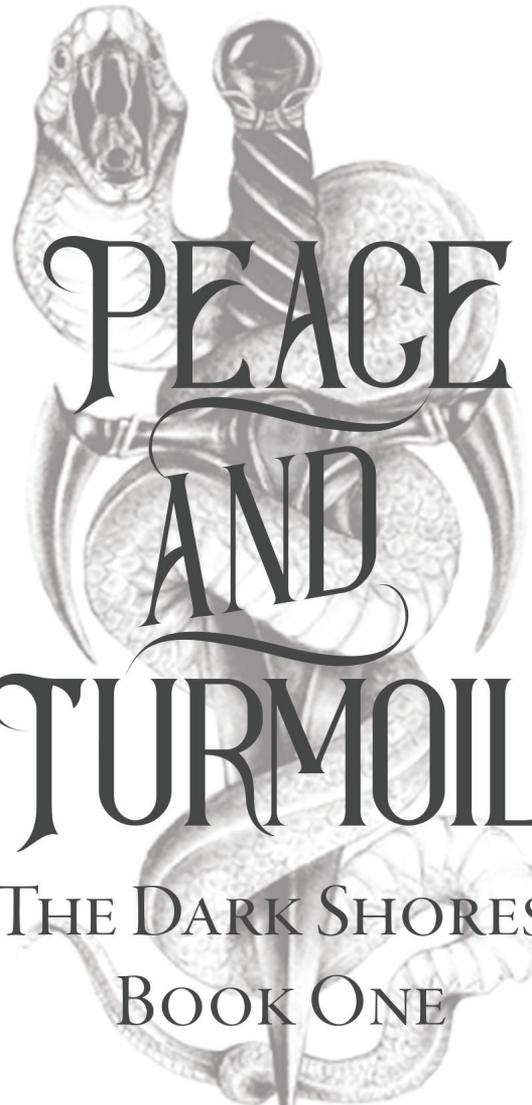


PEACE AND TURMOIL

THE DARK SHORES: BOOK ONE



ELLIOT BROOKS



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AND
TURMOIL

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ISBN 978-1-7336643-0-1 (Hardcover Edition)

ISBN 978-1-7336643-1-8 (e-book)

Book design by Jay S. Kennedy.

Cover art by Sarah Hodgson.

Creature illustrations by Madison Crawford.

Portrait illustrations by Elliot Brooks.

elliottbrooksnoels.com

Printed in the United States of America.

*For my first book, I'd like to dedicate it
to the first person who knew me, held me,
and loved me:*

My mom.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, a huge thank you to my parents. You've not only loved me more than any parents could love their child, but you've taught me the meaning of hard work. I will forever be in awe at how much you accomplish with graceful hands, humble hearts, and happy smiles.

Thank you to my husband. I'm sorry you had to reread this book so many times. I'm grateful for that, and for the love and patience you have for me. I love you.

Thank you to my editor Mollie for helping take this from the ramblings of an aspiring writer to the book it is now. You were the best editor I could've asked for.

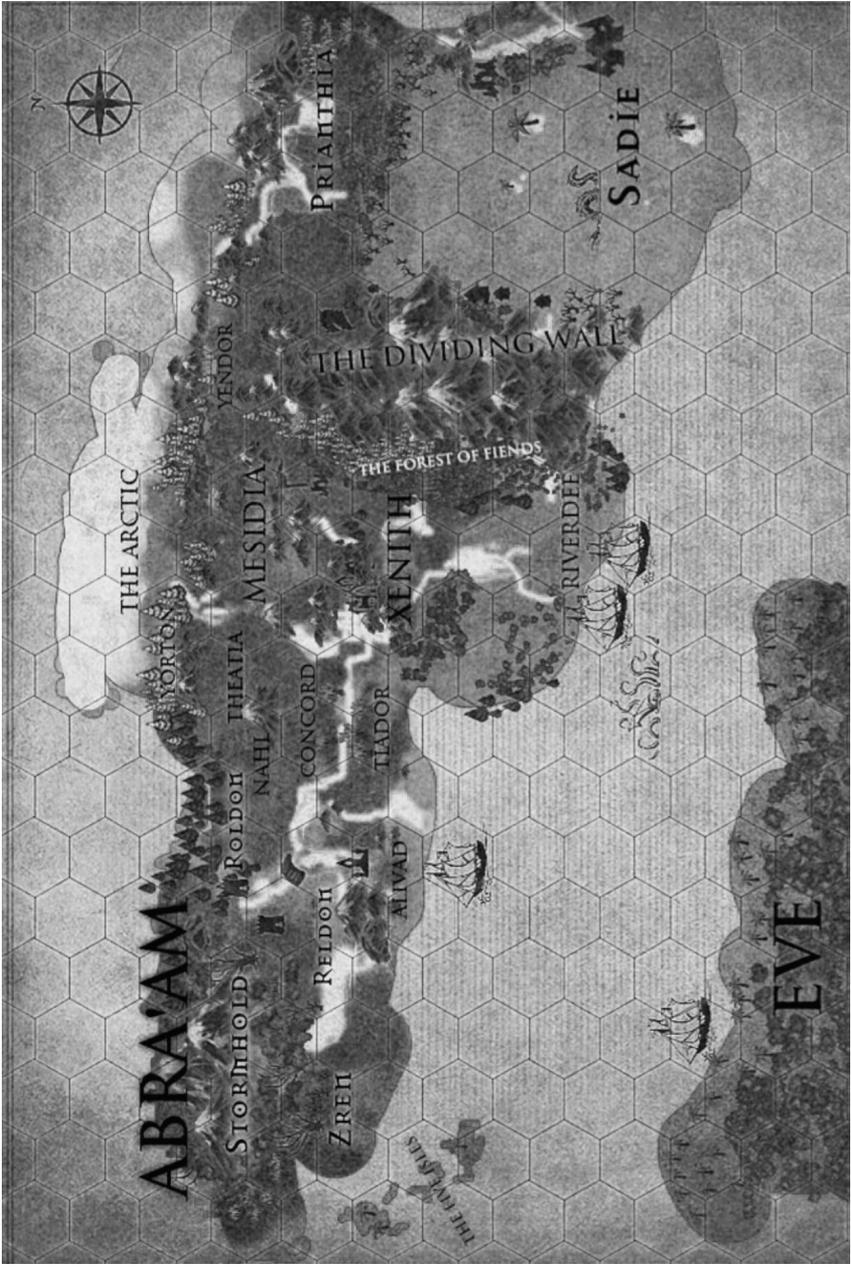
Thank you to Maddison for the amazing artwork of the fiends. I honestly don't understand how you're so talented. The fact that you're so young makes it a little depressing.

I mean inspiring.

Thank you to Jay, who made the cover and formatted the book. You walked me through way more than you should've had to. I am both appreciative and very sorry.

