as though in full understanding. *"Ah, I see. If you can, try to forgive the humans. Death and fear can drive a man to do terrible things. I'm afraid the new decrees have been more than unfavorable toward them."* He seemed to sense her confusion and continued, *"Any humans found on Sevrigel are to be executed. My people are helping them leave... though between the famine, raids, and uprisings Saebellus has caused upon Ryekarayn, their homeland is hardly a safer place. The age is dark for many right now. You are not safe to travel alone."*

Despite his infectious compassion, Alvena felt quite certain that such cruel barbarians did not deserve aid. He released her wrists and she was startlingly aware that the chaffing had vanished entirely. *"You look terribly weary and I can see the hunger in your eyes."* He straightened, gesturing to one of the nearby Noc'olarian females. *"Yulasra,"* he called. *"Will you see to this woman?"*

Then he observed her once more and quietly spoke, *"You are safe here. If you are in need of anything when she is through, write it down and I will*

endeavor to see that you have it.” He briefly laid a hand upon her dirty shoulder, and then he was gone.

Before he vanished amongst the tents, Alvena wanted to reach out and cling to him for comfort. He was the first glimmer of hope that life outside the palace wasn’t all suffering. He was soft-spoken. Bold. Kind... even to those who did not deserve it.

And he had saved her.

“Come, my dear. Let us get you cleaned,” Yulasra prompted from her side. “Food, water, healed wounds, a warm bath... and something lovely to wear, shall we?”

*

Relief filled Alvena’s chest as she stepped outside of the white tent, her hair braided over her shoulder, her skin clean and smooth. The injuries on her face had faded beneath the healing skills of the Noc’olarian female, and her stomach was heavy with satisfaction. Now *this* was the nature of the elves she knew! She sucked in the winter air and nestled beneath her thick, wool cloak. Even the weather could not remain bitter for long!

“Ah, you look much happier,” chuckled a familiar accent.

Alvena started, looking over her shoulder.

Itirel, too, had changed. He now wore the purple robes of a Noc’olarian healer, the hue as dark and muted as his violet hair. With the blood on his hand cleaned and his disposition serene, it seemed laughable to imagine him as a wild elf of lore, chanting in the glow of some great fire in the obscurity of the new moon.

He followed her gaze and lifted his hand. “Unfortunately, he died,” he lamented. “A merchant from a city Saebellus’ army sacked. He prevailed in a journey here... but there was nothing that could be done for him.” He stopped beside her, placing a hand beneath her chin and turning her face up to his. “You too seem to have had your trials. Here,” he spoke gently, pressing two fingers to her lip.

For a moment, it flickered in pain and then abruptly, the throbbing was gone. As he drew his hand away, Alvena slid her tongue in search of the wound. Her eyes widened.

“Yes, it looks as new as on the day you were birthed. *It is*, let me clarify, wholly healed. A beautiful lady should not have to bear such an unnecessary scar.” He took a step past her with his ever-present smile. “Have a pleasant—”

Alvena blinked. Whether he meant it or not, he had called her *beautiful*. No one had called her beautiful but Hairem! She took a swift step after him, causing him to halt.

He raised a violet-black brow. "...Do you want to come with me? I'm afraid I'm not at all doing anything pleasant."

'Has to be better than sitting around watching the moss grow,' Alvena countered. She gave a vigorous nod and slid closer. *'Please let the True Bloods be like him and Sellemar...'* She would *even* accept a liberal dose of Sellemar's arrogance.

Itirel shrugged his rugged shoulders. "I must make my last rounds before I retire for the evening. You are welcome to accompany me, but as I said, it is nothing pleasant."

'Carry on already!' She could not resist the urge to tap one of her new, shiny shoes in impatience. *'I clearly want to come!'*

"...Well, this way, then," Itirel beckoned, the corners of his lips twitching. His footsteps were silent as he glided over the mossy earth to the row of tents behind her own. She could hear an assortment of moans and wailing, and cries of anger and pain. Were they *all* humans? Why, surely such a refugee camp was treasonous against Ilsevel's intent! Her spine stiffened and she glanced at the drifting male. If he was surrounded by danger and chaos, he did not appear concerned. That accent... Was he from Ryekarayn?—Perhaps he did not fully grasp what had occurred in the capital.

No, he had to know.

She could feel the parchment scrape against her skin beneath her dress. How she wanted to share it with him! To hear him breathe words of comfort with such unshakeable courage...!

"That letter seems quite valuable to you," Itirel ventured as they made a slight turn on the narrowing path.

Alvena leapt. What? How...? She had just been thinking that!

"Judging by the unconventional attire in which you arrived, it seems safe to assume that you are a refugee as well. By what need have you to flee Elvrorium?"

Rigidly Alvena marched onward, yet she felt as though he could hear her heart pounding her story beneath her breast.

"...You needn't tell me," he spoke after a moment. "My people will assist you regardless." He halted before the first tent, passing her a reassuring smile before leaning inside to the warm, amber glow.

Alvena felt her anxieties fade and poked her head in below his. A smile as easy as his own promptly donned her face. A human baby lay, fat and content, in the arms of a mountainous man. *'Ugly. And bald,'* she thought as she regarded the sleeping infant snug in its little blue shawl. How did anything so tiny grow up to be so barbaric? Her gaze shifted to the sleeping woman on the mat before them and she paled. The hollow face was tranquil and ashen, the body unnaturally still.

The Noc'olarian female inside gave a gentle shake of her silver hair as she gathered a pile of crimson rags. "I'm sorry, Itirel. I couldn't—"

"How long has she been dead?" Itirel interrupted. The warm smile was gone and Alvena was at once aware of the stinging wind.

"The lady passed away on the hour," the female began, tucking the last cloth beneath her arm with a reverent bow. "I preserved her as you directed."

Itirel's fluid gait became sharp and deliberate. He walked briskly into the tent and crouched down beside the woman, pressing his long, calloused fingers into her chest. Alvena watched in horror as the woman's body thrashed and danced as though she had been jolted with lightning.

"She's been dead too long!" the man behind him wept, his husky voice cracking. He dropped the baby into the crook of one arm as he reached out in a frenzy. "Just let her rest, gods damn you!"

The Noc'olarian female's rags scattered and she seized the flailing arm. "Sh!" she ordered. "May Ilra have mercy on her!"

And no sooner had the female invoked the god than the woman on the mat arched once and then fell flat, her chest rising and falling steadily beneath Itirel's hands.

In a terribly delay of reflexes, Alvena's feet finally sent her backward. Her hand snapped to the tent flap, holding it ajar just enough for her to glimpse the wonder inside. The human had been *dead*...!

Itirel withdrew, rising gracefully to his feet. "She will be perfectly well with a little further attention. Cisera can oversee her care."

Alvena let the tent flap drop, slowly tossing her head. What gift of healing did this male possess that the dead could return unchanged?! *'Incredible...'*

She could hear the human's sobs of gratitude as Itirel stepped outside, his face as impassive as before he had entered. She cocked her head. Was he not happy about what he had done? Or was he truly unaffected? She could not read him!

"It's a chilly evening, isn't it?" he began as though nothing at all had happened.

Alvena stared. He had just saved a long-dead human and he was bent on talking about the weather? The *weather* had not surprised her. *Bringing back the dead*, however...!

Her hair prickled at the nape of her neck. Was he a necromancer?!

No... No. She imagined necromancy must comprise something far more sinister. Dark magic: skulls and candles and sacrifices. Undoubtedly a torrent of blood. This male had done no more than touch the human...

What an *extraordinarily* gifted healer!

Through several tents, she bumbled behind in utter awe. When they reached the row's end, he paused, luminous eyes cast out over the encampment. She followed him, peering into the dark. Away along the forest line, she could detect a faint group of figures moving near the massive roots and she wondered if their smudges were any more distinct to him. He was an elf of the night... *'So he must see better in the dark!'*

"They're going to the coast," he informed her solemnly. "To Eraydon City." He stopped and Alvena could hear a thoughtful tone creeping into his voice. "And where are *you* going?"

Alvena opened her mouth and closed it, clutching one hand to her abdomen where the paper was still tucked safely away. No, she couldn't tell him. Yes, she had to get to Ryekarayn, but Sellemar had been very specific. He had said to show it to the ships bearing a blue phoenix. He had mentioned no one else. As much as she wanted to trust Itirel, this male was neither a ship *nor* a blue phoenix.

"There is a small wait to board, but you will arrive wherever it is you are going. Now, do not look so distressed—there is always hope. Our Lord, Kinraeus, has very close relations to the human king." And he left the knowledge there, as uselessly vague as though he had said nothing at all.

Alvena drummed her fingers along her crossed arms. *'Who is Kinraeus? How does he help save us?'*

Itirel smiled faintly. He was catching on quickly. "Sevrigel is unlikely to rebel, so our aid will have to come from Ryekarayn. The True Bloods are expected to remain neutral as the Royal Schism dictates, but the human king Joramon north of their borders is in dire need of help for his own people—he will seek aid. His kingdom is suffering a terrible famine, and Saebellus has recently ended the trade that helped to alleviate the shortage of food. Now he faces the threat of marauders who have taken advantage of his people's weakness. If our Lord Kinraeus can strike an alliance with King Joramon, he

could offer economic stability in exchange for the king's royal forces—which would no longer be occupied by internal threats.”

Alvena looked around eagerly in hopes of spotting this magnificent ambassador, but no one so splendid stood in sight. Still, her tension ebbed. If Itirel was right, perhaps she would no sooner arrive on Ryekarayn than find herself headed straight back for home!

A sudden shout hailed across the encampment. “Itirel!” Alvena heard footsteps racing toward them from their left, the sound muffled by the moss. “Itirel!”

Itirel stood tall and shot forth an indignant hand. “Sh!” he admonished. “There are many who are—”

The newcomer skidded to a halt, his glowing skin perspiring across his narrow brow, his lips parted as he heaved for breath. Despite his obvious exhaustion, his eyes were ablaze with excitement. He bounded forward and clutched Itirel's still-reprimanding hand.

Alvena retreated slightly, body tense once more. What was going on?

But the male ignored her entirely, shaking Itirel's hand in fierce exhilaration. Or perhaps in his eagerness he had not noticed her at all. “Yes!! *It's true!* He's come to Sevrigel! Rumors are spreading as fast as dragon fire, but we believe he just arrived in the south!”

She saw Itirel's composed expression alter abruptly. His face grew solemn, and yet, a flicker of mutual excitement seemed barely contained behind his eyes. “Are Saebellus and Ilsevel aware of this?! Of *him*?” he spoke almost breathlessly.

The elf shook his head, frizzy blue hair flying about his narrow shoulders and whacking Alvena in the eye as she anxiously leaned in for the details. “No, they do not know—not to my knowledge. Not *yet*, at least.”

Itirel turned sharply to Alvena and she snapped back. Yet he barely seemed to see her as he spoke. “I had a wonderful evening with you, my lady. Be sure to inform the Noc'olari of anything you need. May Ira bless you.” And with that, he took rapid steps behind the new elf. She could hear his voice as he faded into the distance saying, “I will pack my belongings and find him *immediately*.”

Alvena stared after them, now alone beneath the great white tree.

Her toes curled in the small leather shoes. *What* was so urgent?

Who had come to Sevrigel?

CHAPTER FIVE

Rain cascaded from Elvorium's sky in an unrelenting stream, the droplets so fine that they formed a fog of dreary inhospitality. Hardly a ray of sunlight managed to illuminate the golden rooftops, and still less fell to the cobbled streets. The afternoon marked the seventh day of King Saebellus' reign and the beginning of a bleak and miserable winter.

'You could have spared me the weather,' Sellemar begrudged his goddess as he hurried across the damp streets.

An upraised stone pocketed in the shadowed cobbles rebuked him sternly.

'Damn it,' he swore, and hobbled past the statues of Eraydon's company in the council's square. He spared them no glance of his usual affection; he had no doubt that half of their heroic faces would snigger at his plight.

He was late, and only so long as Ilsevel had not yet arrived in the Council Hall did he still possess some hope of surviving the day with all of his limbs attached.

Poverty was first to blame; if Sairel had the decency to spare the proper coin for his mission, he could afford a servant to at least make certain that he rose at a reasonable hour.

The sun had once been such an ally, but *apparently* Zephereus had more pressing concerns as of late.

Sellemar scowled once more toward Emal'drathar as he surmounted the stairs two at a time, then heaved the doors of the great hall wide. His dramatic entrance into the council chamber nearly three months before had been far more glorious than his current woebegone appearance availed; he was now disheveled, panting, and sufficiently soaked.

"Late, aren't we?" a male voice greeted him instantly from the far side of the room, bouncing off the walls in unison with the door's infernal creak.

It was difficult to decide which was more painful: Cahsari's voice or the agonizingly drawn-out, high-pitched screech resonating from the hinge.

A blessed silence then settled over the room and Sellemar was aware of the intrusive stares that accompanied it. Still, he managed a stiff smile and a generous, “Good morning,” as he casually brushed the raindrops from his emerald, cotton clothes. In the presence of such despicable men, he could have been in a pauper’s potato sack and still strode with equal confidence across the hall.

Cahsari followed his movement with a sneer and the beady gaze that so reminded Sellemar of a vulture eyeing its prey. Any day was infinitely worsened by the presence of the Helvarian creature, but Sel’ari *had* spared him some grief in his arrival: the queen was not yet present.

Sellemar pulled his damp shirt from his chest, dropping his voice to a mutter as he passed. “Imbecile.”

Cahsari’s eyes bulged and he leaned back in his chair with a strangled gasp. He gurgled at the nearby council members as though to demand their equal offense. “*What* did you call me?”

Sellemar wheeled and blinked once, slowly and deliberately. “Why ever would you think the word would refer to you?”

Which only seemed to enrage Cahsari further. His already narrowed eyes nearly vanished between their skeptical slits, and the newest wrinkles on the Helven’s forehead did not help to distance him from the appearance of a vulture. Now Sellemar was quite certain he could never forget the unfortunate similarities.

He crossed the distance to his station and lowered himself into his elaborately carved chair, nestling his back against the painted blue phoenix. At once, the council decided he was of no further interest and subsided into a flutter of softly whispering voices—each member trying to keep his volume just low enough that the elf on one side could hear his words but the elf on the other side—of equal distance—could not.

Sellemar softly stroked his chin and regarded his fellow council members caustically: these were the trials he was now subjected to endure for his choice of espionage. He could have abdicated his position after Ilsevel revealed her true face—sailed across the channel to the safety of the Sel’varian Realm. After all, his venture to assist Sevrigel had been entirely voluntary of nature. Charity, as it were.

But now, he who had assisted the country to its fall was wholly responsible for undoing his mistake.

‘But truly, Sel’ari, you could not have chosen worse company,’ he griped. While Cahsari was most certainly dreadful, he was by no means unrivaled; the

Galwen, Fildor, held an equally distinct and callous expression only worsened by the thin line that materialized on his lips whenever their eyes met.

Beside him, the wiry Ruljen, Ilrae—although but recently appointed to his position—seemed as attached to Fildor and Cahsari as a babe to its mother’s breasts.

In contrast, Mikanum managed a sympathetic response. He had grown thinner since the death of General Taemrin and what pressure he had received at the general’s defeat could only have intensified by his own people’s gradual silence and disappearance. Still, Sellemar knew his sympathies were undeserved: the Darivalian was as smooth and cunning as the most venomous of vipers.

And now the male had risen to his feet, his icy expression fixed grimly upon Sellemar. “El’adorium,” he spoke politely, nodding his head toward Sellemar as though the distinction was needed. “As speaker, your timely arrival would be an example to us all. Granted, this is only your second meeting with us and—”

Sellemar’s sympathies certainly did not extend to tolerating a rebuke. He interrupted the male in the most natural manner he could muster. “Thank you, Lord Mikanum. I shall be certain to arrive promptly to our next meeting.”