Thank you to Cassandra and Karen. You were the first critique partners that really made me believe my story was worth telling.

Lastly, thank you to all of you: readers, subscribers, supporters, beta readers, friends. I wouldn't have been able to do this without you.



ABRA'AM

STORMHOLD

ZREH

RELDON

ALIVAD

ROLDON

NAHL

THEATA

CONCORD

TIADOR

XENITH

MESIDIA

THE ARCTIC

YENDOR

THE DIVIDING WALL

THE FOREST OF FIENDS

THE RIVERDEE

PRIAETHIA

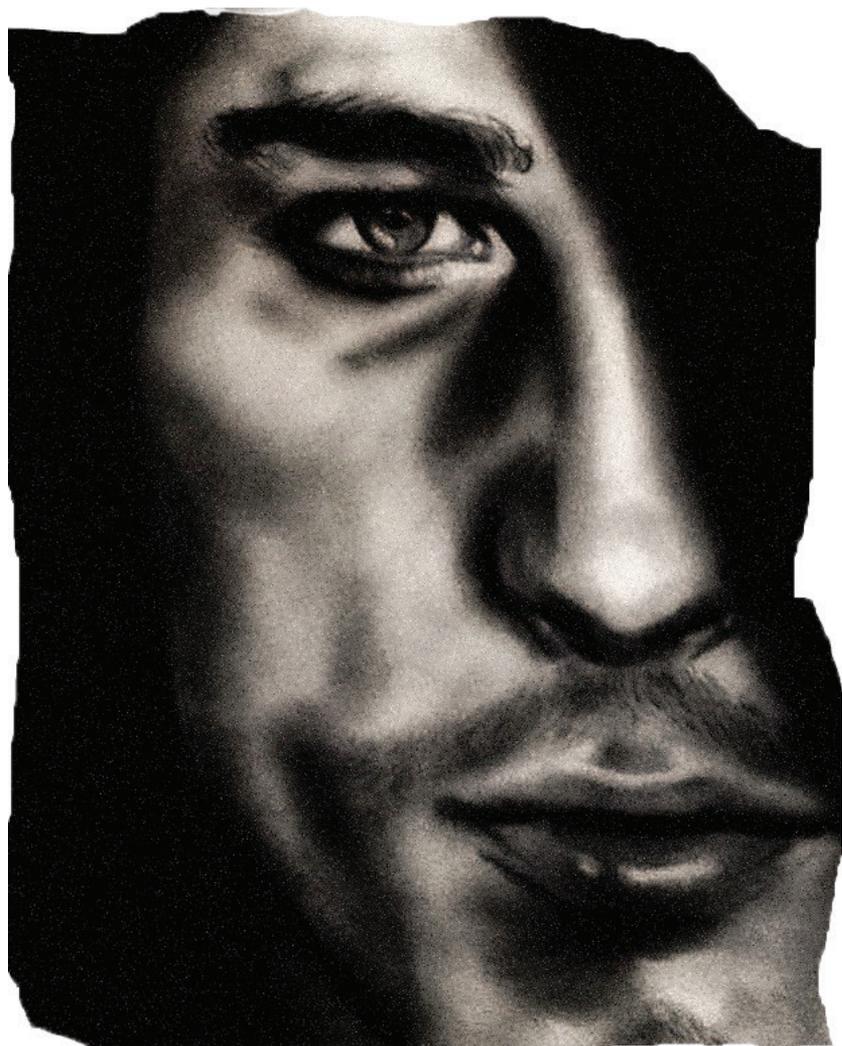
SADIE

EVE

PART ONE

ACROSS ABRA'AM

*It would be better to die than to continue living the way I live.
Not just for me and for my sanity, but for all of Abra'am.*



Dietrich Haroldson

I've never seen the man aside from portraits of him as a boy. He hasn't been seen since then, so my depiction is based on my own imaginings.

From the sketchbook of Elizabeth al'Murtagh

PROLOGUE

DIETRICH



Night was coming. Dietrich, son of Harold, son of Rorik, Cloaked Prince of Sadie, knew the night. He knew it better than most knew the voices of their loved ones. It was his. It was home.

Sovereignty, Sadie was ablaze as nightfall came. Dusk meant the yellows of the desert became orange, and the sky became purple and pink and red. Even the balcony Dietrich stood on seemed gold from the descending sun.

He watched the colors shift and change from beneath the hood of his cloak. Most of the colors sank into the clays of the capital's buildings, but some reflected from the glass domes of the hospitals and temples. If Dietrich weren't standing where he was, he'd see the coming night reflecting from the domes of his family's palace as well.

His family's, not his. It hadn't been his for years.

"Dietrich?" his mother whispered. Her voice was rasped from having just awoken. "Dietrich, is that you?"

He didn't respond. He continued to stand silent, motionless, with his back toward where she lay.

"Dietrich?"

She said his name with more urgency. He inhaled deeply and made to face her, bracing himself, but stopped.

There was blood on his shirt.

Hurriedly he wrapped his cloak around his torso. There was blood on it too, but not as much. He didn't think she'd notice it against the dark fabrics.

"It's me," he said, turning. He watched her release a breath and he released one too, grateful her eyes didn't flicker to the red on his clothes.

"It's been so long since I've seen you," she whispered. Her lips, cracked and dry, pulled into a smile.

Dietrich swallowed. From where he stood she looked so different, so weak and frail and weary. But her smile was familiar, and that pressed him forward. When he reached her bedside, he sat on his knees and embraced her.

Her smell struck him. It was foul, overwhelmingly so, and filled with the remnants of sweat from a fever and saliva from days asleep. It lay derisively against her skin and along her sheets, proving what he'd tried so hard to deny.

She was dying.

He made to hold his breath, to force the truth away, but whatever was plaguing her was tangible. He could feel it, or rather he could feel what it had done to her. Her shoulders were jutting and her collarbone dug into his chest. Her face, buried against his neck, was sharp from protruding cheekbones. Even her thick hair was thinning.

As he pulled away, the green eyes he'd looked into so many times seemed desperate to stay closed. Lenore managed to

keep them open, but so many small lines of red lingered in the whites that it'd almost been easier to look at her when they were shut.

Dietrich held down the sorrow building in his chest. How could this be his mother? He understood aging, he understood wrinkling skin and graying hair, but how could he understand this? How could he fathom her deteriorating while she still lived?

He'd pulled away, but he hadn't stopped holding her. His hands still clutched firmly to her arms, afraid they'd vanish.

Perhaps this is my punishment, he thought, finally releasing her. *Perhaps this is the Creator's way of reminding me of everything I've done.*

"What troubles you?" she asked, as if knowing, as mothers always seemed to, that guilt had taken him. She lifted her hand and reached for the cloth hiding his face.

He flinched as she pulled it down. The bitter air of dusk stung against his nose and jaw.

"I like you much more like this," she insisted. She patted his cheek, then lowered herself back into her blankets. Instinctively he reached for the red and orange *auroras* in his mind, forcing them to bring heat to his palm. When he had them comfortably in his grasp, he put his hand on hers, hoping to halt her coming shivers.

"I know it's custom in Sadie to wear such a thing," she continued, eyeing the cloth she'd pulled down, "but that cloak is nothing but a facade on you. You're not the man it's made you out to be."

"I am that man," he said simply. The blood beneath his cloak, the blood he prayed she hadn't felt as he'd held her, seemed to dampen in agreement.

She sighed, then motioned for him to sit near her. He ground his teeth and complied.

She was wrong to think he was a better man than he was.

He knew that, but it would do him little good to try persuading her otherwise. He wanted her to think of him as her sweet son, remember him for the thoughtful boy he'd once been.

Better that than the killer he'd become.

"I'm sorry," she said, nestling her head against him. "I never wanted this life for you."

He bit back a swell of emotion and squeezed her hand. He thought to comfort her more, knowing her memories in that moment likely mirrored his own, but he didn't. Nothing he might say would make her feel renewed.

"Rest, Mother," he whispered, kissing her forehead. He released the fire element he'd been holding, pulled his hand from hers, and opened his mouth to ask if she wanted another blanket, but stopped when he noticed her closed eyes.

She'd already fallen back asleep.

PEACE AND TURMOIL

Gwenivere is nothing like us, Gerard. I fear for her future, because she is so strong-willed outwardly, yet compassionate inwardly. How do I raise a daughter with such a demeanor? I myself am so much the opposite.

How much longer until you're home?

From a letter between Rose and Gerard Verigrad

CHAPTER I

GWENIVERE



Gwenivere fiddled with her Amulet and watched her brother Aden. Her eyes, strained and blurry from reading, were more occupied by the game he and his knight were playing than by her book. Their game was simple: remember where the card lay, then present its match whence found. Yet the mind always seemed to play tricks, the griffon that once appeared near the edge of the layout replaced by the icy, taunting eyes of a dragon. A simple game, truly, but so very, very frustrating.

Had it been Gwenivere and Aden playing, the number of pairs each discovered would likely be the same. He was young, five springs to her twenty, but he was a worthy opponent with a mind that rarely forgot. She waited with him as his knight Maximus turned over the first card.

A serpent, she thought, craning her neck around the knight's broad shoulders. Her eyes flickered to her own knight Garron, hopeful the statue of a man wouldn't notice the lack of attention she gave her book. Thankfully his stern gaze seemed

entirely consumed with Aden and the fidgeting Maximus.

Gwenivere set her book *The Art of Calling* beside her and looked back at the cards. She rattled her brain and fingered her Amulet, knowing she'd seen the serpent's match earlier in their game.

Not in the first row, she thought, biting her lip. Not in the second row, not in the third row, not in the fourth row . . . wait, yes! Fourth row, third in!

She held her breath, hopeful for Maximus's pride that he would remember its location. How embarrassing it would be, a young knight of Xenith, to lose a simple game of cards to a child. A smart child, and a well-educated one, but a child nonetheless. If she were in his place, unable to best her own brother, she would order any and all taunts silent.

After surveying the card table, Maximus finally, hesitantly, reached out. He chanced a look at Aden, but the prince just smiled.

Maximus turned the card over and grunted, slapping his hand against the table. The card—not the third in from the fourth row—showed the painting of a fiend. Gwenivere thought it looked like a panther of sorts, with shadowy-black fur and tentacles for whiskers, the tips of which were painted a teal green. The tail, long and curved, looked the same, and the eyes shone a similar bluish hue.

Gwenivere scrunched her nose and tried to think through all the fiends Garron had demanded she read about. There were hundreds of them, thousands even, all with some ability to manipulate or absorb the same elements humans cast. She glanced at the tan leather of Garron's and Maximus's jackets, the stitching sewn together with the thread of were'ghul fur. Scarce, and expensive, but highly absorbent to any elements thrust their way. Even the stones of her modest crown and the bracelets along her wrists harbored such defenses, the pieces likely taken from the scales of some poor draconid. Neither

though, in spite of their rarity, were made from anything like the panther creature in Maximus's hand.

"Damn game," Maximus muttered, shaking his head. He turned his mismatched cards back over, placing them where he'd found them, and slumped in his chair.

"Watch your tongue," a shaky voice called. "Such foul words around the heirs is shameful."

Gwenivere looked toward the room's entrance to find her father's knight Charles walking in. She snatched *The Art of Calling* back up, pretending to flip through its pages. He seemed not to notice, or not to care, the wrinkles around his eyes lifting as he scanned the room.

"Where's the king?" he asked. Aden, with a quiet, mocking snicker, snatched the panther card Maximus had discovered and paired it with its twin. Maximus crossed his arms and fumed.

Gwenivere thought about making some jab about how Charles of all people should know her father's whereabouts, but chose instead to bite her tongue. Despite being her father's personal knight, Charles was extremely, terribly old. Why her father insisted he continue to serve when the rest of the knights were practically half his age was beyond her. Still, her father was Gerard Verigrad, the mighty King of Peace. Whatever he commanded, she accepted.

"He retired to his chambers," she answered, tossing *The Art of Calling* aside. She stood up from her lounge chair—a gesture made more dramatic by the useless ruffles of her clothes—and tried to appear as regal as she could. The old man was always talking down to her, treating her as if she were a child. She wanted to look the authority figure she was, the princess of Xenith and the Guardian to the Amulet of Eve. The lace of her dress, though, still wrapped around the buttons of the chair, decided she should look otherwise.

Cursing under her breath, she yanked as discreetly at the fabric as she could.

Charles stared at her a moment, then as he always did, looked to Sir Garron instead.

“He’s where the lady has told you,” Garron answered. His voice was a low rumble as he narrowed his eyes at Gwenivere, likely noticing the incessant tugging she made at her chair. “He wasn’t feeling well. If you wish to speak with him, it will have to wait.”

“No!” Gwenivere finally pried herself free, annoyed as red locks of hair fell against her face. “Whatever you must speak of to my father, you can speak of to me. I hold just as much jurisdiction over Xenith as he—”

A loud banging sounded from the game table. Gwenivere flinched, let out a curse much fouler than Maximus’s, and shot him a glare.

“If you’re going to lose, lose with dignity!”

The knight rubbed his reddened palm and hung his head. Aden, continuing to grin, joined his new pair of cards to the stack beside him.

“I’m afraid King Gerard has asked that I deliver these messages to him directly,” Charles answered. She turned back to face him, half expecting he would chastise her for her childish behavior. Instead, he shifted his hands from behind his back and revealed a pair of envelopes.

They were royal, the seals atop their covers too elegant to be from a commoner. A serpent shape lay on one, the symbol of the eastern kingdom Sadie across the Dividing Wall. Interesting, undoubtedly, but unimportant. The four-cleft leaf of the second envelope, shaped and dried from a dark-blue wax—that one had Gwenivere’s attention.