To Mikanum’s left side, a councilmember glanced up, his dark eyes rolling as he regarded the Darivalian’s satisfied expression. *‘What is his name again...?’* Sellemar squinted at the Eph’veen, as though this would help him recall the elusive knowledge. *‘Helsheron... Heshanon...’* He frowned. Damn the Eph’vi and their impossible language!

The grand doors to the chamber swung open abruptly and Sellemar’s regard of the council members vanished with the voices in the room. A single ray of sunlight pierced through from the outside, hastening to warn of the advent of the queen. *‘Late again, Zephereus.’*

There was the soft clink of armor as the two guards at her front and back escorted her into the room. Between them, in the warm rays of light bouncing off their polished plates, Ilsevel stood. She radiated like Kamora herself, hair gleaming brilliant gold in the light, creamy flesh glowing and smooth.

Yet the power in that beauty only sickened Sellemar.

Hairem, Erallus, Lardol, Taemrin... her own father?—They were but the first casualties of her war.

The councilmember nearest the doors was the first to rise to his feet and bow. He was the only male Sellemar had not had time to scrutinize upon his arrival, but he had heard tales of the veteran of the Noc’olarian wars. “Your

Majesty,” Lord Valdor said, his one eye sweeping across the queen and her company. “May Sel’ari bless this morning.” His words, while respectful, dripped with discontent.

Yet none other than Sellemar seemed to note the tone; the council was scrambling into standing positions so that they could promptly mimic his greeting. With a painstaking humbling of pride, Sellemar forced himself to do the same. Then he straightened with a carefully neutral expression, eyes elevating to meet the queen’s.

Hers were already upon him. She tilted her head and her lips curled into a tender, almost beckoning smile.

‘Damn it.’ It was as he had feared. He stiffened and willed his expression to remain vacant. He did not want the queen’s affection—merely her *favor*... However, surrendering Erallus had procured him far more than he desired.

She halted before the jewel-encrusted throne of the king, pivoting unhurriedly to posture severely before her council. Yet when she spoke, her voice lilted as soft and tranquil as the chords of a harp. Deceptively docile. “His Majesty is unable to join us this morning. He has other matters that require his attention.”

Sellemar sat, glancing at the empty chair beside her. *Saebellus*... He had not glimpsed the king since the wedding ceremony, but the warlord had far from disappeared. Swift in exercising his power and military genius, Saebellus was engaged in slaughtering any opposition to his recent rise to power. And that left Ilsevel to charm the populace with a pretty face.

But Sellemar was wise enough to infer more than that from the sly elf enthroned before them now. Ilsevel ruled from the inside, directing her dog whichever way she wished, while Elvorium clutched to her for safety lest Saebellus turn upon them next. A brilliant farce.

Ilsevel retained utter power.

Yet there she posed, folding her petite hands across her thigh. “First, I wish to welcome Sellemar into his new position.” She inclined her head once more toward him, her smile extending with her regard. “I have no doubt that he shall bring more honor to the position of El’adorium than did Nilanis.” Her smile persisted, but Sellemar could see a ripple of unease sweep through the council chamber.

What she had done would not be forgotten. For a thousand years after her demise, she would be immortalized as the queen who had heralded her ascent to power with the murder of her father.

And, gods willing, the murder of her husband.

“Now on to business,” Ilsevel continued as the others settled behind their mahogany desks. Her face grew grim and what lines she had hidden creased unexpectedly. “Alvena has not been found.”

Carefully composed, Sellemar merely blinked. *‘Thank you, Sel’ari.’* Surely by now she had reached the Noc’olarian city!

Ilsevel drew his attention back with a sudden softening of her voice. “If there is anyone who possesses any knowledge of her whereabouts, he shall receive my...” her chest jutted forward and she awarded them a slow bat of her dark lashes. *‘Utmost gratitude.’*

The agitation in the room escalated. There emerged a very real threat, and yet she laughed, as though all their lives were but a game.

Wherever Alvena was could not be far enough.

Mikanum stood. “Your Majesty,” he spoke with alacrity, his pale face flushing with eagerness to please. “I shall assist in finding the servant. I shall order half of my personal guards to scour the city and surrounding countryside for the fugitive.”

Sellemar’s nostrils flared in disgust. *‘How desperate Mikanum has become.’*

Ilsevel’s fingers twitched. “I am truly grateful. But do not waste your time outside Elvorium. She *must* be in the capital.”

Sellemar dared not breathe for fear of betraying his relief. By the time Ilsevel realized Alvena was no longer in the city, Sairel would have her tucked safely behind his walls.

Another voice alighted in quick succession to join Mikanum’s pandering. “I shall do the same,” Cahsari declared, his palms clasping tighter together as though he was almost begging to throw himself at her feet.

“And I,” Fildor and Ilrae announced in unison.

Sellemar watched as Ilsevel beamed at each of them, lingering to savor her hold upon her pets. Then a vein along her neck pulsed as her gratitude dissolved. “Lord Sellemar may have no troops, but what of you, Lord Valdor? Lord Heshellon? Shall you pledge your guards to find the little... witch?”

Sellemar saw the Eph’veen recoil. Gods, could none of his brethren retain some decency of composure?

Beside him, Valdor let out an audible grunt, plucking at the side of his patch. They had witnessed firsthand what she had done to her own flesh and blood—he had to know the danger he was in. And yet, the words that left his mouth shocked the room. “Your Majesty, if you will forgive my... *ignorance* of the situation... What exactly is the girl’s crime?”

Sellemar's expression could remain fixed no longer; he felt his lips part, his eyes widen. *'Are you mad?!*' Even those that had submitted their aid sank low, seeming to will themselves to vanish lest her wrath fall to them as well.

Ilsevel's thick lips twisted crookedly. "Lord Valdor, I assume that you do not intend to assist?"

Unlike his fellow elves, Sellemar's shoulders remained tight, but his eyes flitted back and forth in warning. *'Silence!'* he willed. *'Do not question her!—Not about this!'* Ilsevel was as much a creature of deception as she was of pride—she had feigned such distress at Hairem's "assisted suicide," and now the criminal of her story had escaped her frantic search. No words would procure Alvena's safety now.

Valdor's bold eye flitted past his and landed in study upon the queen, his silence hovering like a heavy cloud above the room. Then his voice grasped at some semblance of humility and his head dipped. "Of course I shall assist Your Majesty in your search for the fugitive. You need only request my resources and they are yours."

As the attention of the room shifted to him, Heshellon retained somewhat more wit than his Noc'olarian ally. He averted his eyes swiftly to the floor. "...As are mine..."

Ilsevel tutted, waving a hand to dislodge the stifling gravity. She inhaled deeply, as though to savor the scent of rain hanging about the air.

But Sellemar knew it was victory she tasted.

"Well, that is enough about the witch," she exhaled with a smile. "I am certain you all have questions of your own." She snapped her fingers sharply, as though she had anything but their full attention. "When last we spoke," she continued, "I briefly mentioned our—that is, King Saebellus and my—intentions for the kingdom. As you well know, already the king has begun to eradicate the corruption in this land. And this shall progress until the elven nation holds one history of the past and one vision for the future. For those who are ready to return to the goddess' design, they shall be relocated to ensure the end of their entrenched minds and non-Sel'varian culture. Dissenters shall be put to the sword."

Sellemar grimaced. Relocation was a common and bloody military technique utilized to break resistance... for *humans*. It held no history in the world of *elves*.

Ilsevel's amusement had faded during her speech. Now her creamy face was grey, her full lips tight. "And what design is this, you may very well ask,

as each of you has proven in turn that you believe yourselves above the moral law.” Her eyes shifted in challenge to the males surrounding Sellemar.

Yet each one maintained a face of utmost innocence, instead glaring about to accuse his fellow councilmember in kind. Fildor dared even to glower in Sellemar’s direction, as though he, Sellemar, who had never truly sat on the council before that day, was one of the sullied.

Sellemar scowled right back.

Ilsevel continued, wholly unaware of the insolence. “Sel’ari chose the Sel’vi as her first people and charged us with her tenets. Over time, the other races have infected us with their cultures. In the face of excessive dissimilarities, we have become confused as to the rights and wrongs—our virtue has become weakened and the people have thus fallen into moral complacency. And complacency breeds corruption. Now is the time for us to eliminate these impurities and conform under one culture and one law... *one people*. Our brethren must join the Sel’vi, or perish.”

Sellemar grimaced. Where had she derived such a hostile notion of diversity? Before the battle that claimed Eraydon’s life nine thousand years ago, the elves had been unified by their unique cultures. It was not until the Ryekarian humans—once staunch allies—betrayed them in battle that the elves felt compelled to abandon their homeland. Hence, their decline began.

No, the fault was not in their diversity, but rather in that the elves had forgotten their ancestors’ way of life. When the elves came to Sevrigel following their desertion, they had experienced a period of unprecedented peace. For the first time in their history, they were not forced into constant unification to fend off foes. Idle and selfish living rushed in to fill the wiling hours. With no enemies to challenge their beliefs, the clarity of such things was lost. And the elves, once virtuous and pure, had no knowledge of how to fight the enemy within themselves.

And so, it was complacency that reigned.

Ilsevel’s righteous conclusion merely became more impassioned. “In our victory we shall rise like a phoenix from the ashes and the world will once again know us as the pinnacle of virtue in this world!”

Silence enveloped the hall, and Sellemar wondered if the other lords were attempting to absorb the insanity of her words. Finally, one male dared to break the stillness. “Wise indeed, Your Majesty,” Cahsari murmured, bowing his head. Sellemar could see his hands tense together as he spoke. Did he agree with her... or *this* time, was he merely afraid?

“Indeed, a just decree,” Mikanum declared, pandering once more. “You are an inspiration to us all.”

“As you will,” Heshellon relinquished.

Ilsevel turned at once to Sellemar, leaning forward and placing her small chin into her palm. Sellemar’s jaw tensed, but she did not seem to note his change of countenance. “You are a Sel’vean, my lord,” she began, her voice shrill with enthusiasm. “What words of wisdom do you have for our brethren?”

Sellemar felt his stomach twist, his pride warring violently against his intelligence. *‘Agree with her,’* he commanded himself, trying to take the advice he had so berated Valdor for almost ignoring. *‘You will gain nothing through dissidence. You have a charge—you must rally the people!’*

There was a scrape of wood against marble and the room turned sharply at the unexpected sound.

“Madness is what this is. *Madness.*” Valdor was standing, his white-knuckled fingers gripping his desk in an apparent attempt to quell his shaking. But his voice echoed boldly across the room, his pale eye set. A chill seized hold of the heavy air. “The Sel’vi are no greater than the rest of us. What has any culture ever done to *force* their beliefs upon your people? To what history do you refer where the goddess chose your kind above the others? The unity of the elves throughout the millennia has never placed one race above the next—not until we abandoned the homeland.

“While you speak of our vices, you ignore those your own race has engaged in. What of the whispered rumors of the Sel’varian heads that turned when warned that the mad Farvian king cultivated plans to *butcher* his entire people? Or the gates to Sheolra opened on the Phantom Isles so that the Sel’vi could employ demons to fight for them in The War of Dragons? Or the massacre called on the sirens for a few dozen murders spread across the eastern riverfront? These were all Sel’varian crimes! What you suggest is *genocide.*”

Ilsevel’s eyes were wild with anger behind her narrowed slits, but she did not stop the Noc’olari’s tirade.

Sellemar shook his head at Valdor in disbelief. *‘You fool...’*

Yet Valdor dared to continue, absentmindedly raising a hand to brush his eye patch while his one good eye fixed upon the queen. “How can you believe your own claims? And the rest of you? Standing here, nodding your agreement. Have you no pride? *No stand for your people?!* Sellemar, I expected more from you, at least!”

Sellemar felt heads turn to challenge his stance, but his expression remained carefully stoic. *'A stand here will accomplish nothing.'*

"What will happen to the Lithri in Darival for their refusal to join in this butchering—for we all know they, like so many other of the smaller races—will have nothing to do with this cause? What shall happen to the Darivalians for their failure to supply troops to fuel the capital's wars? Forgive me, Your Majesty, but you lost your good sense in the shock of Hairem's death. This, Your Majesty... This is *nothing* but *genocide*. I ask you to reconsider your actions."

At the conclusion of his words, no one moved. Sellemar could sense that the council members hardly dared to breathe. He could see Ilsevel shift from the corner of his eye, playing with a strand of hair as though she had grown bored with the elf's challenge.

She gave it a little twist. "Execute him."

A gasp swept through the room and Sellemar's jaw slacked.

Valdor drew himself up, his sensibilities apparently wholly lost. "Kill me, Your Majesty? For what? What is my crime?"

The guards on either side of the queen strode forward in solemn resolve, ascending the steps to Valdor's desk.

"What is my crime?" the Noc'olari demanded, shoving the nearest soldier away. "I demand to know my crime!"

Ilsevel stood, her face impassive, her eyes set like stone. Yet her voice rose in a cry that caused the window panes to hum with her fury. *"Execute him!"*

The soldiers recommitted their efforts, ignoring Valdor's second attempt to wrest away, and seized him firmly by the arms. Even as he swore in the Noc'olarian tongue and challenged their morality, they flung his arms behind his back and shoved him toward the center of the room.

Sellemar required every shred of control he could muster to remain where he sat, his chest burning at the sight of the helpless lord. *'Interfering will cost you everything!'* he warned himself. *'You cannot save him!'*

"WHAT IS MY CRIME?!" Valdor shouted all the louder, his one eye fixed upon Ilsevel. He was frantic, now. Death was rushing toward him and all the room stood still.

The queen raised her chin. The strand of hair that she had torn free of her braid stuck out, breaking her flawless composure. Yet she remained otherwise statuesque, watching the slow thud of the lord's feet dragging down the steps and across the marble tiles.

Sellemar could see his neck bulge, his limbs flail briefly. “*WHAT IS MY CRIME?!*”

A soldier near the door marched forward to assist. “Kneel, Lord Valdor,” he demanded.

But the Noc’olari no longer resisted. He drooped in submission and even as he did so, the two elves on either side shoved and contorted his form until the pain alone prevented any revival.

Sellemar lurched to his feet, his hand clutching for his hilt, his mind racing to form a dozen plans of escape.

All futile.

“Your Majesty—”

Ilsevel raised her hand in command and the room fell silent.

Sellemar felt his breath catch.

“Lord Valdor, you are charged with treason for inciting rebellion.”

Valdor’s lips parted in disbelief. “*Genocide!*” he cried.

The soldier at his back inclined his head toward the queen. Then the room watched as his blade slid slowly from its hilt. Rose high into the air.

And then, with a swift and smooth stroke, it swept the air and sliced cleanly through the lord’s neck. Blood sprayed across the floor. The body went limp. The head rolled to the side, Valdor’s one eye staring at the queen in accusation.

Ilsevel flung her shoulders back, talons curling around the arm of her chair. “The Noc’olarian city in our north,” she spoke calmly, “shall be removed first.”

CHAPTER SIX

Jikun fought desperately upward, kicking violently, his heart racing against his breast. His hand flailed outward, grasping only empty waters.

“NAVON?!” he bellowed, breaking the surface and gasping for breath. “NAVON?!”

There was a brilliant flash of lightning and he frantically scanned the black waters, head whipping from left to right. There was no sign of the Helven.

“NAVON?!” His shout was reduced to a gurgle as a wave rolled over him, pounding his body into the ocean like the last leaf outside Elarium, tossing him easily toward the endless depths below.

Jikun extended a hand, feeling the rush of magic twisting about his raw fingers as ice formed in his palm. It grew, faster and wider, sucking his strength from him with every inch in its diameter. He grasped onto a small mast he formed in the center of the ice-raft and it bobbed to the surface, pulling him with.