She grabbed at the Amulet hanging from her neck. A chill crept down her spine when she touched the swirling jewel in its center.

“Very well then.” She cleared her throat and gave Charles the warmest smile she could muster. “I shall accompany you to him.”

She hoped her voice sounded as even as she intended. The letter had likely come from Roland, the prince and heir to Mesidia. He was her dearest friend, and if the term lover could be applied to a couple who had never made love, then her lover as well. But Charles had said her father ordered the letters passed directly to him. Why would he insist on such a thing? What was beneath the parchments' folds that her eyes needn't see?

She had an idea of what, she just hated admitting it. She swallowed the lump in her throat and fingered her Amulet again.

Charles stared at her before glancing back at Garron. Gwenivere frowned at him, then at Charles, then back at him again.

After a deep breath, Garron nodded.

"Your presence would be most welcome, Your Highness," Charles said. Gwenivere scoffed at the feigned reply and walked over to where Aden and Maximus sat. She grabbed two cards from their game and lay them down on the table.

"It was driving me mad," she said.

Aden and his knight looked at the cards—Behemoths, from the Age of Old—then immediately started arguing about who should get them. Gwenivere smirked and walked away, Garron and Charles following.

Paintings welcomed them as they crossed into the castle's hallway. The pieces of art were a flash of color amid the dreary place, the frames alone holding more vibrancy than the castle's grey stones. It hardly mattered what lay in the frames, the paintings themselves commonly replaced for newer or prettier ones from down another hall. By the time Gwenivere had time to notice one, to grow fond of the scene it depicted, it would be gone. Not completely gone, of course—her father would never be so wasteful. Just simply someplace else within the castle. So many of her mornings had been lost trying to find the paintings she fancied that she no longer fancied any at all.

Regardless, the paintings supplied a strange comfort. Her

mother had loved art, no matter the kind, and had spent their wealth extravagantly to support anyone with an easel and a brush. Musicians too, and poets and bards—anyone and everyone who considered themselves masters of finer things. Gwenivere wondered if that was the reason her father still kept the paintings everchanging, to keep thoughts of her mother alive. The Light knew his heart was a duller vessel without her presence.

The door to his chambers lay shut as she approached. He never used to hold his privacy so dear, but he seemed to value solitude much more as of late. Gwenivere lifted her fist, stopped to brush any loose strands of hair back behind her ears, then gave the door a heavy tap.

“Father, may I enter?” she asked. The pleasantness she forced tasted bitter as she glanced back at Charles and Garron. What senseless circles they insisted on spinning over a few letters.

“Yes,” she heard through the door. The usual booming of her father’s voice seemed muffled. “Come in.”

The smell of burning wood hit Gwenivere as she entered, a fire crackling from the cutout near the room’s bed. Wet wood smelled too, and the glass of a nearby window was open as small patters of rain fell against a desk. How odd of him to both warm and chill his chambers.

He’s getting old and strange like Charles, she thought, noting the grey that streaked her father’s hair. It had been nearly black, years ago, but not anymore. Not since her mother had passed and Aden was born.

“Gwenivere, to what do I owe the pleasure?” Gerard returned the portrait of her mother he held to the drawer of his dresser. Gwenivere knew she was likely mistaken, but she swore the tiniest drops of red were speckled against the portrait’s face.

She clasped her Amulet as she tried to collect her thoughts.

Thankfully, Charles's sudden wheezing snapped her back into focus.

"We have letters!" She whirled around and reached to take the parchments from the knight, who stood with his free hand shielding his face. Garron, still a constant, looming presence, settled himself in the room's corner.

"Charles, if you please?" Gwenivere said, extending her hand out more. The knight concluded his fit of wheezing and furrowed his bushy brows, looking to the king.

"It's fine, Charles, thank you."

The old knight nodded and handed Gwenivere the parchments. She didn't bother hiding her annoyance as she snatched them from his bony hands and pointed toward the door.

"You've done your duty. Return to guard the hallway and allow us some privacy."

Charles's expression was blank. He merely stared at her a moment, glanced at her pointing finger, then looked toward the king.

Infuriating.

"Go on," Gerard said. His voice was sympathetic, but his dark-blue eyes, which stared straight at Gwenivere, were not. After twenty years, she still couldn't help but cower under his gaze.

Charles gave no indication of impatience or annoyance. He simply dragged his haggard feet along and left.

Thank the Light, Gwenivere thought. She brought her sunken shoulders back up and faced her father.

"Was that necessary?" he asked, cutting her off as she opened her mouth. She tried again to speak, then sealed her lips, knowing she needed to think through whatever rash, overzealous thing she was about to say. Her father was the King of Peace. Friendly manipulation was his forte.

"These letters." She lifted the parchments up for him to see. "Was there a reason you insisted I not be permitted to read

them? You often insist I be ready to take Xenith's throne, but how might I accomplish such a deed when I'm so frequently ill informed?"

Her fingers went numb as she made her confrontation. Her father was known for being intimidating and evoking humility. He was a head taller than most and always dressed in black, the clothing he adorned never truly hiding his soldier's physique. The dark beard along his jaw, trimmed but thick, shadowed the face of a kind yet shrewd leader. What a contrast he had made to the slender, red-haired queen with the pale skin and pretty lips. What a contrast indeed.

He never scared Mother, though, Gwenivere thought, running her finger across the smooth blue wax of Mesidia's seal. Gerard was allowing the forwardness of her query to linger and die in the sound of the rain and the crackling fire. *He doesn't scare me . . .*

"Those are merely confirmation of our allies' attendance," he finally said. He crossed his arms over his barreled chest and leaned against his desk. It creaked beneath the strain of his weight.

"Xenith is to host a gathering and masquerade," he continued, "for the thirty years of peace since the War of Fire. All nations, friend or foe, are asked to attend, in hopes that we can convince the greedy to humble themselves, perhaps sway the bloodthirsty to drink from another cup."

He held his hand out to her. She shut the mouth she only just realized hung open and handed the parchments over.

As if to torture her, her father tossed the Mesidian letter onto his desk and began opening the one from Sadie. The raindrops from the open window soaked into the parchment as the thunder outside bellowed a hearty, mocking laugh.

Gwenivere clenched her fists and closed her eyes. In her mind, the bright colors of her *auroras* raged.

They beg for me to burn him, she thought, noting how

strongly the streaks of red flickered. She opened her eyes and felt her palms grow warm, tempted then to humor the elements and make her father's bottom burn. Not anything damaging, of course, just something to make him squirm a little.

A sudden glare from him, as if knowing her thoughts, shoved the fire away.