Jikun sputtered and coughed, heaving deeply against the frozen surface as he clung in despair. “Navon?” he called weakly.

The storm barreled down on him, hurling his block of ice haphazardly across the foaming crests. A crack of lightning flashed in the sky and an image was briefly illuminated to his left—a pillar of stone jutting from the crashing waves, a ripped sail tangled across the jagged surface.

There came a sudden, fervent cry. “Jikun?!”

Another blaze of lightning and Jikun caught a glimpse of the pale skin of the Helven, his body gripping the debris of the ship. He vanished under a massive swell and reappeared in a frantic struggle for air.

“Over here!! Left!!” Jikun hollered. He swung his hand into the water, trying to propel himself forward. As though mocking him, a gentle wave knocked him farther away, and a ripple of thunder cascaded like laughter across the sky.

He saw Navon's head turn toward him, his hollow cheeks lit by a brilliant flare of light. His fingers were like bones clutching onto the cracks of the wood, his fingernails clawing at the surface.

A wave barreled into Navon from the side. With a terrified cry, his companion vanished beneath the water, swallowed with the remnants of the ship.

*

Jikun started, his heart racing, his eyes flashing open against a painful brilliance of sunlight.

Navon bobbed peacefully asleep in the water beside him, his cheek pressed against the ice of their raft.

Jikun let out a breath of relief, but it was stifled beneath a moan. He shook the vestiges of the nightmare from his mind. Sunlight. God-damn sunlight. And while silence surrounded them, thunder crashed through his skull—a feeling he could only liken to one too many drinks with a feisty and expensive woman.

But he had experienced no such fortune; the only mistress that had fondled him was the same vicious, black waves of the storm that had shattered their ship. His head ached and his joints groaned reproachfully with every motion. His stomach twisted and churned with fatigue. As a crackle accompanied his scant movements, he realized his white shirt had dried across his shoulder blades in stiff ripples formed by salt. A fine layer of the grains had dried across his eyelashes and sprinkled away as he squinted.

The waters arched and dipped about them, the waves having subsided into a gentle foam. They stroked their little raft, causing it to shrink in the warmth.

'*Warmth...?*' Jikun's intellect was slow to realize that the winter chill—which had stalked them for the week adrift in their shoddy vessel—had also dissolved. He lifted his head fully with a grimace, a spurt of pain rupturing from his wounded chest. Where... *were they?*

His heart stopped. His dried lips cracked as they opened to croak in elation, "Navon! *Navon* are you awake?!" All essence of his natural pessimism was drowned beneath his cry.

Across from him, the Helven groaned, face rising from the ice. "I can't feel my chee—"

"LAND!" Jikun gasped, almost breathless.

Clarity ruptured through the haze in Navon's eyes. "Land?!" He swung around in a frenzy, seeking confirmation. "Oh my gods... Jikun..." His voice rose, his lips curled. "BY SEL'ARI, WE MADE IT!!"

'*We made it!*' Even the goddess' name could not dampen his euphoria! Jikun kicked violently toward the bank, wishing his water-logged boots were not so much like an anchor. "Help me!" he ordered feverishly.

The glimmering shoreline grew until it stretched endlessly into the distance... They had nearly starved and drowned but this sight erased that trial! The frozen cuffs by which Jikun had anchored himself and Navon to the ice-formed raft melted away at his command, and the two elves sank into the rough sand of the shallow waters.

"Gods..." Navon panted, stumbling forward. "Gods, General... I didn't truly think we would make it..." A glaze was forming over the Helven's eyes, his lips trembling with praise.

Jikun dragged his weak legs forward until the last wave of water broke over them... and then they buckled. He fell to his hands and knees, staring... *numbly*... ahead.

Sand. Endless ripples of golden sand.

And nothing else.

Jikun's fingers dug into the shore beneath him, his teeth clenching together until his jaw stung. His stomach now felt like a lump in his throat—his flicker of enthusiasm had been dashed against the coast and sunk into oblivion. "Damn the gods! *Damn Sel'ari!*" he erupted, spitting what little saliva his dry mouth had managed to conjure onto the earth. It failed to reflect his venom and so he followed with a fistful of hot sand.

It blew back into his face, ridiculing his fleeting hope.

"*Wipe away that fucking smile, Navon. Do you know where we are?!—We're in a god-damn desert!*" He made no endeavor to curb his tongue in the presence of his captain and rolled onto his back to shun the asinine optimism plastered to the male's face. He dropped a hand to his eyes in the event that the male repositioned. "We were supposed to land on the lush coast of Ryekarayn!—Grass! Forests! A damn morsel of edible food!" He slammed his free fist down, his chest shuddering. "We will die here the same as we would have done out there!" The failure and dishonor was more infuriating than tragic.

A shadow eclipsed him. For a moment, Jikun declined acknowledging the male, but when the Helven remained silent, he dared to let his hand fall away.

A mistake, of course.

Navon gazed upon him, sickeningly calm. “A lack of faith makes cowards of all men. You must not be so pessimistic, General.” His words were slathered with morale, and he extended a hand toward Jikun as though his mood should reflect the same.

It did not.

* * *

A brief spasm of fear rattled Navon as his companion remained sprawled upon the earth, obdurate to his offer of assistance. The general had managed to retain some semblance of strength despite his injury and fatigue, but pessimism would certainly slay that resolve.

Navon steeled his gaze. *‘Mesheck, Tiras, Eraydon...? No... Ephraim?’* He held no level of joy in impersonating the harsh character of Ephraim, but from all the ages of heroes and leaders, who better to perform when Jikun needed to be shown tenacity? At every misfortune since his defeat at the hands of the centaurs, his general had slipped further into a chasm of self-loathing and despair. Perhaps a nurturing leader would have most effectively soothed him, but Navon’s dusty scrolls and own experiences offered no such figure to impersonate.

Ephraim would have to suffice.

Navon’s extended hand tensed as the words and deeds of the old lion of The Seven welled inside of him. The words came to his mind and lips as though they were of his own character. “I will not wait here to die. Not after what I sacrificed to save you. Get on your feet!” he directed, his forceful tone certain to quench the general’s wallowing.

But when Jikun merely knocked his palm aside, Navon detected the flicker of pain that hid beneath the fierce defiance. There was both a physical and emotional wound restraining his general’s usual resolution. *‘By Sel’ari,’* he determined, *‘it is not a rebuke he requires.’*

And the thought banished Ephraim promptly from his mind in exchange for someone who channeled far more empathy with his resolve. *Eraydon.* “Come, Jikun,” Navon began again, aware of the oddly stark contrast in tone. “We must be in the Makataj—Ryekarayn’s desert.” He extended his hand once more and offered what he hoped was a reassuring and apologetic smile. “We simply must travel north. I know Eph’vi live in the region. With a little luck, we will find them. *But* you must accept my help... And I, for one, require yours.”

Jikun exhaled begrudgingly at Navon's altered approach. His icy blue eyes flicked out across the empty horizon and Navon had no doubt he was weighing the will of his pessimism against the genuineness of Navon's need.

A little manipulation would assure the desired conclusion. "...Or perhaps you may be right..." Navon lamented, tossing a hand with the dramatics induced by Mesheck. "This *is* hopeless." He squatted toward the sand and Jikun's head whipped sharply to him.

"Cease your complaints," the general barked, snatching his forearm for assistance. "Lead onward."

Navon heaved him upright. "As you command, General." He slung a triumphant step into the expanse of sand and Mesheck's internal applause faltered. For the first time, he absorbed the scalding temperature; it scourged his body from head to heel, with his naked feet bearing the brunt of the pain.

He had forgotten that more than his sword had been lost with the ship.

Jikun noted his change in countenance with a puffing of his wounded chest. "Here," he grunted, taking charge with the charisma of any great leader. "We have a long march ahead of us and this will serve you better than nothing." He tugged off his stiff shirt and flung the fabric; it was a dismal display of strength and landed a mere yard away. "...You will need your shirt for the other."

The skin of the northerner would certainly burn, but if Navon's feet failed him, so too would the rest of his body follow.

He wisely hid his admiration as he straightened from the binding of his feet. "Thank you. Now I have the pleasure of feeling as though my feet are in the soft confines of a portable oven," he laughed dismissively, sure to utilize the great healer Riphath's optimism in the face of such a physical trial.

His general's eyes glazed over. "If you laugh again at the gravity of our situation, I will stab you."

Navon's smile vanished. A definite overuse of optimism.

"Now," Jikun demanded impassively, rounding on the leagues of hazy grains. "Which way to the Eph'vi?"

Navon winced. "Remember the night I had to comb the entire Sagewood to find an antidote for your wound? I managed to find *that*, and in the dark, did I not? I reason I can certainly find the Eph'vi in a flat plain of sand."

Jikun followed his gaze outward. "I was nearly shitting out my intestines by the time you returned," he countered with a snort. "And dare I indicate that these events are *entirely* unrelated."

Navon struck his breast. “Stifle a little of that Darivalian cynicism and trust me.”

“Trust...” Jikun relinquished with a sigh. “I *suppose* all your years of dedicated service earn you such a request, Captain.” The title still left the general’s lips without a flinch: the emotional dam was yet secure.

Navon had seen the effects of the Sevilan Marshes breaking free at Elarium. And now the dam the general must have built to repress *that* slaughter...? Gods knew a breach of that emotional trauma would be infinitely worse.

But he let none of his concern show. “Damn right I have earned it,” he replied good-naturedly. He strutted forward, leading the general at his heels. *Forward* was the only direction in which he had determined to move. Into the heat. Into the sand. Away from the ocean. And he knew he required more than a staggering force of luck to find the Eph’vi before either of them expired. ‘*Sel’ari guide us,*’ he prayed.

Yet his expression ever remained a beacon of positivity.

As they plodded on, the sun climbed higher and the warm, sandy surroundings became a searing span of scalding earth. The rays of the sun were like the touch of a brazier, sizzling against the bare flesh of their torsos and arms. Navon pressed a hand to his empty stomach, pushing it against the cavity in hopes of finding some form of relief from one of their trials. But the growl in his gut from days without sustenance had even ceased its once-persistent cries.

By the time Zephereus arrived at his zenith, Jikun’s ability to draw water from the air had reached its final juncture. It was an honest wonder how the Darivalian yet managed to use any magic at all, and at the same time, it was a testament to the male’s greatness. In his underfed, wounded, dehydrated, failing condition, he could still conjure strength for his underdeveloped talent.

Even if this misshapen creation was the final show of that might.

Jikun gave him a brief glare, as though he had detected an unsavory taste from Navon’s sudden fixation of awe, and then returned to eyeing his little lump of ice. By the time it reached his mouth, it had all but evaporated.

Jikun scowled. “The air is drier than a cunt with no foreplay.”

Navon’s admiration clutched his chest once and expired. “Why must you be so terribly crass?”

“I no longer have to pretend I have a shaft up my ass, Navon. There isn’t a god-damn Sel’ven—or anyone of note—for leagues.”

And the heat was too intense for Navon to rejoin. It was moments like this when all the scrolls and old tomes in the world could not offer enough knowledge to survive. There was an expanding lack of hope. A mounting intensity of heat. Distant whispers of imminent death. Only Eraydon seemed viable to bear the weight of such trials, and Jikun's fading strength would soon be too great a burden to carry.

Hour drew into hour. The sun faded and the heat broke. The stagnation about them seemed to draw away. But before Navon could consider his relief, another danger cackled with the dusk. The dry air began to cool at an alarmingly unnatural rate, as though winter had swept across the Windari Channel and swallowed the night.

And through it all, the sand stretched endlessly into the distance.

Navon glanced sidelong at the ragged gait of his general. They would not survive another day in the heat. And they would possibly not last through a long, frigid night. If he did not find the Eph'vi soon, they would not find them at all. *'Sel'ari, I need you!'* Navon beseeched the stars above them. He wondered if, through the full moon of Noctem's presence, his message would prevail.

There was a sudden flicker in the darkness, faint and orange. Navon's body leapt and the words rushed from his cracked lips before he could fully grasp what he saw. "Jikun...!" he gasped. He snagged the male's cold shoulder, swinging his drooping body to the left. "Pray tell that you see it...!"

Westward, a faint twinkle of light gleamed, floating like a wisp of fire high above the sand.

Beneath his boney fingers, Navon felt Jikun's muscles stiffen. "What is it...?" he barely dared to speak, as though his breath might extinguish the tiny spark.

But Navon was already moving away, his blistered feet carrying him weightlessly over the earth. "Anything different is excellent!" he cried with a surge of relief. "The Eph'vi might reside that way! The light resembles fire, does it not?!"

Jikun ventured a single utterance of acknowledgment which Navon chose to interpret as budding optimism. "Maybe," his companion ceded.

Hope. Not just for Jikun, but for *him*.

Back across the Windari Channel, for a brief moment, Navon had allowed that single instance of his own character—not the scrolls or tomes, but *Navon*—to dominate his actions. Defying all that he had read, he had chosen to

break tradition and honor. To pull his general from the battle at Elarium and ferry him across the channel.

None of the heroes would have been so selfish. He had chosen his affections for his friend over the lives of his troops. And he did not even have enough decency in his own character to feel guilt.

Pathetic.

They had been thrown off course into the cursed Makataj, but this glimmer of hope... What was this respite if not Sel'ari's forgiveness? What was this if not a second chance?!

Sel'ari had a plan for them yet!

CHAPTER SEVEN

The darkness around him was unlit, but Jerah could still see. The pounds of meat had long since been eaten, and his stomach gnawed at him pleadingly. “You are always hungry,” he scolded himself, feeling much like he imagined his master felt. That was what his master always said to him, with the sort of tone Jerah often found made his jaw clench and his skin crawl. But in mimicking it so exactly, he found himself less aggravated toward his master than pleased with himself.

He had awoken just shortly before and completed his waking routine. Now it was time to pass the remaining hours of his day before he would sleep for the eighth time in his dripping room.

Jerah sat down against the cold wall with his stone balls on his right. He prodded the blue one forward to roll along the cracks in the floor toward the opposite wall. He smiled to himself, a crooked, hooked smile that his master had always worn when he seemed satisfied. Jerah found this expression to be useful in far more situations than his master apparently did, and used it often... *especially* when he was released. He had been surprised to find that it had the opposite effect on those witnessing it than on he himself making it—usually sending the viewer quickly in the other direction.

Jerah pondered this difference between satisfaction and flight, replaying the times of his release endlessly—like the twitching legs of a nearly dead cockroach. *Those beasts never died.*

His mind was pulled back into his little room as the red ball turned sharply over a bump in a raised stone and collided with the blue one, sending it twisting into the nearby wall.

Jerah left it there. It was all part of the game, he determined. Instead of simply seeing if a ball could roll farther than the others, now there was the

additional challenge of avoiding running them into each other. He narrowed the imaginary alley in which they could move to enhance this challenge. Though perhaps not quite as tricky as catching the rats that crawled about his cell, the stones offered an interesting and new form of entertainment that lasted longer. The damn rats died within a day after he played with them. Stones, he was pleased to note, seemed to remain unchanged.

A distant voice made Jerah still. “—*didn’t* actually believe Relstavum would amount. When Kraesin found him after the Phantom Isles, he took one look at him and wanted to use him as fodder for his hound. The poor bastard said, ‘He won’t succeed. Not in a century and certainly not in less.’ But Saebellus’ trust seems to have been well placed after all—look what the fucking madman did in a decade. Imagine if he really *had* worked for a century!” There was a chitter of soft sounds and then the distant voice continued, “If his success ever tempts him to turn, the beast will make a bloody mound of his allies.”

Jerah promptly sat straighter. *The beast*. His master must have guests. He strained his ears to pick up the second voice, which was higher and quieter than the one before.

“Which I... the only... him.”