"Sadie will be sending someone," he said, looking back down at the letter. "Prince Dietrich, it says. How interesting." His attention seemed lost as he pursed his lips and nodded. "Is that not fascinating, Gwenivere? The Cloaked Prince himself. Perhaps the insurgence of the East has finally settled."

Gwenivere cared little for the affairs across the Dividing Wall. She only cared about Roland, and his letter, currently continuing to soak beneath the window. With hardly a thought, she felt the swell of her clear *auroras* just before the air in the room closed the window shut. She jumped at the sound and gasped as her father released a surprised, heavy breath. Beside them, Garron continued to stand in silence.

"I'm sorry," she stuttered. She was, truly, though her frequent temper made it difficult to seem sincere. The window shutting was not the first time her anger had released unintended elements. Aden, since the day he was born, carried the mark of a burn against his belly. Gwenivere had not possessed any aversion toward him then, nor had she meant to cause him harm, but she'd hated that her brother's life had stolen away their mother's. She hoped her father believed her apology now more than he'd believed it then.

"Will . . . will anyone from Mesidia be attending this gathering?"

Gerard's chest heaved as he tossed the Sadiyan envelope on the desk. He opened the window back up, cool air returning.

"Dorian," he answered. "And the al'Murtagh siblings. I've been told by the duke that Natalia will be attending as well."

But no Roland, Gwenivere thought. She hardly had a mo-

ment to think about anyone else, or wonder how her father knew without opening the letter.

“I see.” Her fingers were running over the Amulet of Eve again, but she chose not to fight it. Somewhere, hopefully, Roland was holding the Dagger of Eve, loving it for its connection to her but loathing it for keeping them apart.

“If you expect me to choose a husband at this gathering, I . . . I cannot. I’m not ready.” Gwenivere pulled her hand from her Amulet and returned it to her side. She opened her mouth to speak again, but her father’s hand rose to silence her.

“It will not be long before Xenith is bestowed unto you.” There was a graveness in his words, and a sadness, but the terse tone of his voice demanded she keep quiet.

“You are to ensure our prosperity, make certain we will not only flourish but aid our neighbors in the path to affluence. You are also to protect the Amulet of Eve as every Guardian in your lineage has before you. I have faith in you, faith that you will fulfill these roles, but I fear what terrors face you if you accept them on your own.” Gerard reached forward and took Gwenivere’s hands in his. His lips pulled into a defeated smile.

“You understand this, yes? You understand how I fear for you—my treasured daughter? Abra’am’s kingdoms have kept peace for thirty years, but it was not always this way, and it will not be this way forever. I wish terribly to know you will have someone to rule alongside you when the time comes.” He lifted his arm up and brushed away the red strand of hair that fell against her face.

Her lips tightened.

“I understand.” She pulled away and looked to the floor, ashamed to face the man she knew only wished her protected.

“At least,” she added, “do me the decency of admitting what my part in this gathering is. Please. I care little for being leashed like a hound.” She looked back up, the fury of being forced to marry more refined than her blur of guilt. “You wish

me to pick a husband, don't you?"

Gerard sighed, a frown visible beneath his beard. He pulled away and leaned further against his desk.

"I don't wish it, Gwenivere." He crossed his arms and stared down with conviction. "I command it."

PEACE AND TURMOIL

I remember my grandfather telling me stories of when people thought called weapons evil. He said those were the better days, but he was a blacksmith. He likely just missed the profits of selling his touched blades so readily.

Mesidian merchant

CHAPTER 2

ROLAND



Roland studied the elk and slowly lifted his bow. It felt almost weightless in his hands, as all *called* weapons and shields should, the black *auroras* perfect in balancing their creations. Even so, holding the arrow in his mind and keeping its path true was far more difficult than wielding a *called* blade. At least in close combat a blade was always attached, and the hilt was always present in the hand. The *auroras* were tangible as a sword, even if the sword had no weight at all.

Bows were vastly different. Disjointed from their arrows, they existed in different and unique parts. It took multiple threads in the mind to connect such parts, and the threads distanced further still when the *called* arrow was released. Thus the Bowman had to imagine more than just his arrow. He had to imagine the arrow within the air, and the resistance the air would give. He had to know the angle the arrow would take and what it would feel like when the arrow pierced its target. And,

once the arrow struck, the bowman had to know what it would feel like for the arrowhead to wedge itself in its target's flesh.

It took a master of manmade *touched* bows to know how to use a mind-made *called* one.

Roland grinned and took aim at the elk.

The right eye is dominant, he told himself. Rely on it too much and you miss by half a yard. And there shall be no such mistake with Dorian watching.

Roland breathed in, deeply but silently, the coolness of the forest air filling his lungs. They burned, his chest muscles stretched as he pulled the bowstring to its fullest. Such a distance was necessary, the massive animal having likely heard the wood of his *called* bow straining. He could see its ears twitching as it grazed.

He tilted his bow upward, only a degree or two, took one last breath, and released.

The arrow's path held true as it struck with a *thump*. Had it been a *touched* weapon—a manmade weapon—the animal likely would've fled, and he'd have needed to chase it down to where it eventually collapsed and died. *Called* weapons, which were crafted with the strength of the black *auroras*, were stronger than any weapon a blacksmith or bowyer made. Roland relaxed as the elk fell to the ground.

"Impressive!" Dorian said. Mesidia's ambassador sprung from where he sat, the dark mud of the forest clinging to the thick wool of his clothes. His black hair blended with the black of his wolf cloak, the pelt draping over his shoulders and down to his boots. He was like an elegant shadow, mud and all, the mud only seeming to give his regal look more demand. Roland might have been jealous, if he cared of such things, but at that moment he only cared about his kill. Humility existed in his silence, but not in his thoughts. He doubted the ambassador had ever made such a shot.

He exhaled slowly and *vanished* his weapon, his body in-

stantly releasing the tension it held. All of his tutors told him black *auroras* used less energy than colored ones, that *called* weapons were better for hunts than elements. One could hold *called* weapons for longer, they claimed, than a vine trap or an arrow of ice. He hardly believed such insistencies in that moment, his every muscle grateful as the bow disappeared. Beneath his own wolf cloak, beads of sweat dripped.

“You said you hunted as a tyke, yes?” Roland asked.

Dorian shrugged indifferently and nodded.

“Aye, but only for small game. Rabbits, squirrels, anything I could skin and eat myself. That was over twenty years ago, before your parents took me in. Since then, I haven’t hunted for anything.”

Haven’t hunted for anything? How strange a thing to hear in Mesidia. All men in their kingdom hunted. Light, most women in their kingdom hunted. Women were actually—usually—better at it. Roland’s mother said it was because women were more patient. *Animals require time and focus to be killed*, she said, *and men have neither*.

Dorian was not truly Mesidian, though, but Yendorian. It wasn’t a secret; his olive-tinted skin, gold eyes and black hair would certainly have made it a difficult secret to keep if it was. No Mesidian shared such a blend of features. Most, rather, looked a spitting image of Roland: blond, stocky, and blue eyed. And, according to the lovely Gwenivere Verigrad of Xenith, Roland was the least attractive of them all.