Jerah’s brow creased. He had missed most of those words. He stood, letting the orange stone drop from his hand, and raised his head toward the ceiling. He recognized the voices of both males. They were present most often when he awoke. The first voice was certainly his master, proclaiming boldly as he often did about *his* master’s plans.

“Saebellus knows what he’s doing. We’re perfectly safe.”

That was good. Jerah relaxed slightly, leaning against the wall. If his master was safe, then he was safe as well. That was what he always told him and Jerah had complete confidence in his words. After all, he had but to look at where he was now: safe.

There was silence for a few minutes and then voices emerged from further away, toward the back of Jerah’s cell. He slid to them, his chains scraping across the floor. He hopped over the puddle on the ground and cocked his head toward the ceiling, his long, knotted hair falling away from his ear. There came a third voice now, strong and confident.

“Did you hear that the True Blood king invited Ilsevel and Saebellus all the way to Ryekarayn to dine with him and his brothers? Gods save us! As if Saebellus would accept any sort of diplomacy. He’s come too far for that. I guess the uprisings are putting them on edge.”

Someone made an unfamiliar sound... like... a series of fast, light grunts... or a gentle series of quick coughs... Jerah's brow knit as he imagined what this sound related to.

"It is NOT humorous," the higher voice growled, rebuking the third man.

Humorous? So that sound must relate to humorous. Jerah mimicked it quietly to himself as the conversation continued on, too soft for him to discern.

Finally, a few words became audible and Jerah fell silent again. "—since Saebellus took the port?"

Now, he knew what port was. He had drunk some himself once, on a celebratory occasion after he had been released a long time ago.

"Difficult," the third man replied. "I heard Relstavum is headed south to ensure the attempts at smuggling goods—or soldiers—between the channel dies. The Eph'vi will never see it coming."

This statement made little sense to Jerah, but he deduced that some ports would suffer and those smuggling ports were about to profit significantly. His master would certainly want in on that trade. He was a good male of business, after all. Especially with humans. His master always talked about how he made short work with them. Or of them.

Something like that.

"By Noctem, how the moon has risen! Saebellus is expecting me early tomorrow morning. I must sleep."

"I should be going as well. I have another operation," the third voice agreed. "Good night."

"My *wife* will be expecting me to make time for him tonight... Ow, Adonis!" his master replied. And with the heavy click of doors above him, the world fell silent once more.

Jerah sat down slowly, repeating the conversation in his head a few times. He had heard that name before: Relstavum. He was his master's master's plan. Another elf of the surface, Jerah imagined. He wondered, briefly, exactly how many people there were up above. He knew that the city had many elves in it, but if people were making port outside of his city, there must be a few more people there. And across the sea, on Ryekarayn, there were humans, which were fatter, shorter, and dumber elves. And then the things called dwarves, which were, apparently, the fattest, shortest, and dumbest elves. So if there were as many humans and dwarves as there were elves, then there must be enough of them to fill a few rooms the size of his quarters! And *then* there was the enemy general's army...!

But Master had said they had killed them all, so that meant there certainly were not as many surface-dwellers left.

He reached out to pick up his orange stone and stopped. It was no longer as it once was; instead, there were several pieces of varying sizes, sharp edged in the center and round on the outside. He picked up a chunk, turning it over slowly. This must have happened when he dropped it. He felt what he did when he was placed back in his chains—a cold, unpleasant feeling that allowed no room for a smile.

So, stones could change too.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Jikun sprinted toward the distant amber light, hardly daring to breathe. Beneath his lopsided gait, the sand was fading, ceding the ground to clumps of brown grass withered by the day's relentless heat. Yet the orange, floating light beckoned brighter and brighter until it had formed the shape of a fire burning high atop a taupe-colored tower.

'*A tower... a watchtower...*' Like the crystalline towers of Darival, this structure was a beacon of refuge in a long stretch of uninhabitable land.

"Sel'ari be praised!" Jikun heard Navon's latest debasement, but for once, he did not entirely despise the religious tribute.

The expanse revealed beyond the tower was indeed a fortune. Plains of inconceivably green grass blanketed the land beneath intertwining strands of glowing, swaying orbs. Charmingly squat homes emerged under the light, and surrounding them along the wide, dirt roads were colorful bazaars. These booths complemented the houses' simplicity with intricacies of design and vibrant colors.

The city was alive and bustling in the cold night air, packed with merchants and consumers. Living people. *Civilization.*

Jikun blinked hard once and dug his nails into his palm until he flinched. From the deepest reaches of the city, chimes rang out in greeting. "*Saved,*" he whispered. He drifted across the lush earth and inhaled the heavy mist that hung in the air.

Beside him, Navon's gape signaled that he was equally as entranced. "I told you I would find aid."

"Are you alright?" came a sudden shout of alarm.

'*Highstead—the Common Tongue!*' The human language had never sounded more inviting, even from all the whores in the Port of Targados.

Several heads wrapped in scarves turned at once to spot the approaching strangers, and a horde of bodies dressed in thick wool and camel hide began to gather at the city's edge. They huddled together like a herd of curious livestock and Jikun immediately dismissed them as such. When he reached the crowd, he flung them aside in a frantic search for the food and water that was required to sustain them.

It was only when Navon stayed him with a restraining hand that his mind somewhat cleared. A rapidly advancing figure strode out of the throng of scrutinizing, caramel faces. A prickle of caution jolted down Jikun's spine and he lifted his hands from the shoulders of his next victim.

Dark skin... golden eyes... indeed, *Eph'vi*. Their practices had not before gnawed at every fiber of Jikun's tolerance, but in the face of his snarling gut and buckling knees, he could not think of a culture more revolting... even if it might be the only one that could deliver him.

The figure was approaching faster now, long legs striding purposely toward the pair.

Jikun recoiled. *Eph'vi* were not known for being particularly sympathetic—their crowning tenant made all but the most self-righteous squirm: fate aids and rewards those who have proven their worth; misfortune befalls those who have not. *'And gods be damned... in their eyes I would be the latter...'* Jikun concluded derisively, even as his memory struggled to deduce exactly *why* that whisper rang true...

Fear stabbed abruptly through his mind, screaming a warning of an... *incident...* to which he had given little allowance of thought. *'You are contemptible: you broke your vows. You abandoned your soldiers. You are a traitor not just in the eyes of Sel'ari, but in the eyes of all elves!'* He staggered, shaking his head violently to shun the suggestion.

"My friend is in need of aid!" Navon called, placing a hand swiftly to Jikun's chest in a struggle to steady him.

The crowd had grown rigid and Jikun's chin dropped against his breast. Those judging eyes... *The battle had been lost...!* Surely Saebellus would still have slain his soldiers despite his sacrifice. *'My life... would have served nothing!'*

His hunger withered at the thought and he struggled to rebuke his weakness. *'You're making a fool of yourself and Navon.'* He pushed his friend aside. With the efficiency he had learned from masking the agonies of war, Elarium was pushed swiftly into the recesses of his mind, hidden somewhere

beneath a pile of dead soldiers in a hazy swamp. All that remained was the veil of great military successes and personal triumphs.

The surrounding desert rushed back to Jikun's senses—as well as the craving for food, the need for water, the probing faces... and the figure that had broken through the throng to stand before them.

Navon took a single step toward the female, and Jikun noted that only the faintest trace of cautious sympathy could be seen in the creases of her dark, stoic face. *'Perhaps they deserve their trials,'* he could almost hear her condemnation.

"We are in need of aid," Navon repeated with a short bow that caused Jikun's rekindled pride to bristle.

The female's button nose curled at the scrawny, bent frame before her. "Hmph," she grunted. She pushed her thick scarf down to lick her darkened lips, and her accent followed thick as soldier's gruel. "What happened? Where have you come from? What aid do you seek from the city of Dahel?"

Jikun did not have to look down upon himself to imagine the visage of the shirtless, blood-stained, and fatigued male that he was. *'What aid do you think we need?'* he snapped internally, and a weak tremble coursed through his body at the effort. "We are survivors of a shipwreck off the southwestern coast." And that was the extent of his paltry creativity.

The female turned her apathetic gaze upon Navon, and the intensity of her inspection grew as though his very appearance—barefoot and deathly pale—offended her. "There is no charity for smugglers here."

'Smugglers?' Jikun's chest dared to swell, despite its sad state of sand and sash. "We are not smugglers—" he denied, but was undermined by his own voice as it cracked in the dryness of his throat.

"We are mercenaries," Navon interjected with a dashing smile. "Bastin of Alaris and Rulan of Venmore—I am certain you have heard of us."

The acerbity of the female's tone lessened, even as Jikun steadied himself pathetically against his captain's shoulder. "...The names are familiar," she mused.

Navon's expression became livelier, his posture straighter. "We were sailing from Elarium to Ryekarayn for business with Lord Thamos when our ship was destroyed in a storm. And as you can clearly see, all of our possessions were lost with it. We were most fortunate to escape with the flesh still strapped to our bones."

If Jikun's mind was any hazier, he may have believed the tale himself.

The female tossed her head at the small crowd peeking around her back, as though feeding off of their reaction. “Rulan and Bastin,” she exhaled slowly, her features displaying an array of deliberating grimaces and wrinkles. Then her words became decidedly brisk. “Our charity rests with the tenets of Epherphese. I am Esra, one of fifty representatives on behalf of our council. In order to supply you and escort you from Dahel and out of the Makataj, I will need to convene with our Re’heshae.” She tipped her chin at their tattered state. “They will devise your test. If you prove yourselves worthy, aid shall be given. Follow me.”

She added nothing of if they failed.

Yet Jikun allowed himself the faintest smile as he fell into a deplorable limp beside Navon. He inclined his head. *‘Swift thinking. Commendable work.’*

Navon grinned. Still, when he leaned over to speak, he did not address his own success. “Now is not the time or place to start whoring,” he instead scolded.

Gods. And here Jikun had the audacity to believe they were sharing a sensible moment. His jaw snapped open in offense. “*Excuse me?*” he hissed as another sandy breeze swept past, making the little orbs of yellow light shake angrily along their cord. “I had intended to praise you for your quick mind. *Now...*” he trailed off. No, it was no use. Navon could read the lust in his eyes as plainly as if he had spoken his desire aloud. *‘Shamefully predictable,’* he chastised himself. “Who are Rulan and Bastin, anyway?” he demanded gruffly. “I have never heard of them... but *you* were quick and confident in the use of their names.”

* * *

Navon *had* been rather sagacious, but then, he had an ample supply of material to draw upon. Not only had wild tales of the iniquitous pair reached even moderately informed individuals on Sevrigel, but he had actually *met* Rulan and Bastin once before—and not so long ago. Unfortunately he had few others as his alternative; his focused readings did not offer him an extensive selection of unsavory characters to mimic, and impersonating a long-dead hero would likely *not* be terribly effective.

More importantly, evidence that this conurbation catered to seedy mercenaries was written plainly across the city.

As though his reasons should be obvious to his culturally inept companion, Navon gestured in a wide arc. He imagined Ephraim must have felt similarly when he had escorted the unrefined Eraydon into the folds of Sel'varian civilization. He watched as Jikun surveyed the easily recognizable Sel'varian intricacies of several vases and silken rugs displayed upon a table up ahead. Not far from them, Noc'olarian, Galvarian, and even *Farvian* artifacts were scattered with frequency amongst the merchants' wares and the balconies of nearby homes.

After Jikun had given the scenery an ample scan, Navon withdrew a few paces from the Eph'ven female. He spoke, careful to keep his voice hushed. "The Eph'vi are frequently involved with both human and elven smugglers," he intoned. "Rulan and Bastin are two mercenaries who are frequently bid upon in the business of procuring such items. I met them briefly when I acquired the book you eventually *stole* from me." He looked pointedly at his friend, a little surge of bitterness following the memory of the altercation inside his tent.

Jikun's brow merely furrowed. "So now we're black market mercenaries? Fantastic decision, Navon." He paused. "Wait. What book...?"

Anger and incredulity would have flared within Navon's breast, but who was he to fight the predictability of the self-centered hero? In fact, Jikun had probably had the audacity to stuff the tome beneath his bed under a pile of a whore's willfully abandoned lingerie.

"*The book*," Navon muttered. He could play as indignant as Ephraim or as furious as Tiras, but ultimately he had to admit that it was his own resentment that inflamed his offense now. All those diligent hours dedicated to his sole personal desire and Jikun did not even have the courtesy to remember! "How can you not recall that tome? It is not like you have stolen *multiple* volumes from me. In fact, if we were to eliminate your 'poetry book'—which I think is quite reasonable—it's the only one I've seen you touch in fifty years!"

Jikun blinked, as though struggling to recall what Navon could possibly be "complaining" about. "You mean that necro—*that* book?"

Navon heaved a sigh. "What *other* book could I be referring to?" he retorted, puffing out his chest.

Jikun cuffed him on the ear.

"Ouch! Damn you, Rulan!"

"Still have enough wits to maintain that lie, at least. I suggest you keep focused on your role lest I strike you again."

“Here we are,” Esra interrupted as Navon withdrew his palm from his throbbing ear. She had stopped before a curtained doorway and was pushing the heavily ornate fabric aside, unaware of the spat behind her. “In here. My home. Wait. I’ll see what I can do for the two of you.”

“You have the mental capacity of a dwarf,” Navon muttered.

“And you whine like a whore,” Jikun jabbed back.

And then they ducked in truce beneath the curtain into Esra’s quiet home.

The building was of simple stone and underdressed: a single vase on the low dining table was the sole decoration. ‘So... empty,’ Navon reflected with an internal grimace. He had spent so long enfolded in the radiance of the Sel’vi that he had nearly forgotten that such baseness existed in most of the world. Like where he had been raised. Against the farthest wall a fire burned, fending off the chill of the night with an amber glow. It was also the only source of light in the otherwise darkened home. He shoved his own character aside, quick to shield his emotions with Riphath’s stoicism.

“Wait,” Navon heard Esra’s distant command, and refocused in time to see her vanish into the street behind the curtain.

“Who do you think she is?” Jikun queried after a moment. “Not even a family name attached to her introduction.”

“Someone you *cannot* bed,” Navon reproached. “That you can even consider such a notion while in our circumstances—and in your condition in particular—*would* be impressive if it wasn’t such a glaring problem.”

Jikun returned a shameless smirk, and, rather than offer his usual caustic retort, surveyed the dimly lit kitchen.

Navon had already absorbed the sight of the worn cabinets. Empty counters. A spider web bridging the cracks of the un-swept corner. And there was no character to play—not even a self-assured Helven like Tiras—that could elevate Navon past his own resentment of the nakedness. If he had any affection for a life alone in squalor, he would never have left home.

The Sel’vi would certainly never demean themselves to such a state of oversimplification.

Across the kitchen, the uncultured general was settling in with ease. He slammed one cabinet door and flung wide another. “So we are sell-swords who procure items for the black market?” he was asking. “What do we know about ourselves? What’s our family name? Are either of us wed? Are we related?—I hope not because we look as alike as a cavalier and his horse. Do we have children? Where do we live? Have we been here before?”

It was the last question that caused Navon to writhe past the jest. He watched as Jikun bent down to a drawer and slid it open to survey the contents. In tales, lying about one's identity never ended well; but by Jikun's relaxed approach, he clearly was not much of a scholar.

As though this instance was necessary to reveal such a truth.

Navon cleared his throat loudly. "We'll decide that information now," he informed as he knelt down on a large seat cushion at Esra's table. "I am Bastin of Alaris and you are Rulan of Venmore. We do business everywhere and so we aren't *'from'* anywhere; experience says people generally accept a mercenary's secrecy. I'm recently wed and you can't sit on one woman long enough to achieve that. I don't want children and at the rate you're whoring, you don't have a choice."

Jikun's eyes narrowed, unappreciative of Navon's wit, and he jerked open a second drawer.

Navon accepted his partial attention. "As for having been to... Dahel... There, we're just going to have to gamble. We must try not to sound committed on the matter. If someone recognizes us, we can feign memory loss caused by errant magic. It happens frequently enough when steal—*procuring* magical artifacts. A strike or two in the head—they're not going to condemn us on the mere grounds of suspicion... but *try* to not get carried away. And may I repeat myself once again, General: *NO* whoring—in your fits of ecstasy, who *knows* what information you might divulge."

Jikun pillaged noisily through the contents of the next drawer. "I'm impressed, Navon—you didn't need more than a moment to devise an entire slew of lies. *You* would make a *fine* sell-sword."

Navon huffed indignantly, feeling a score of his heroes gasp in offense. "You say it with such a negative connotation, and yet you are aware that Eraydon was a mercenary and the pinnacle of accomplishment. Just as with all matters, there are heroes amongst the thieves, Jikun. I would imagine we *both* can avoid devolving into the latter." Jikun snorted, and Navon snapped his fingers in a futile rebuke. "For now, we just happen to be *masking* as two *slightly* shady individuals."

"I'm fairly certain that you have branded us as thieves."

Navon paused, watching Jikun's hand surreptitiously slide from the drawer as though he was trying to hide his action from the Helven's perceptive gaze. "...What did you just take?"

Inconspicuousness foiled, Jikun raised a small kitchen knife and slid it snugly into the side of his boot.

Navon regarded him flatly. “*I branded us as thieves?*”

Jikun closed the drawer forcefully, startling Navon from his ease. “Let me be plain,” he began sourly. “I did not exchange my army to do a novice’s work. We can masquerade as these two miscreants for now, but if the Eph’vi refuse us aid, I am not taking chances that I am trapped as a groveling thug.”

‘And that little knife is our salvation?’ Navon wanted to challenge, but he wisely held his tongue. His general’s gaze had begun to shift deliberately about the room and there could be no doubt that the conversation had come to an end. Navon reprioritized. *‘Food, water, clean wounds,’* he reminded himself, scanning the kitchen in hopes of uncovering any such assistance. His eyes bulged suddenly as a shimmer emanated from the table’s single decoration.

Jikun spied the water at that same moment and as one, they sprang for the vase.

“I saw it first!” Navon cried, all semblance of sophistication and maturity lost in his frenzy to quench his thirst.

“Frozen tits,” was the culturally vulgar response the Darivalian chose as he swung out to snatch the water.

Navon flung himself over the table, jerking the vase free of Jikun’s grasping fingers. *‘Frozen tits to you,’* he thought triumphantly as he tipped it back... but nothing flowed free to satiate his thirst. He lowered the stoneware and glowered contemptuously at the block of ice. Then he shot Jikun a defiant glare as he extended his tongue and slowly slid it across the surface.

“You think that will stop me?” Jikun leaned casually across the table and plucked the vase from his hands. “Thank *you*.”

Navon watched the vase leave his grasp with an impatient twitch. “You’re so very welcome,” he grumbled as the Darivalian gulped the contents down.

Jikun sank wearily into the comfort of the cushions across the table and passed him the remainder with a shameless belch.

“And you could turn away when you decide to act like a repugnant dwarf.”

“Is there any other type?”

Somehow he had even forgotten that Jikun was his constant representative of the world’s primitiveness. Navon rolled his eyes and drank until his thirst dissolved—but it passed only to be replaced by his still-existing trial. His scorched feet seared once more in pain and as though he had not already violated Esra’s property enough, a thought entered unhesitatingly into his mind. There was still some clean water left. *‘Jikun may be accurate about*

aid... We should clean our wounds in the event the Eph'vi do not offer any such assistance.'

Riphath would insist so.

Navon slid to a sitting position upon the cushions and peeled the shirt from the blisters on his feet. The puss had oozed out and sealed the wounds to the salt-coated fabric. As Navon tore the bandage free, his loose skin ripped away with it.

"That looks severe."

Navon did not lift his eyes. "The appearance sells the suggestion."

Silence.

"Jikun," he began, trying to conceal Riphath's nagging, "you may be correct about the Eph'vi's lack of generosity. The kitchen knife is surely a worthy addition to our company, but might I suggest you focus on your more immediate care? Balior could take you any minute."

The male immediately prickled, wise to Navon's intent. "I'd like to see him try," he muttered, glowering once toward the sky in visible defiance.

Navon glanced up as well, seeing past the roof of auburn stone and starry sky, to the realm of Emal'drathar. He could imagine Sel'ari beholding their state with a stony gaze. Jikun was certainly not winning her or any of the deities' favor with his continual blasphemy. And yet here he stood. "I told you the gods have a plan for us. You will discover that we were wrecked upon this land for a reason," he countered as he rubbed a moistened hand across his foot to dislodge the flecks of sand. "But *not* if you don't tend to your wound."

Jikun groaned.

How could such a brilliant male be at the same time so foolish? "*General*," Navon barked sternly, giving way to Riphath's nagging. "You were nearly gutted back on Sevrigel and it's a miracle you have survived this long without proper care. At any moment, even *your* adrenaline shall perish and Esra will find you sprawled out on her kitchen floor."

Jikun patted the silken pillows once. "I've already planned to do the sprawling here," he laughed.

Navon smacked the table sharply. "Take your health seriously, damn it! You are not going to be able to survive on luck forever. We are on the human side of the world, Jikun, and it is *far* more savage."

Jikun gave a dramatic sigh. "Oh Mother, please stop fretting."

Navon snatched up a nearby pillow and hurled it at Jikun's face. "You're fortunate *I* was never the general on Sevrigel because I would have bled that Darivalian arrogance right out of you!"

Jikun caught the pillow and hurled it back, skirting the side of the vase and smacking Navon in the face. “Father will most certainly hear of this abuse.”

Navon let the cushion fall aside, forgotten. His mouth opened and closed twice. “Good *gods*, General—your behavior would put the worst sprite to shame. You are a bloody *adult!*”

“*No,*” Jikun feigned a gasp and struck his wrist dramatically across his forehead. “*I am?* What a *shocking* revelation!”

Navon pounded the vase several times in silent anger, the remnants of water sloshing about. “If you make me come over there and strip your shirt off—”

Jikun grabbed another cushion and chucked it at the male. “Control your lust—I’m not going to loiter with a bloody injury exposed. I’ll take my chances with Lady Luck.”

Navon shook the vase as though it were Jikun’s neck. It offered him only paltry relief. “You had best start addressing your wound this very moment, General, or—”

“SH,” Jikun hissed as a soft thud sounded from beyond the room. He leaned forward sharply to shove the vase toward Navon’s lap.

Navon was forced to cut his words short as he hastened to balance the teetering stoneware. He had barely succeeded when the curtain slid aside and Esra stepped into the room. She paused, eyeing the churning vase and the two dirty males lounging about on her finely woven and scattered pillows.

* * *

Jikun awarded her with a subtle smile—one the women on Sevrigel would have paid to receive. It was worth the attempt.

He was half naked already, after all.

Perhaps the female had noticed his charming address or perhaps she had not, but if she indeed *had*, she was clearly not attracted to the opposite sex. She offered no reaction to his comment, or to her guests’ intrusive behavior. “...I come with good news. Do not fret. The council is eager to grant you aid... *if* you can prove that you are who you claim you are. You shall do so by completing the task provided to you by the council tomorrow morning. Until then, you shall be housed at our community inn.”

A community inn was squalor Jikun had never experienced the likes of before. And judging by the placement of Dahel in the scorching desert with naught but the sea for company, the general had no doubt that only smugglers

would pile in for the nights—or weeks—their ships lay docked along the eastern coast.

The notion of a group of sex-deprived males crowding into a single room to while away their time was not exactly Jikun's preference.

Despite Jikun's outward misgivings—a curled lip, flared nostrils, and a deeply furrowed brow—Esra was predictably curt.

The captain shot him a warning glare.

“At my heels, minabi,” she tutted at the door as Navon finished rebinding his feet.

Jikun briefly speculated what insult he had been thrown before he stepped onto the street behind her where his offense was promptly swallowed. *‘What in the great tundra...?!’* Dozens of creatures of various species roamed and idled about the paths as though they were merely the adorable household wolf. But they each could have crushed Nazra beneath a single, massive paw.

“Beast taming is an innate skill found in all Eph’vi,” Esra beamed as she strutted toward the center of Dahel. “You Darivalians have thakish you ride into the hunt, do you not?”

“Yes,” Jikun lied. Responding with, ‘Actually, the thakish hunt *us*’ was mildly less impressive. He watched as a row of carefully painted vases and flickering evening lights were lost in the presence of several massive forms tromping alongside their tiny masters. Upon passing a blackened beast with glistening, scaled skin and lumpy, spiked hindquarters, the creature sucked itself into the nearest wall and grew as watery as its master's bloodshot eyes. When Jikun had hurried past, it fattened once more and the pair disappeared down the street.

“That was an agretha,” Esra spoke as she noticed the subject of his gawking. “They are one of the most deadly. And my favorite.”

Jikun's lips managed a slight twitch. “Delightful.”

And she did not charm him again until they arrived at a long, flat building shimmering with an orange hue from the nearby lights. The exterior was seamless basalt, as though hued entirely from the face of a single, colossal stone.

This might have impressed Jikun if it was not ultimately a lump of rock.

“Here we are,” Esra announced as she swept the curtain before the door aside. It was only slightly less gaudy than those that dangled before the windows. “On any given night, Keshal was bustling with foreign merchants. Since the arrival of the hel'onja, no one dares to travel from the coast.” She

ducked inside and continued in rough Highstead, “You shall have Keshal almost for yourself.”

Jikun followed, ignoring the fact that she had brushed over an obviously sinister matter.

Navon, however, had curiosity to quench. “What is the hel’onja...?”

Esra trailed alongside the wall, past pillars carved of red sand and a slew of vividly painted murals. Her voice was softer in its reply, a hush not wholly formed by the distance. “The creature appeared two weeks ago, and since, travel to and from the city has stagnated,” she began solemnly. “We call it ‘hel’onja’—the black serpent—but it bears little resemblance to others of its species except in size. It is marked in strange symbols unfamiliar to our kind. It will not be controlled or pacified. It is a great bounty of luck that the two of you managed to arrive,” she finished as she stopped before a mauve curtain at the far wall. “Someone must have need of you.”

Navon smiled in his smug, little way and Jikun shoved an elbow staunchly in his side. “Contain your glee. We still have to get out of this damn desert.”

“Esra, I am here,” a new voice declared, and a male swept from behind the curtain with his arms spread wide. This Eph’veen was slightly shorter than the female—a rarity amongst males to be certain—with hazel eyes and a thin, dimpled smile. He was the very essence of an innocent elf, plucked straight from the pages of a Sel’varian children’s story.

If he was of fairer skin, Jikun was quite certain his cheeks would have been rosy.

“This is Khatja,” Esra spoke stoically. “He shall care for you until the council determines Epherphese’s will.”

The newcomer flounced into the large room with a generous bow, flashing the female a glamorous smile that signaled his eagerness to please. His gaze was disappointingly personal; it was quite possible he had already gotten his cock wet. “A deep pleasure to meet such distinguished males as yourselves,” he began with a stupid grin. “I have heard a fair share of your adventures across the seas and, while I can in no way *condone* all of your actions, more than one item in my possession has been acquired from your work. Find a place to rest and I shall bring food, water, and aid to bear you ’til the dawn.”

Jikun turned with the encompassing motion of his hand. ‘*Not as empty as suggested,*’ he groused as he inspected a large group of humans skulking along the left wall. The mass of them were drinking and eating and mumbling to one another in the Common Tongue.

Smugglers.

And along the rear curve of the wall was yet one more man. His solitude was distinguishing, and Jikun found his curiosity piqued enough to study him more closely. His skin was weathered, sun-beaten, and browned, but he appeared aged no further than his late thirties. He was exchanging a small bag of coin for a leather-bound book with one of the hairy crew members. ‘*An outcast smuggler, perhaps...?*’ “And who is that? Part of that crew...?”

Esra cocked her head, as though baffled that she should have to explain. “No—the crew is from *The Ire*, unable to return to their ship because of the hel’ onja.”

Navon gave a nod, apparently familiar with yet another unsavory group.

“That man is Relstavum. *He* is a prestigious mercenary from the north, most famous for his work culling the bloodthirsters and lycanthropes.”

On cue the man looked up, a leather-bound book in one hand, a heavy bag of coins in the other. His attention flicked across the room to meet Jikun’s gaze, as though he had heard his name at that considerable distance; but as the mercenary was human, that was impossible. His eyes were dark, solid, and hollow, and yet they searched the Darivalian with unnatural intensity—a surveillance far too intrusive.

“He arrived two weeks ago. Fortunately, he is a master of ancient Farvian protection enchantments. He has been forging spells of warding against the hel’ onja.”

The human broke off his gaze as he muttered something to the smuggler. The coins were exchanged. The leather book vanished into his vest.

Jikun turned back to Esra.

“I bid you a good night,” she was finishing as she strode to the entryway. “May Epherphese find you worthy tomorrow.”

And without so much as a flicker of hesitation, she ducked out into the night, leaving the two shipwrecked males alone to enjoy a solitary night on the stony floor.

* * *

Navon swung to face the uncouth room. Someone in the midst of the smuggling scum belched and another man valiantly attempted to best it. Reflecting upon the termination of their once close friendship with these brutes, he was certain the Sel’vi had made a wise decision. Like any hero who had undergone arduous trials, Navon too was subject to misfortunes.

But for now, his displeasure was momentarily abated by the reappearance of Khatja, who brought them two wide cloaks, a dry, meager meal, and herbal bandages that emitted a questionable odor. Still, after a generous application of the remedy, Navon's feet felt practically ready to dance.

Beneath his dirty sash, even Jikun's wound was now exceptional. "Gods, that herbal oil reeks like shit," the general balked, as though he had not just skirted the edge of Balior's door.

His creaseless expression briefly faltered as he sank against the wall, and Navon was reminded of the caliber of his friend's masks.

"After we receive aid and are escorted from the Makataj," Jikun continued, recovering his command, "we will need to find honest work. I'm sure, with our skills, we can easily acquire such tasks in the human land. How far is Eraydon City from here?" The food had, at least, lifted his mood.

Navon could not resist a smile, even as he tilted his head in consideration. Eraydon City was the redeeming beacon of civilization on Ryekarayn. Not only was it the country's cultured capital, but it was also the birthplace of many of Navon's heroes. "At least a few weeks away... possibly more. But there are far more refined dwellings in the west—unlike Sevrigel, we will pass through a good number of settlements before we reach a major city. We may find opportunities for labor in any such place. All of the human lands have lords that claim certain regions—almost like... an elven councilmember, but only subordinate to King Joramon. Most of these men are free-reigning and very near kings themselves. True kings, may I stress, and not purely men who think themselves king—such powerful men will have much to offer."

Jikun snorted once in disapproval. "One king was bad enough," he huffed with a dismissive toss of his hand. "Where are you from? Is it nearby? Do you have connections there that we might find of use? Personally, I'd rather avoid the human lands. As much as I hate the Sel'vi, I imagine humans are even more loathsome."

Navon's pleasantries deflated and he stiffened. Before Tysis of Payne could rein him in, he uttered far too concisely, "No."

Inwardly, he groaned. There was no escaping the general now.

Jikun's eyes locked upon Navon's with all the endless persistence of the frozen tundra. "No?" he repeated, narrowing his lids against Navon's casual smile. "I suppose there is a story to this that somehow makes relations with the Helvari worse than serving humans?"

Navon attempted a dismissive shrug where it would have been preferable to lie. He was good at that. He likely could have woven a dozen historical stories together and Jikun would have been none the wiser.