Blasted girl, he thought with a grin. He reached instinctively to the Dagger of Eve along his thigh and rested his fingers against its hilt. His grin quickly deepened to a frown.

“Your cousins told me you were good at hunting,” Dorian said. “William especially. Peter tends to agree, but then insists he’s better.”

Roland chuckled, releasing the Dagger.

“I’m better than my father too, but he’ll never admit it.”

“Don’t say that too loud,” Dorian whispered jestingly. He crouched down and opened his gold eyes wide. “He’s around somewhere!”

The sound of Roland’s laugh seemed to pull King Pierre out of his place of hiding. His lids were thin as he peered toward them, the sharp, intense blue of his gaze marking him either upset or freshly awoken. Roland could certainly imagine his father had used the hunt for napping, as he was often weary and distressed from settling Mesidia’s civil disputes. He was strong for his age, and still surprisingly lean, but no amount of muscle could fend off fatigue. The flecks of leaves in his hair proved as much.

“We shall feast tonight,” Pierre said, the sound of his boots almost noiseless as he made his way to the fallen elk. Roland stood patient and said nothing as his father surveyed the animal. Even if it was the largest elk in all Mesidia, he knew his father would give him no praise.

They wasted little time skinning it. Both Roland and his father stood at a different point, *touched* hunting blades steady as they made incisions near the beast’s joints. Dorian, not being either the king or the elk’s killer, was forced to bear the burden of proving the elk a bull, as they had no means to carry back the antlers and killing a cow was illegal. He glanced displeasingly between the elk’s legs and carried out his task with as much dignity as he could, then tied the small pouch to his horse.

It was tempting to tease him, deliver reprisal for all the taunts Dorian had given him as a boy, but Roland kept quiet. Mocking glances were amusement enough.

“Elk is Gwenivere’s favorite, is it not?” Dorian asked, walking back to them. “Perhaps I shall bring her some when I depart for the celebration.”

Pierre looked up with narrowed eyes, nostril’s flaring. Roland noted the glare, surprised, but ignored it.

“Celebration?” he asked. The elk’s shoulder ground loudly

as he broke it. "When do we leave?"

The ambassador grimaced, looking down. Not down, truly, but away.

"Not we," Pierre answered. The cold blue of his gaze turned remorseful as he faced Roland. The grip on his hunting knife tightened. "You and your mother and I are to stay in Mesidia. Dorian will travel without our company."

Roland squinted and looked searchingly between the two men. They were guilty—both of them—of harboring some secret, each tightening their jaws and gritting their teeth. Instantly Roland reached for the Dagger of Eve at his side, fearful suddenly that the celebration meant Gwenivere betrothed. It was perfectly plausible. She'd been writing to him for some time that Gerard was pressing her to marry. But she would have told him, would have written him the moment she chose a suitor. He had always assured her he would not begrudge her when she did. He would only begrudge the Dagger he currently held.

Cursed thing, he thought, glancing at his side. The jewel in the Dagger's hilt glowed slightly, the swirling colors shifting and shining through his clenched palm. It was so aggravatingly queer, the jewel dancing from green to blue to violet. He wanted to stab it into the elk and bury it deep in its flesh. At least then, maybe, he would be free of its incessant glow.

"Xenith is our greatest ally," he said, meeting his father's gaze. "Perhaps it would convey a false sense of abandonment if Mesidia's royal family were not in attendance."

Pierre shook his head and returned to skinning the elk. "It's an ambassador's duty to represent the royal family when our presence isn't needed." He carefully peeled the hide back. "Do you not trust Dorian to fulfill his role?"

Roland grunted and eyed the ambassador for answers. Dorian kept quiet, likely pulled between his loyalty to the king and his sympathy for the prince.

A bloody coward.

“What I don’t trust,” Roland said, looking back to his father, “is how you waltz about this.” He released the Dagger and pulled another *touched* carving blade from his calf, plunging it into the animal’s shoulder and ripping it apart. He could feel Pierre watch him as he rested the meat against the opened hide, careful even in his confrontation not to dirty it against the soil on the ground.

Pierre stabbed his own *touched* knife into the mud and brushed off his palms, then stroked the bit of stubble along his jaw. “Fine. You’re right, you’re a man now. I should be able to speak to you as such.

“King Gerard is hosting a masquerade, a Peace Gathering, to celebrate Abra’am’s thirtieth year without war. He intends for Gwenivere to find a husband there and have her wed shortly after. You’re not to attend, nor are you to see her again, until this has occurred.”

The king stopped abruptly, his words returning with an echo from the forest. He looked down at the elk before him, then stared at his carving knife again before yanking it up and meeting it with the kill.

Roland ground his teeth but didn’t reply, careful to mind each piece of the animal he tore apart.



The trek back to Stonewall Castle was a quiet and somber one. Dorian would occasionally open his mouth, likely in an attempt to say something jesting or uplifting, then close it when Roland gave him a scowl.

Pierre’s rigid shoulders and squinting eyes were no help

either. The king hadn't always been a stubborn man, but the carefree nature of his youth had been stripped away by the trials kingship bestowed. Blood boiled in many Mesidians' hearts that he was their ruler, the Victorian rebels scattered across the land having gained in numbers despite his efforts. Civil dispute had long rooted itself in their history, the kingdom torn in two when the Dagger of Eve was forced into unworthy hands. Those hands had belonged to Roland's ancestors, and though generations had passed since the act had been done, time had yet to heal the wound the Victorian rebels felt.

Such pressing weight and expectations left the king unsympathetic toward many matters. Roland would receive no pity from him.

Up ahead, with sandy-blond hair and simple blue garb, the al'Murtagh family stood. They would be a welcomed deterrence. The coldness between Roland and his father and Dorian was almost colder than the Mesidian air itself.

It seemed the al'Murtaghs had just arrived, servants from within Stonewall Castle bustling about to tend to the five royals' horses. Catherine, Pierre's sister, beamed when she saw them, both Roland and his father temporarily abandoning their fury as they dismounted and feigned happy greetings. The short woman ran over to Roland and clutched his face, pinching his cheeks and kissing him smack on the lips.

"My goodness, Roland, look how handsome you are!" She gave a mocking glance at Pierre before shaking her head, then squinted and studied their faces. "You know, I think Rosalie may have had some other men around when you were off training your Elite soldiers, Brother. Roland has your hair—or what *used* to be your hair—but where he got that perfect jaw is beyond me!"

Roland's grin was halfhearted as his lips remained shut.

"Careful how loud you jest," Pierre warned. "The Victorians will hear jokes that Rosalie was adulterous and tell the rest

of the kingdom it's true. You already know Yvaine has spread her fair share of rumors."