But now his opportunity was lost. Jikun laughed and kicked out good-naturedly, catching Navon in the shin. “You nag the *shit* out of me like a lordling’s wet nurse every step of my life, and I ask you one personal question and you think you get to decline? ‘*Jikun, is this your poetry? Jikun, how long will you be gone? Jikun, how do you feel? Jikun, don’t strike the king.*’”

Navon rubbed his shin vigorously. Beneath the jest his friend *did* make an unfortunately valid point, but by Sel’ari, that *was* his role, was it not? He swallowed the discomfort rising in his belly as he struggled to reply nonchalantly. “It is not at all as exciting as *your* nagging seems to suggest. I was... I am a very... *dull* individual—there is nothing in my pages that would interest you, believe me, General.”

Jikun was not dissuaded, nor—disappointingly—did he seem to catch the subtle jest at his diary. “Go on.” Despite their distance from the elven nation, the Darivalian had not lost his commanding nature.

Navon thrust his own emotions aside and wrested the strength of Tiras to play his champion. “I am from the Æntara, in the far north, where all the Helvari are birthed. The land is the same as every mountain range inhabited by elves: there is a cluster of dwarves who claimed they arrived first and thus every so often, we must pound them back into the stone. Outside our territory, there live only brigands, goblins, and the cross between, all still grasping for dominion over the land the elves abandoned after the last True Bloods left. And when we are left to our own devices, we practice necromancy.”

Jikun lurched forward, his eyes flickering intensely. “So did you ever kill one of these insolent dwarves? Hack a few goblins? Decapitate a throng of brigands?”

“...Many.”

Jikun was clearly satisfied with the bounty of killings. “Good gods, Navon. I am so tired of killing skinny, towering elves I would sell my soul to kneel down and drive a blade through a fat gut.”

“...Sometimes I question whether you are an elf at all.”

Jikun sniffed dismissively and briefly rubbed his nose with disappointment. “Sounds like an untamed land... but you certainly do not reflect that. What did your father and mother think of you choosing the dress over the sword?”

Navon regarded him flatly, but even as he devised an equally scathing response, an immense and barren room devoured his amusement. The light of a single log danced across old necromantic symbols worn free of potency by their fragmented lines. Cobwebs fluttered in the breeze from the open door. The house was empty but for the small, male child that stood at its center, willing the broken lines to reform just long enough to swallow him.

“Navon?”

Navon shook the memories from his head, forcing Tiras onward to dull his emotions. But his good humor was lost. “My father was obsessed with necromancy... and when my mother could not endure his obsession any longer, she took my sister and left. Some of the elders said she made it north, to the Hatore region. But I don’t believe she survived that long.

“Eventually, my father’s necromancy even compelled *him* to leave, and he did, one day, to Sevrigel. I was... raised by the community, as no individual wanted to take responsibility for me getting gutted by the enemy. I was often sent to scout alone and fought in nearly all the skirmishes—my service was dutiful payment for their care. Primarily, however, I stayed in the mountains and studied. It has been such a long time and I was young: I would not remember anyone now and believe me, in a culture with far more pressing concerns, *no one* would remember me. As you like to point out, *I’m* not at all interesting.”

Jikun’s observation intensified on Navon’s carefully composed expression in an attempt to infiltrate his captain’s walls. But the general would find them equal to his own. “So you did not go with him,” his companion clarified after a moment.

Navon felt his false smile falter. Tiras was not at all rising to his demands. “My father? No. He said he had to acquire Tiras’ necromantic writings to his apprentice—they were the only two texts Tiras ever wrote before he left the Æntara and set out with Eraydon... Before he disappeared. And they contain the rarest collection of necromantic spells on the mortal plane. But you know this from your visit with Murios, don’t you? And my father, like so many necromancers before him, lusted for both books. Ironically, years later, I heard that one of them was not far from our mountains in the possession of some great thane. Presumably, it is still in the king’s archives in Vise. But my father never came back for it. For anything.”

And before Navon had realized it, the image of the child before his eyes was collapsing, weighed down by the knowledge that all who he cherished in the world had left him there.

Navon grappled to return from the unwelcome vision. In all his years since he had left Ryekarayn, no one had ever questioned his origins—the Sel’vi just assumed that their world was that much greater.

And it was.

Of course it was Jikun, with his fervent love of family and homeland, who threatened Navon’s walls now. *‘Many great males had worse circumstances,’* he reminded the anguish, and quickly transferred his attention out across the room, searching for a distraction not only for himself, but for Jikun as well.

He found it in his single observer: Relstavum. The dark-skinned mercenary was gazing at them with striking intensity for a man that could not possibly hear across such distance. And still... Navon felt a sudden and unnatural tug toward the man.

There was something that he could glimpse through those eyes...

Jikun’s words pulled him back into focus as he offered the rarest trait he had—empathy. “Your father strikes me as a bastard. But I don’t understand... how did you come so far east as Sevrigel? And into the *army*? Not that I am protesting that excellent decision.”

Navon knew far better than to respond with anything equally sentimental. “*So,*” he began stoically, “I went searching for Tiras’ book myself. Saved every coin. Crossed the channel. And then found that my father had been apprehended for practicing necromancy and was put to death years ago.” He paused briefly and elevated his chin, his face remaining smooth. “...But I suppose that’s what I should have expected.”

Jikun’s compassion had been exhausted. “Yes, you should have.” He blew out his cheeks. “And then, after you learned the truth, you naturally joined the military, where reports of your discrepancies were likely to have you executed on the spot.”

The male’s inability to appropriately address—or express—vulnerable emotions was astounding. “I joined the army after spending years trying to hunt the book down and expending everything to do so,” Navon replied patiently. “As a male who spent his entire life reading books and swinging a sword, not a great many talents present themselves as optional pathways for success.” And he had to admit, in a heavily warring culture like the Æntara Helvari, not much else had been likely to cross his mind. “All we ever heard on Ryekarayn was of Sevrigel’s ‘unrivaled peace and beauty.’ *Peace and beauty.* So the army seemed an ideal place to be paid for my skills while I studied. By the time the war with Saebellus intensified, I had already climbed the military chain—deserting did not really seem like an option.”

Jikun's amused features relaxed into mild perplexity. "I've heard many motivations for why males join the army, but the belief of perpetual peace where you can bury your head in books is definitely new."

"When you have no place else to go and no greater skills to boast, it seems a fine place to be. Many of the greatest heroes served in a military capacity at one time or another."

"And that's what you want to be? Someone who history remembers?"

Ephraim's personality vied for a yes, but even Navon's own nature had sense enough to know better. "...No... I am wise enough to recognize that I am not that male. But I hoped to serve someone who would be."

Jikun was silent for a moment as Navon turned the focus of the conversation unexpectedly upon him. He cleared his throat gruffly. "So when you learned about Murios' book... Did you consider deserting then?"

"Yes..." Navon trailed off, but as Jikun's expression fell slightly, he smirked. "And then I realized, who would have wiped your ass?"

Jikun's offense was stilled by the moment of personal sentiment. Quiet settled about the tavern—even the smugglers had just finished some crass tune about the flexibility of large-boned women.

In that silence, they should have been able to hear a grain of sand hit the floor. And yet, a shadow fell over them suddenly. "Pardon my interruption," a smooth voice inquired beside them.

Navon jolted straight, caught off-guard by the abruptness of the human's appearance and too dumbstruck by his imperceptible movement to respond.

But the *feeling* that accompanied the man. Up close, Navon was certain of it... the look in the man's eyes—familiar. *Similar*. The pull he felt was that of two souls reaching out across a sea of indistinguishable whispers, both tattered and worn but uniquely distinct amongst the waves. Navon had felt this sensation many times amongst his own kind.

'He's a necromancer,' he realized.

Relstavum crouched down a foot away and smiled reassuringly, as though he knew the same about Navon. "I apologize for intruding. I would not normally involve myself with the Eph'vi and their customs, but I could not help but observe the severity of your state and overhear the grueling task you will face in the morning."

Navon saw Jikun give a short, blank nod—still too equally surprised by his own deficiency to speak.

"The struggles of the unfortunate involve me as well; I have been channeling Farvian warding to protect Dahel," Relstavum continued with a

respectful incline of his head, as though he was a partner to their trial. “While the Eph’vi have done little to fully pay me for my efforts, still here I remain.”

“So we were told,” Jikun finally replied, and Navon could hear the instinctual caution and defense rise in his general.

‘There is certainly no possibility that a polite and kind human is bearing any good,’ Navon thought sarcastically. But after a moment he was certain: despite Jikun’s sensitivity toward all mentions of necromancy and his instinctual pessimism toward the man, he was clueless as to Relstavum’s use of the much-hated magic.

Relstavum reached within his vest and for half a heartbeat, Navon expected the leather-bound book. Instead, the man extended his hand and dropped a charm to dangle from a silver chain at his fingertips. The round, intricate design was beyond Jikun’s understanding—as it should be. But there was something that struck Navon with familiarity. *Relief*. Something in its composition was not unlike those in the ancient necromantic tomes he had studied. But it was certainly Farvian in origin—the elven race that had long since been obliterated from the face of Aersadore. Navon, with his massive knowledge of manuscripts, could at least recognize the similarities to their dead language. “A Farvian ward of protection. This is the last one I have, but assuming it does its job, you can deliver it to me upon returning from your trial.”

Navon could see Jikun look skeptically upon the gently swinging medallion. “If Farvian warding was so effective, why are there no Faravi left alive to testify to this?”

Navon flinched. *Why* did he have to keep such rude company? He bent apologetically and reached out to take the charm. *‘From one necromancer to another...’* “Thank you.”

Relstavum returned the same soft smile, then stood. There were no further words or exchanged expressions; Navon watched as he vanished from the inn, the ornate rug flapping gently in the icy breeze. He stared intently at the rippling fabric for a short time, irrationally hoping that the fellow necromancer would reappear to offer some semblance of comfort in the foreign land. But when it moved again, a new figure swept through, his face fully concealed deep beneath a drawn hood. Even with his body hidden beneath ample folds of similarly dirty, white silk, it was clear to Navon that he was leaner than Relstavum.

He sighed.

“It’s all yours,” Jikun spoke sharply, his words snapping Navon into focus. The Darivalian’s eyes had narrowed, his usual cynicism fixating critically upon the charm.

Navon draped it around his neck and tucked it beneath his cloak, pressing a palm to the silver for that brief tie of solidarity. The acceptance of necromancy...? This was one side of Ryekarayn... one side of home he *had* missed. “It can’t hurt,” he smirked.

Beneath his coarse blanket, Jikun settled down across the sandy tiles. “Well I don’t know enough about magic to get specific, but I’m guessing that statement is incorrect. I’m going to sleep. If our current misfortunes are any indication, we’ll be facing the hel’onja in the morning. And I think *sleep* will do me more good than some old jewelry.” He tugged at his blanket once. “On another note, the versatility of their same fabrics—rugs... curtains... doors... blankets... is admirable.”

Navon chuckled and rested a few feet away, clutching the amulet as he closed his eyes beneath cloak and rug. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Yes... if one of these charming smugglers doesn’t slit our throats while we sleep.”

“...May dawn rise for you, Jikun.”

CHAPTER NINE

Mist coiled in from the west, twisting through the bay as the old ships creaked and groaned. Not far to the east, a tumult of voices could be gleaned from the ruckus at the grimy human tavern, but here, only the gentle lap of water and the shifting suits of armor broke the night's silence.

A figure dropped from the rooftop and into the darkness. No sooner had he landed than mist rushed inward once more to bathe him in the shadows, concealing him from the Night's Watch. Only four males of the city guard were prowling about the Port of Targados that night. A sliver of moonlight penetrated the clouds and illuminated their presence in a flash of polished steel. For several minutes they patrolled up and down the length of the port.

And then, for only the span of a breath, the opportune moment presented itself: all eyes were cast away from the water, a weighty cloud masked the struggling moon, and a billow of heavy mist plumed between the bobbing ships. The figure leapt from concealment in a soundless sprint, crossing the cobblestones to leap with unrivaled grace onto the jutting stern of *The Black Queen*.

He landed with a thud too faint for human ears and too unremarkable for elves'. With strong fingers and well-placed footing, he sidled up the side and slipped over the railing.

"By Galway's arse, whattin I wouldn't sell to have a night with one o' 'em fine whores," a voice grumbled below the crow's nest, his lean shape swinging idly around the pole. The disgruntled sailor received a round of nods from four weathered companions, each man unaware of the shadow that had crept into position directly across from the mast.

The figure flicked a black oiled cloth from his belt loop and pressed it to his nose and mouth where it clung as tight as his own flesh. When the mask was secure, he withdrew a crystal vial, popped the cork, and let it roll across

the weather-beaten planks. A single *thunk* signified that it had skidded down the upper level of the stern to nestle upon the main deck. The fog seemed to thicken, and then...

Bang!

A cloud of midnight blue gas erupted from the vial and the watchmen of *The Black Queen* dropped like stones to the floor, splayed and still as death.

Sellemar vaulted over the side of the ship, landing upon the deck just as the thick clouds lifted, a ray of intrusive light illuminating his face and dispelling him from the dark. *'Too late for that, Noctem,'* he thought with a smirk as he surveyed the unconscious figures.

And then he was gone, clearing the deck in moments to arrive at a heavy trapdoor, its old handles beckoning Sellemar to venture inside. A swift tug, a muted creak, and he descended into the belly of the rocking, amber vessel.

As he reached the base of the cargo hold, a series of growls and hisses heralded his arrival. There was a tremor of feet and a pounding of fists against iron bars.

Sellemar's eyes adjusted rapidly. The light emanated from a single lamp atop a decrepit wooden table. Its glow was hardly superior to the sliver of fogged moonlight from the world above, but it was consistent.

And it was enough to see that he had found his quarry.

The second bottle of Loedrin's Breath was at Sellemar's fingers in seconds, uncorked and sailing slowly through the air.

It bounced once. There was a furious growl. A soft hiss issued forth from an eruption of gas. And then the cargo hold from the Phantom Isles fell silent.

Sellemar felt his adrenaline level out as his prey became immobilized, and he strode forward as though the ship were his own.

And it was. With a lefry mask protecting him from the gas and a blade for defense in hand, he was the king of this shoddy vessel, unchallenged by the unconscious occupants sprawled out in their iron cells. Nonetheless, he maintained the same level of cautious preparation that had kept him alive for so many years—those creatures were only deceitfully peaceful now that the drug had rid their bodies of malice.

He contemplated the scene with impassive calculation. Rows of crates created small mountains before him, each marked with "Xs" of varying colors—whites, greens, reds, and blues. Their contents were a mystery, but given their origin, they were undoubtedly sinister in nature.

More important was the cargo of the iron cages—those beasts he had sent into a slumber. *These* were his prey. Bound in rusted chains, locked safely

within their enclosures, were the demon spawn of Sheolra. They were brutal, soulless beasts, lacking sense of self and purpose. Violence. Bloodshed. Lust. It was all their kind knew, and all their kind could comprehend.

If the stories of Saebellus' Beast were true, then perhaps it too was one of them.

These particular beasts had been wrenched from their abode in the abyss to the mortal realm, then ferried across the sea to fill the gaps of losses in Saebellus' ranks. Already, Saebellus' personal Beast lurked somewhere within the capital. And to think—the warlord was about to acquire *more*.

Sellemar's lip twisted. It was a dangerous and sick desperation to use such animals of bloodlust.

He approached the bars of the first cage, drawing his sword and slicing in quickly and wholly painlessly. The beast was dead in seconds. He offered no prayer to ferry it onward as the demon possessed no soul for the gods to take.

On he progressed, dispatching the occupants of one cell after another with crisp efficiency. Soon the demons' blackened blood oozed with an overwhelming stench not unlike rust, leaking with flickers of essence as the corpses returned to the ether. The scent was nearly strong enough to send a conscious male's head spinning, but it was the sleeping that were stirred by the tangible call.

There was a sudden cry, a piercing howl that speared Sellemar's core and rattled his mind. He recoiled from the bars in a surge of fear, even as the creatures before him remained eerily still in the sudden explosion of noise. He whirled around, eyes wildly searching for the beast that had risen above the powerful drug.

The scent of blood must have aroused its hunger—its lust so intense that it had shattered the bonds of Loedrin's Breath with a crazed need.

There. From amidst the long shadows against the wall, one of the demons rose to its feet, its great mass trembling with fury. Its pale red eyes flicked and twitched, jerking about its enclosure in a frantic hope of finding a means to satiate its hunger.

It found Sellemar. Glee filled the demon's eyes, its face contorting into a mockery of elven emotions. Cracked skin peeled upward in a fanged snarl. Then the beast wrenched its body toward Sellemar, its bulk contained only by the thick chains and bars that separated them.

At that moment, it felt unsettlingly insufficient.

'*By all the gods,*' Sellemar breathed in sudden realization as the shadows beside the demons shifted.

Three demons beside it were stirring as well. Bloodlust and a cry that split Emal'drathar... They would not be the only ones to awaken!

Sellemar sheathed his blade and hefted his spear, the familiar weight reassuring as he strode forward to the awakened cage. He had to slay them before their howls captured the attention of the Night's Watch. "Damn Saebellus," he muttered. *'How determined must he be to ferry creatures from the demon realms?! Determined... and daft.'*

Acting concurrently with his thoughts, he saw one of the demons wrenching at his bonds and roaring to Ramul, his chest bulging as his shoulders popped and grated, as though *sensing* Sellemar's intent—and his confidence.

Then with one fierce yank, the chains at the demon's wrists snapped away like the rusted bits of metal they were.

Sellemar froze, confidence waning.

The three demons that had awoken beside the first grabbed the bars and howled, latching onto his hesitation with mad delight. A ripple coursed through the four—a tremor of rare racial solidarity in which the obstacle, source of food, and enemy were the same.

The first demon snapped the chains from the three awakened beasts behind him, building his force against their prey. Their snarls intensified as they watched Sellemar's swagger ebb away like the draining blood from his face. When the last demon in that particular cell did not stir, the largest of the four crushed its skull mercilessly beneath its heel. Essence and brain juice sprayed against the wall like the contents of a vomiting gut.

For the last time, its eyes met Sellemar's. *And it sneered.*

'Sel'ari guard me.'

With that, the iron bars separating him from the demons crumpled away like aged parchment and the demons tore into the amber glow of the rocking hold.

Sellemar leapt to the side, throwing his body behind a stack of crates to spin around into the shadowed alley behind him. He dashed into the darkness, his mind racing to calculate the differences in scent and vision, of his abilities versus theirs.

The cargo hold was vast, the many crates like a maze, and Sellemar darted and wove between them, low and out of sight. Before he had travelled even halfway down the expanse, one of the smaller demons found him. With a lurch and a cackle of triumph, its talons swept for the deep tissue of his breast.

Sellemar's spear lunged with greater speed. He thrust it clear through the demon's throat and in an unbroken motion, wrested the weapon free to leave the demon's essence dissolving on the beaten ground.

There was a sudden tap on the floor before him and a flash of shadow smeared the wall. A lean figure flitted just out of sight. *The other demon was on the prowl.*

'*Damn it!*' Sellemar hissed internally even as his breath remained calm. Only the tightening of his hand upon his weapon betrayed his fear.

The floor behind him gave the faintest creak and Sellemar whirled, leaping away on instinct, twisting his spear around to shield his narrow frame. The taloned hand shot from the darkness like a viper and raked down the shaft with a blow that knocked Sellemar clear off his feet.

But *he* was the hunter. Sellemar kicked the butt of his spear up even as he careened away, sending a wave of shock through the demon's body with a solid blow beneath the chin. The head snapped up to the cobwebbed rafters.

It was the last thing the beast saw before Sellemar regained his footing and shoved his spear through the creature's silver throat. It flailed once, its talons raking furiously for the nearby crates, and reared free in a final moment of crazed bloodlust. Sellemar immediately drove a second blow into the beast's naked breast and threw it to the floor. The thud boomed like thunder through the cargo hold, but the taloned hand could do no more damage.

Sellemar straightened, swallowing audibly as his eyes shifted across the cargo. There were two more demons loose, but the wooden crates were just as sinister. He reached out a hand, wiping it gently across the white "X" beside him. To Ramul if he knew what was in *this* one, but he had seen enough of the storage hold already to warn him that the contents were malevolent. '*More smuggled goods from the Phantom Isles. And nothing pleasurable to be sure.*' The Phantom Isles only betokened death and destruction, and the crates upon crates from the cursed lands were stacked nearly to the rafters. What was one demon to the mountain of these?!

And he had seen a drugged drake—large enough to rip a fully grown man to pieces in seconds—sprawled unconscious on the western side of the room. Gods forbid *that* wake as well!

The netted barrels of alchemic explosives around it brought him no further ease.

His breath returning, Sellemar crept past the body of the slain demon as though it might still lash out in death. His body tucked into the shadows as he

moved, the shaft of his spear the only comfort in the darkness—his sword *and* shield against these bloodthirsty beasts.

The ship let out a heavy groan and Sellemar almost missed the soft creak of wood from somewhere nearby. He dropped like a stone into the shadows, hunkering beside a crate with breath held. He was fortunate enough to be able to driftwalk, but his body still carried a scent—noble though it was. Demonic olfactory perception was great enough to rival a dragon's, even in a weakened state. He could only hope that the lingering odor of Loedrin's Breath disrupted the demons' senses enough that they could not locate him.

At least, not at the same time.

That was hardly too much to pray for.

He jerked his head slightly as he once more stood, annoyed by the grease of the lefry skin pressed against his face.

'Damn it, Sellemar, you are playing too dangerous a game to lose your concentration now!' He stepped over the body of a sleeping human, the only watchman to be seen below deck. The rest of the six members of the night crew would continue to sleep like babes up above him. But even with that danger averted, the cries of the damn demons would surely bring the Night's Watch to arms in their stead—if they were not alerted already.

'Perhaps the greater olfactible sensitivity is causing the demons to be further affected.' And then a little jolt of pessimism to keep himself alert: *'Do not count on that.'*

And then he found himself tearing to the side, his body reacting on instinct before his mind had even absorbed the dark mass hurtling toward him. *'Damn it!!'* There was an audible rush of wind, a horrible crack. The crate with the white "X" was hurled with such force that it burst open against the wall behind him, sending a spray of white worms into the air. They narrowly missed Sellemar as he scrambled to his feet, but the others oozed free of the broken planks to wriggle with alacrity toward the unconscious body of the human. Sellemar leapt off the ground instantly, placing his feet against the side of the hull while he rested the bulk of his weight against the spear that held him up. He watched in horror as the worms swarmed past. Then he kicked off the wall, flipping clear of the scene below and landing neatly on a nearby barrel.

The worms swarmed into the body of the sleeping human and in seconds, the man's flesh withered and caved.

Maravian worms. He felt a convulsive shiver as he realized how close he had been to sharing the human's fate.

His balance had hardly settled on the barrel when his eyes snapped away from the repulsive sight. *'Sel'ari!'* The crate had not flown by itself!

But his distraction had cost him the ground. The two demons had emerged from the darkness, their bulging masses rushing across the crates behind him. The nearer one had vaulted from the floor before Sellemar could raise his spear. Wind whistled as the fist flew, smashing into the arm he had hurriedly raised before his face.

He tumbled from the barrel and slammed into the hull, the armor of the gauntlet saving him from an otherwise shattered forearm. His head struck the dense wood and left him dazed. *'Defend!'* was all the sense his mind could scream, and he spat the blood from his lip as he swept his spear out blindly.

He heard a yelp as the demon skirted the tip. A shape landed beside it, snarling and posturing its blurry form to terrifying height, threatening the lesser beast from poaching its prey.

The fog in his vision cleared and Sellemar lunged, driving his spear into the belly of the smaller demon. It wailed and bayed, flinging itself away into the nearby barrel. It toppled over the side to sprawl, momentarily stunned, across the floor.

Sellemar pulled himself up rapidly, ignoring the jolt through his spine. It was only the subtleness of the pin prick that abruptly sharpened his self-awareness, and he realized in horror that he had fallen by the edge of the mass of writhing worms. He scrambled back, drawing the blade from his hip as he did so and slicing unhesitatingly at the sting emanating from his shin. The maravian worm sloughed out in two as the wound burst open, and Sellemar cried out in pain and terror.

'Are their more? More?!' his mind frantically cried, searching the length of his body for the feeling of pins and needles, hardly perceptible above the dance of his spasming muscles. He ducked low, narrowly missing the fist of the last standing demon. *'No! No more! Focus!'* he commanded himself, even as his mind was racked with doubt. If the maravian worms did not kill him, this beast certainly would!

Its eyes were wild and bloodshot, its mouth gaping wide in a shrill scream of fury and delight. Blood. *Blood!* Sellemar's blood was flowing in a steady stream down his leg now, pooling into his boot and squishing as he shifted his weight. He lurched away from the multitude of worms. Around him, a barrage of yowls was joining in the frenzy, the fresh scent rousing the demons to consciousness. And all their bestial minds could comprehend in their unfamiliar surroundings was *blood*.

Sellemar's blood.

He could hear the beasts rattling against the bars of their iron cages, screaming and raging, yanking hysterically against their chains.

Sellemar scurried across the span of clear ground, spinning around the corner and dropping low. As the demon pitched around the side, Sellemar thrust his spear forward and through the creature's skull.

Its legs buckled and it slumped in a twitching heap.

'Damn it... I have to get out of here now...! I cannot finish...!' his thoughts were broken as a crate above him boomed and cracked—something had smashed against it from the other side. Something big. He leapt clear from showered debris as a slow trickle of worms began to crawl around the corner, seeking out his trail of blood.

Sellemar sprinted for the stairs to the upper deck, but was forced to reel back as another crate flew past and smashed into the planks at his feet. Sellemar's head whipped wildly to the side and he spotted the demon from before. The small beast heaved as its stomach pumped blood from its essence like a torrent of black ink. *'A resilient type... damn it!'* he deduced as the beast hounded him with growing speed, its wound merely driving its strength.

Sellemar leapt over the crate of green ooze, stifling a wretch as an overwhelming stench arose from within. A second and third crate followed in quick pursuit, splintered across the floor in a sea of obsidian shards and jellied tentacles—the latter of which flopped and twitched as though still connected to the body of the beast that had borne them.

And then came the barrel of alchemic explosives.

Sellemar saw the net sliced wide and the demon ripped a barrel from the stash, unaware of the deadly contents nestled within the ash buffer. Every ounce of Sellemar's muscles pulled now. He ran, lurching wildly past the wall lined with bellowing demons, and rushed single-mindedly for the stairs.

Then the barrel smashed into the iron cage behind him.

A thunderclap like the belly of a storm tore into the night sky. Sellemar was blasted off his feet and flung against the stairs in what he was sure was a dozen pieces. Darkness swallowed him and for an instant, his vision was lost. The roars of the creatures had ceased—only a keening ring wailed in his ears, and he felt even his faculty of touch failing him.

Then his chest sputtered and he coughed out a ball of ash. Blurred shapes twisted in the dim light. A faint trickle sounded from somewhere nearby. Muffled voices...

And then his senses smashed into him with the same force with which they had departed. He gasped and cried out, a wave of agony and sensation overwhelming him. The demons were yowling once more. The cage where the alchemic Hadavrae had exploded was a heap of broken iron and singed bodies. Several demons that had managed to survive the blast were clambering free... *of the water rushing into the punctured hull.*

A hole the size of the drake itself had been blown clear through the ship and the water rushed in with eager greed to join in the killing.

'By Sel'ari, the ship is sinking!' Sellemar realized in horror. He pulled himself to his feet, scrambling through his injury and up the stairs. Even as the ship around them groaned in warning, the demons clawed toward him in pursuit—not to save themselves, but in hopes of retrieving a swift and fresh meal.

Sellemar tossed himself through the open doors and onto the main deck. He spun around, eyes frantically sweeping the ship.

The five men still lay sprawled and unconscious. *'Damn it!'* Sellemar swore, running to one of their listless forms. He ripped the sword from the slacked grasp and shoved it between the handles of the storage hold.

It would not seal the way for long.

Sellemar was moving away instantly, his mind hastening to form a plan. He calculated how long he had to implement it before everyone was lost to sea with the beasts of the Phantom Isles. Sellemar had fair time to save himself, but the crew as well...? And worse still, the noise had surely brought the Night's Watch to the dock's shore! Even with the din of the beasts roaring behind him, he could hear shouts from somewhere beyond the bow of the ship.

Sellemar yanked his singed mask to cover his face.

"Damn my sense!" he swore as he rushed to the skiff at the side of the helm and lowered it swiftly until it was near level with the railing. He rushed to the farthest men, dragging them across the deck. "Going to your deaths sleeping is far more than you deserve," he growled resentfully. But it was not Sel'ari's way. He flung the five men into the small boat as rapidly as he could, praying fervently that the ship would stay afloat just long enough for him to get free as well.

Sel'ari heard his prayer and the ship did not capsize toward the stern until the skiff had dropped with a resounding splash into the water and the men bounced once within.

Cries of alarm rose louder from the Night's Watch on the docks. The sounds of hurried paddles hit the water as someone rowed out to meet the unconscious crew.

Sellemar stood upon the railing of the sinking vessel, his resolute silhouette briefly illuminated as another explosion rocked the ship from beneath. Then he kissed his thumb once and raised it to Emal'drathar. Tonight, he was glad for the darkness, for he too would vanish within it.

But what he had uncovered...? *That* would remain.

The warlord would not solidify his grip upon the elven nation. Instead, come dawn, he and his queen would behold their first taste of his Resistance.

CHAPTER TEN

A piercing scream rent the night air, penetrating Jikun's exhaustion and fatigue like a lance to the heart. He wrenched himself upward through his pain, at once fully aware of the world around him. The blanket dropped away from his pounding chest and he grasped for the kitchen knife. His eyes darted to the right for his companion—Navon was still there beside him, his stricken face illuminated in the glow of Keshal's dying fire. He had likewise risen to one elbow, his alarmed expression a confirmation that the sound had been more than a figment of Jikun's imagination.

Across the inn, the hearing-impaired humans were stirring and a white-cloaked man was already on his feet.

Jikun's mouth opened dryly. "What was—?"

But his words were culled into silence, drowned beneath a second scream of terror. No sooner had it begun to fade than a howl of cries pursued it across the city.

"W-what in Sel'ari's name?!" Navon stammered as he clambered to his feet beneath his cloak. He flattened his body against the wall as a maddened human barreled past him, frantic to escape the confines of the inn.

Jikun had experienced enough battles to recognize the sound. To *know* the sound. They were not merely screams of fear. Howls of warning. *These were the last cries of the living.*

His head snapped about Keshal's interior and he spotted the white-cloaked man leaning out of a curtained window. "What do you see?" he demanded. Deep within the recesses of his mind, military tents danced with blackened flames. *'What in Ramul is occurring?! We're in the middle of god-damn nowhere!'*

The man clenched the curtain, and for a moment, there was no response. Still, his breathing was audible from across the room—quicken and loud,

made erratic by fear. “There is something moving in the darkness...” He hesitated. “But it looks like... smo...ke? What in the—?” The man flung himself from the frame, narrowly avoiding a dark shape hurtling through the window. It smashed into the fire in the center of the room, spewing a shower of sparks high into the dome.

Even if Jikun had not been riveted to the floor by the dim illusion of torched soldiers, it was too late to do more than watch as the scrambling humans fought to claw their way from the windows and door.

“Osin, don’t let it touch you!”

“GAHHH!”

“Shit!”