Roland watched Dorian grimace as Catherine's eyes turned toward him. The woman had never completely accepted Pierre's choice to bring Dorian into the family. He was a man who evoked whispers, a man who the Victorian rebels insisted was Pierre's bastard from a Yendorian whore. No matter how often they dispelled the lie, some still believed it fervently.

Thankfully Roland's cousins were all smiles and hugs as they embraced him and Pierre. William, the eldest of the three and the stockier of the brothers, smiled at Roland as an equal, never having been sheepish or shy. He made his way to Dorian as well, despite his mother's glare, and wrapped his arms around the ambassador.

"Who made the kill?" he asked, his head cocking to the meat the servants took away. His hooded eyes widened when Dorian and Pierre each pointed to Roland. It really wasn't a surprise. Roland was the best Bowman among the three, but William acted jovial nonetheless. He smacked his rough hand proudly into Roland's chest and beamed.

"You'll have to tell us all about it when we dine. Or perhaps before. I'm not sure Elizabeth will want to hear about killing while she's eating."

The party all turned to Elizabeth, who blushed furiously. She was the most delicate thing in Mesidia, a little, simple bloom that refused to die away in the harshness of their land. She looked a spitting image of her mother, though perhaps a little more attractive, but Roland supposed it was youth that made it so. She was pale and rosy-cheeked, with light lashes and dull-colored hair. Even if her brothers didn't guard her so protectively, she would still not be the royal most men would eye. Nonetheless, her pleasant, docile nature made her pretty. Dorian exchanged a smile with her, and Catherine flashed another disapproving glare.

"I'll listen to your tale whenever you wish to tell it," Elizabeth insisted. She brushed aside the short strands that blew against her cheek before Peter shoved her aside.

"My pa and I killed one bigger!" The scrawny youth pointed back toward his father Joel, the quiet, long-nosed man standing beside his wife with a mischievous look in his eye. Peter's eyes held the same mischief.

"Really, though, you think I jest, but it was, oh, I don't know, maybe twice that size."

"My, that's really impressive, Peter," Dorian muttered. Roland stood silent as he watched the ambassador glance again at Elizabeth, her brows furrowed at her brother's outlandish remarks. The red in her cheeks deepened when she saw Dorian's smirk.

"Not to ruin this grand reunion," Pierre said, "but my feet ache, and I yearn for a bath." He gestured to his furred clothes, then back toward Roland's and Dorian's. "As you can see, we've had a long day of hunting. There's a considerable amount of blood under all this dirt."

The al'Murtagh family nodded in understanding, each filing in line as they followed behind Pierre. Roland listened absently as Peter continued to tell the tale of his and Joel's kill, Joel occasionally nodding impishly whenever Peter looked to him for confirmation. Catherine and William quickly abandoned listening to the exaggerated ramblings and chose instead to speak with Pierre and Elizabeth. Roland walked in the back beside Dorian, his feet trailing behind as he brushed his thumb against the Dagger.

"Whose horses are those?" Peter asked. The party turned toward the stables the royal pointed to and noted the white stallions standing beside the other mounts.

"Duke Bernard's, and Natalia's," Pierre answered. His weathered face hardened as he said the names. "The Duchess Yvaine has chosen not to join them, though."

An air of anger emerged from the group. None of them cared for the Barie family, the Duchess Yvaine most of all. Roland found himself relieved she hadn't accompanied her pig-faced husband and devious daughter, the invitation a political courtesy alone, but the idea that she was absent was reason for concern. She was the one who championed the Victorian rebels' claims and insisted the Dagger of Eve and Mesidian crown should be restored to her husband's family.

If she wasn't there, it likely meant she was busy with the rebels.

It hardly helped matters that Dorian had once been her daughter's betrothed.

"Will Bernard and Natalia be dining with us tonight?" Elizabeth asked, always first to break the silences. She shivered in the cold and chanced at a smile.

"Yes," Pierre answered grimly. "They will."

Roland ignored the rest of the conversation as he glanced back at Dorian, wondering how the ambassador was faring with his former betrothed nearby. Natalia was hardly any different than the deceitful Yvaine, only more beautiful and slightly less conniving. Not surprisingly, Dorian was no longer in sight.

"If you'll excuse me, I'm going to head to my chambers," Roland said. He realized it was the only thing he'd said to his family, and his words were laced with an unintended gruffness. Knowing it was too late to mend that, he gave them each a courteous nod, then quietly slipped away.

He hoped Dorian had simply retired to his rooms. It'd been a long morning, and a long ride's return. He supposed Pierre's mention of the baths had simply drawn Dorian off, or perhaps the constant, hateful glances from Catherine had set off Dorian's nerves. Either way, the ambassador's own chambers would be best. If he were in them, then Roland could head to his own.

Dorian's current rooms had once been the ones Roland

slept in as a boy. Before the Victorian rebels' uprising, when Dorian was still considered Pierre's son and next in line for the crown, the opulence of heir and eldest child were given to him. Roland didn't begrudge him for it. He'd never cared that the Laighless bloodline might be carried on through a man with no Laighless blood. The way he saw it, Dorian was his elder brother, and a perfectly suitable choice for king. The Laighless followers, devout and steadfast, thought so as well.

Now Dorian dwelled in the lesser of their chambers, and Roland was forced to guard the Dagger of Eve.

"Dorian," he called, tapping on the ambassador's door. He heard footsteps, but light, dainty ones. He knocked again. "Dorian!"

The door swung open, a full-chested servant staring flushed and wide-eyed. Her cheeks grew red as she curtsied.

"Milord," she said quickly. She opened her mouth to say more, but Roland held up a hand.

"Is Dorian with you?" he asked. It was an implying query, certainly, and her blushing deepened. It was hardly a secret between the two men that Dorian enjoyed the company of the castle's maids. "Has he come by here?"

The curls atop the maid's head bounced as she shook her head. "No, sire, Master Dorian hasn't returned yet. Shall I fetch him for you?"

Roland raised a brow. "Do you know where he is?"

Again, red cheeks. And an embarrassed frown.

"No, milord."

Roland nodded. He saved the servant any further humiliation and walked away.

If not in his own rooms, that likely meant Dorian was in Natalia's chambers. Though Roland wished to help the man, he had no desire to be anywhere near the duchess-heir.

No servants waited with plunging necklines as Roland walked into his bedchambers. Unlike the ambassador, Roland

didn't mend his aching heart by burying himself in the arms of random women. He never saw the appeal. What good would a few moments of passion do him when it was Gwenivere he desired? What would seconds of fulfilled lust matter when the woman in his bed wasn't his beloved?

They would do nothing. His flask, though, filled with bitter, belly-warming liquid, would do him all sorts of good.

He grabbed it from his bedtable and took a swig. All sorts of good indeed.