“Zane!”

Emerging from the street beyond, tendrils of black smoke cracked like whips, twisting about the ankles of the thrashing, scampering men. As the bodies were tangled into the ethereal web, a host of gleeful skulls materialized in the cloud above.

“*Necromancy!*” Navon choked, reeling from the doorway.

Jikun’s mind jolted. *‘Necromancy? Here?! From whom?!’* He recoiled, for the first time conscious of the growing fog of sneering faces flooding into the inn.

Navon’s nails dug into his cloaked shoulder, yanking him toward an adjacent window. The howls were escalating with a tumultuous wind, railing across the city and growing into a vociferous wail of terror and woe. “*We have to leave!*” he shrieked, flinging his hand straight against the billowing necromantic cloud. “While I have them restrained!” He tore the curtain aside and leapt through the open sill, turning back to extend a frantic hand. “JIKUN, NOW!”

The engulfed tents disintegrated suddenly, leaving Jikun naked in reality. *‘Pull your mind together, damn it!’* he cursed, claspng Navon’s hand and launching himself through the window. Behind him, a smuggler and the cloaked man were the last two who managed to escape before Keshal was consumed in a deafening roar.

Outside, Dahel was awash in equal chaos and blood. The streets were overrun with a churning mass of horrified and confused Eph’vi, who fled with smoke licking their heels.

Jikun’s magic tore from his fingers before his fear could rally the resurgence of Sevrigel’s screams. What little humidity graced the cold air was sucked from it, pooling at the feet of a scrambling Eph’veen and rushing toward

the black sky as an impenetrable wall of jagged ice. The tendrils smashed furiously against the barrier and dissipated left and right, determined to seek a way around.

“Loedrin’s Breath upon you, now is not the time to play heroics!” the man in white berated as the tendrils ceased their futile attempt, instead rounding upon the remaining victims.

Which now was them.

“*Damn you to Ramul!—RUN!*” the burly smuggler bellowed, his arms flailing as he pivoted and deserted them around the side of Keshal. There was an immediate, drowned cry; a spray of blood glittered once in the moonlight before it fell to the sandy street.

The man in white managed an impressively fast retreat and darted around the opposite side of Keshal’s exterior. With a firm kick, he vaulted over the low wall of a nearby building and caught the edge of the roof, dissolving into the night beyond.

Navon snatched Jikun’s arm, nearly ripping him off his feet. “We can’t mimic that in our condition! Come! There must be another street this way!” His palm extended once more, forcing the necromancy to hiss and still as they plunged around the side of Keshal.

The intersecting street was little better than what lay behind, surging with trampling Eph’vi and the swarming, hideous skulls.

“It’s everywhere!” Jikun shouted, watching as a male clawed crazily at the frame of his door in his final attempts to free his soul from its grasp. He shot a wall of ice behind the male and the Eph’ven sprang free—straight into the tendrils bursting from an adjacent alley.

A body dropped suddenly at their feet from the upper balcony. “Stay close, General!” Navon bellowed, and with renewed determination he broke into a sprint along the sandy streets, pausing only to make certain that Jikun was at his heels. Together, they wove and shoved through the stampeding throng, diving past crowded doorways and hurdling over mangled remains. Navon’s driven commands to keep the mauling tendrils at bay ferried them to the path where Esra had guided them mere hours before.

It was nigh unrecognizable through the churning chaos and ravaged bazaar.

“We have to vacate the city!” Jikun cried, leaping over a lifeless, spread-eagled body.

To his right, a rug was torn from its hangings as an Eph’ven leapt through the now-open window. Before her feet could touch the earth, a writhing coil of

smoke wrapped about her torso and wrenched her back inside, smashing her head against the frame as she went.

Navon averted his gaze from the congealed mess. “They’re on their own, General! *You* are my responsibility!”

Jikun hurled a wall of ice before a surge of smoke, temporarily setting a child free from the trailing cloud. Instantly, a tendril launched from an open door and ripped the little girl inside. “*Gods damn it,*” Jikun hissed, biting his lip.

“We’re close!” Navon rallied above the wailing. “Just a little farther!”

Just a little farther. Jikun could glimpse the faint glow of auburn sand from up ahead as dawn’s first light infused the grains with a hint of fire. “Just a little farther...!”

He clutched his hope fiercely as he passed the next familiar building. The curtains from the windows and doors were gone, revealing a bare home twisting with remnants of smoke about a shattered vase.

Something lashed against his ankle, burrowing a chill deep into his body. ‘*Come away, broken one. The flames cannot follow you here,*’ a voice whispered. ‘*Here we pass no judgment.*’

But Jikun’s adrenaline spurned the offer before the wall of his emotional dam could crack. ‘*Just a little farther... Just a little farther!!*’

And a moment later, they broke through the city line between Dahel and the endless desert, kicking up sand as their feet met the cold grains of salvation. Behind them, the necromancy yowled with rage. Eph’vi were still clawing to free themselves from the clouds of smoke rising like a thunderstorm from the sands.

A fierce tremor coursed through the earth. Jikun whirled, past the scatter of Eph’vi who had managed to escape Dahel. ‘*Gods, what now?!*’ But before he could utter his confusion aloud, something hurtled across the orange sky... an enormous, sable mass that arched toward Emal’drathar before smashing violently into the earth.

“*By Sel’ari,*” Navon wheezed in horror.

Jikun’s grip tightened on the small kitchen knife. *Was that...?!*

The earth rumbled once more and Jikun spun toward the source, where a cluster of Eph’vi floundered in a struggle for balance. ‘*MOVE!*’ his mind urged, but as his mouth opened to echo his cry, the sand caved in beneath the Eph’ven stragglers and they were engulfed within the monstrous shadow.

“What?!” Navon gasped, not daring to voice Jikun’s fear.

And then the ground convulsed beneath them. Jikun staggered, feeling the sand writhe beneath him. Navon's arms soared outward for balance. "*It's coming!*" Jikun roared.

The earth rolled like a maravian worm beneath the flesh, rising and dipping in a fluid arc. The sand cascaded past their feet in a wave of gold. And to Jikun's alarm, it kept falling, collapsing into the earth as a great hole was torn wide below them.

There was a sudden flicker of red from beneath the golden grains, a forked tongue to their left and two great yellowed fangs to their right.

Jikun had no time to gather exactly what was transpiring, but he had observed enough of the vanishing Eph'vi to venture a guess. He lunged on instinct, grabbing Navon by the arm and flinging him away. As he extended his palm, a thick pillar of ice shot out from the water suddenly present around him. Jikun slammed it into the upper and lower jaw, reinforcing it long enough for him to kick off and catch the lip of the creature's mouth.

He had nearly been swallowed into the jaws of a reptilian monstrosity!

The hel'onja.

'*It is huge...!*' he heaved.

The strange symbols across the serpent's body bore an unsettling familiarity to those Jikun had seen scrawled in Navon's book. So *this* was the necromancer's assurance that no elf would leave Dahel alive. '*There is no chance by Lady Luck that we can outrun this beast... let alone kill it!*'

"JIKUN!" Navon yelled, catching him below the shoulder. He yanked him onto the sand as the jaws clamped shut, the broken pillar of ice left half-buried in its wake.

There was the briefest moment of stillness as though the earth had frozen... and then it roiled.

Jikun's throat constricted as the creature erupted from the sand to their right. The air outside the beast's mouth was dry... *useless!* And what little strength he had recovered at Keshal was almost spent... A scream in the distance threatened to coax his own to join, but it was culled too quickly by the swift flick of the serpent's tail.

Gods damn it, he had not left Sevrigel to be devoured by a fattened worm! Yet as Jikun glanced around himself into the flat, endless horizon he so despised, a chilling realization seized him.

He and Navon were the only remaining survivors outside of Dahel.

"Run!" Navon's voice rang as the serpent's tail lobbed high once more.

Jikun struggled to his feet, the escalating fire of the sand unfelt as he sprang away from the glistening scales. *'A plan... a plan...!'* his mind battled, but without his magic or soldiers, he could only flee helplessly.

“By the goddess almighty...!” Navon swore as the creature careened forward.

The serpent’s nose dove into the ground beside Jikun as he scrambled away. His toned soldier’s body was faster than those of the citizens of Dahel, and yet the force was so great that he was thrown to the side like a child’s toy. He bounced twice and rolled to his side. “Sh...it...” he groaned, black splotches dancing before his eyes. He felt a wave of nausea loosen his throat and he weakly attempted to lift himself upright.

And then a shadow swept over him.

'Dead.' It was the only concept his mind could grasp. Above him, the serpent reared, jaws loosening as the beast prepared to thrust down upon its dazed prey.

A form wavered at the edge of his vision and Jikun caught sight of the Helven: Navon’s hollow face had grown ashen, his cracked lips parted as though struggling to breathe, his long fingers elevated as sable smoke billowed from the earth around him. It raced upward toward the creature in a storm of skull-like faces. A biting cold washed over the air as the smoke whisked past Jikun and over the creature’s head.

This he knew. *This* he had just fled. As immense as the pillar Navon had hurled upon the Beast at the temple of Sel’ari, this torrent of souls was likewise filled with the hollow-eyed faces of the dead.

Necromancy.

There was a venomous hiss and a scraping like bone against bone, screeching out across the desert sands. Before the beast had reared away, Navon flew to Jikun’s side, jerking him to his feet. “Go!” Navon commanded, tugging at his arm. “Can’t you cast anything? Any spell at all?!”

Jikun felt his stomach lurch as he tried to draw moisture from the beast’s distant body. “By Ramul, no,” he heaved as he broke into a pathetic run. “All the water I could control outside a direct source went into that damn pillar! I missed a full night’s rest...! But it looks like there is something up ahead... North!” He glanced behind him in time to see the serpent’s tail disappear into the earth, diving free of the necromantic magic.

Navon’s face contorted with every bandaged foot that struck the ground. “I have never contended with anything so large... I cast more souls than I ever did upon the Beast and I don’t believe I did much except to—”

They vaulted away from each other, diving and rolling onto the sand on either side of the serpent's head as it ruptured through the earth between them. The thick scales over its ebony skull had been partially eaten away, revealing bloodied bone and flexing muscle. Its mandible swung low in a silent shriek, its eyes narrowing in enmity. Then they flared, locking onto Navon. Jikun was now nothing compared to the little beast that had dared wound it.

It lunged.

Navon flung his hand up in desperation, screaming in the ancient tongue as he frantically lurched toward the empty earth. But the hel'onja was faster—and with a triumphant snap, its jaws closed about his waist. In stunned horror, Jikun watched as Navon's body flailed in the beast's jaws and then went still.

His arm fell loose to dangle in the hot air beside him. *Lifeless.*

"Na...von..." Jikun whispered as the serpent tilted its head against the blazing sun to swallow the Helven like the countless Eph'vi before him.

Navon's head lolled to the side, staring blankly toward the earth, a thin trail of blood dripping from the corner of his mouth and catching in the ends of his raven hair. His last spell washed over the creature's skull as a billow of sable smoke, and for a moment, a face seemed to quiver in the darkness, its eyes bulging, its mouth gaping wide...

'Navon's face!'

"NAVON!!" Jikun screamed.

The cloud that surrounded the hel'onja's head was dissipating, taking the visage of Navon with it.

What in Ramul had happened?!

He threw his arm backward, tendons flexing. *'Cast something...'* he chastised his magic. *'Damn it, CAST SOMETHING!'* The air around him remained sickeningly dry and Jikun felt a wave of fatigue pulse from his wound as a small shard of ice began to crystallize in his palm. *'Useless!'* He bit his lip hard, flinging the ice aside.

If that would not avail him...!

But his resolve was shattered by a roar so bestial in nature and thunderous in power that his movements were smothered beneath a blanket of fear. In an uncontrollable response, his knees began to buckle, begging him to crumple to insignificance before the unseen source. Not even the Beast had invoked such terror! *'Damn coward!'* he swore at himself, and forced his trembling gaze upward in time to see a massive silhouette tearing out of the dawn sky. *'What in Emal'drathar is—?!'* was the last thought he managed. The shape smashed

into the back of the serpent's head and the hel'onja was thrown toward the earth as though it were weightless.

Jikun's heart froze as the immense, winged silhouette lashed down yet again and peeled the serpent's scales back like paper.

A dragon. A god-damn dragon in the middle of a wasteland.

Navon's corpse slid past the serpent's slacked jaw, breaking Jikun's paralysis. His companion's body hit the ground, rolled once, and then... the Helven convulsed suddenly.

With that contortion, the face in the smoke disappeared. Navon's eyes shot open.

'Navon is alive?!' Jikun pushed off the sole of his boot, sprinting hysterically across the earth. Even at his distance, Jikun could hear the male gasp for breath. "Navon! Get up! Run!" he shouted, grappling to be heard over the rising wind. *'What in Ramul is going on?!'* A serpent had been enemy enough without the addition of legs and wings and god-damn fire! *'Fucking Ramul!'* His cloak whipped out, threatening to topple him. "Navon, GET UP!"

The Helven flipped onto his chest, scrambling to his feet despite his palpable confusion. Wild strands of his dark hair were still plastered to his face with blood, and his eyes searched frantically where the spectral fog had dissipated.

Jikun dared to look away, out across the sands. Any possible explanation for the dragon's origins was lost within the smoldering city; instead, his gaze immediately fell upon a figure racing past the base of a dune, eyes fixed upon the battle of the behemoths with surprising serenity. A man in white.

'He escaped...? Why is he coming this way...?!'

The serpent discerned the arrival at that same moment and with inexplicable vengeance, lashed its tail furiously toward the man. In an instant, the dragon struck its head, talons piercing into the skull. The blow left the tail to slam harmlessly into the sand beside the man. He gave a single shout before he slid down the rolling dune in a sprint directly toward Jikun and Navon.

Navon stirred suddenly into comprehension. "Is that a *dragon*?" he managed to croak.

But before Jikun could utter his weak conception of events, his words were drowned by the eruption of an otherworldly shriek. A charge blazed across the sky behind them, a tangle of red and grey light that writhed with hollow faces. *'NECROMANCY!'* His confusion had little opportunity to grow before the spell sliced clean through the dragon's leathery wings, sending the creature plummeting into the dunes below.

At the thunderous crash, the serpent lifted its head, shaking it to and fro in a daze. Its gaze wandered back to the little elves stupefied within its shadow.

“I don’t know what in Ramul is happening! Just run—!” Jikun bellowed in panic, hooking Navon beneath the arm to shove him forward. To his left, the man in white had let out a horrified cry, skidding to a stop before the smoldering remains of the dragon. He swept his hand once and the beast vanished. Then, with a twist in his dirty white silk, the man was running once more.

‘Who in the Nine Realms...?!’ As though the rising necromantic winds demanded the same answer, the white hood was whipped back in a forceful gale.

A fair face ashen in discomfort and fury was revealed beneath. Not a man. An elf. A *Sel’ven*, no less! And through the chaos of the battle around Jikun, his mind was slow to comprehend the features lifted straight from Sel’varian paintings and murals and history books. A face even the Darivalians still taught.

He started with recognition. *‘Darcarus? Darcarus?!’* What in the Nine Realms was the True Blood Prince doing in Dahel?!

And who had managed to slay his dragon?

There was a flicker of crimson light and Jikun’s eyes shot past the prince, in the direction of the last necromantic surge; there was an enemy amongst the sands, far greater in power than the True Blood and his beast. Instantly Jikun spotted him—the sheen of the sun’s glow was obscured by a torrent of sunken faces swarming back to the broad figure. The unnatural gust of wind caused the cream-colored mantle adorning the man’s shoulders to whip away from the worn, leather vest below. A thick, powerful body; coarse, tanned hands; and a stern face with a command readied on his lips.

Relstavum.

—Damn it. The sample gnomes have stolen the rest of this book—
END OF SAMPLE