He sat awhile in silence, dwelling on what his father had told him in the forest. He supposed he understood why Gwenivere hadn't spoken with him, why she hadn't written him for some time. Knowing Gerard, she was likely forbidden to communicate with him anyway. The bloody King of Peace was always protective of her.

Piss-petty whoreson, Roland thought, taking another drink. The liquid burned down his throat and into his stomach, easing away the chill in his weary bones. He shook his head and drank again. *Lightless bastard*.

Knowing it useless to sulk, he stood from where he leaned and headed to his bathing room. It was large, and nearly windowless, the giant, pool-like tub embedded in the ground making it more a bathhouse than a private chamber. It must have taken the servants half the day to warm the water, given how weak many of them were with *auroras*. Anyone could use their elements, but that didn't mean everyone was good with them. When one's profession consisted of menial tasks—washing clothes, tidying rooms, readying baths—there wasn't really a need to become proficient in *calling*. It took a great deal of time and effort to master, much like playing an instrument; everyone had the capability to learn, but few rarely got beyond the basics.

Without knowing how long he'd be hunting with his father and Dorian, Roland could only imagine how many times

the servants had come back to reheat the water. Feeling guilty, he unstrapped the *touched* blades at his sides, along with the Dagger of Eve, then slowly removed his muddied cloak and clothes. He realized he should have brought a towel, or at least something to change into, but the temptation of the steam called. He walked in with flask in hand, welcoming the warmth of the water's embrace.

It didn't take long before the cold in his body began to fade. He leaned back and closed his eyes, his arms resting along either side of the bath's edge. Sweat dripped down his face and his chest, meshing perfectly with the clear waters, and the smell of musky soap filled his nose. Gwenivere had always said that smell made him seem like an old man, but he knew she was fond of it. As a jest, he would rub the occasional letter with it, see if she would mention it in her next response. She never did. She hated giving him the satisfaction.

He knew she noticed, though.

Light, I miss her, he thought, recalling the soft wave of her hair. It was red, the most stunning, subtle shade, and her eyes shone an alarming turquoise beneath frequently arched brows. She was not perfect, her nose almost too straight and her smile crooked, but Roland thought her the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. He cursed the Dagger of Eve and her Amulet for keeping them apart. He opened his eyes to glare at it, make it feel his hatred, but it wasn't where he'd left it.

He sat upright. He'd placed the Dagger by his other knives with the hilt beneath his clothes to hide the glowing jewel. Panicked, he tossed his flask aside and grabbed at his clothes, hoping it was there.

It wasn't.

"Looking for something?"

Roland spun around. In the room's corner, wearing nothing but a thin silk shift, stood Natalia Barie. The Dagger twirled between her fingers.

“You really should be more careful as its Guardian,” she said. “Wouldn’t want someone *calling* on its immortality, would we?”

She stopped spinning it and held out its jewel.

Roland’s jaw ached as he clenched his teeth.

“You seem quite stiff for someone bathing,” she said. “Perhaps it might help loosen you up if I join.”

She bit her lip and took a step forward. Slowly she emerged from the shadows, her silvery-gold hair falling to the center of her waist. Her body moved gracefully as she lowered herself into the other end of the pool, the clinging silk of her shift leaving no curve of her figure unnoticed. The Dagger stayed firm in her grasp.

That wasn’t good. Never mind that she was Dorian’s former betrothed—she was the daughter of his family’s political rivals. He needed to get the Dagger back from her.

“Leave, Natalia,” Roland commanded. His shoulders heaved and his breath escaped in loud bursts, but he managed to keep his words even. “Now.”

A devilish laugh escaped Natalia’s lips. “And miss this sight? Why, Roland, how dare you deprive me of such a thing.”

She placed the Dagger tip against the stones beside her and twirled it between her fingers again. The glowing of its jewel danced off the water’s surface.

“You’ve heard by now that Gwenivere is to find another, have you not?”

Roland said nothing.

“I’ll assume yes. Perhaps now, knowing such a thing, you can move on from your obsession.”

“And what, marry you?” He chuckled and sat back down. “You’re quite the jester, Barie.”

Natalia’s smile widened. “As are you, Laignless. To lead on that poor, freckled wench for all these years when you knew Guardians were forbidden to marry. Quite the jester indeed.”

Roland's temper flared, but he forced another smile. He'd repay that insult to Gwenivere, but not yet, not today. He could do nothing while Natalia still held the Dagger.

As if sensing his worries, Natalia halted the Dagger's spinning. She held it up and examined it, icy blue eyes shining as the jewel glowed against them.

"What do you imagine Dorian would think if he knew I was in here?" she asked. "What do you imagine, a man that's practically your brother, would think of you bathing with his former betrothed?"

Roland shrugged. "Nothing. At least, nothing of me. For you, well, he knows your ways."

Natalia let out a throaty laugh. Strangely enough, it sounded somewhat sincere.

"I shall see you at the feast tonight," she said. She tossed the Dagger aside and backed away. "Don't mind me if I borrow this." She picked up his wolf cloak and brushed off the dirt, then swung it over her shoulders and walked out of the chamber.

Roland knew she would smirk at every stable hand who noticed his cloak and nod at every servant that smelled his scent. Then, more than likely, she would torture Dorian, flaunt their obvious visit until she had all but convinced him she'd shared Roland's bed. Angered and helpless, Roland splashed the steaming water against his face and released the breath he held.

If there was one thing he could be grateful for, it was that she'd gone. And, appallingly, that she'd left the Dagger of Eve behind.



Roland's kill had been prepared for the evening's feast.

The Laighless, the Barie, and the al'Murtagh families all

convened for it. Pierre sat at the head of the table, Queen Rosalie removed from her seat across from him to give the illusion of power to Duke Bernard VII. There the two men sat, one at either end of the elegant wood, both exerting their dominance as a dog claims its ground. Natalia was to the left of her father, like Rosalie to the right of her husband, the queen's stature diminished to that of the duchess-heir. Between them were Elizabeth and her parents, and on the other side, drunk and jesting, sat Peter and William. Roland's place, unknown to him until he entered the hall, was between Natalia and Dorian. As the kitchen maids brought out the feast, only the al'Murtagh brothers seemed excited. Peter's hands brushed together as he looked at the food eagerly.

"Is this elk?" Rosalie asked. Pierre's eyes immediately found the ambassador's.

"Yes," Dorian replied, nodding to the queen. An amused smile lit his face. "I assure you, no laws were broken in its killing. A gift from our great hunt today was actually given to the duchess-heir. Or rather, left at her door. I'm afraid she wasn't present when I stopped by her chambers, but I'm sure she'll be happy to show you the gift later."

A gift? The only thing from their hunt Dorian had taken was the elk's . . .

Roland looked up from the wine glass he'd been about to bury himself in. Dorian, at his side, was wearing an extremely proud smile.

At the end of the table, Pierre's face paled.

"Perhaps it's better Natalia doesn't open it," Rosalie said, catching her husband's expression. "She should keep it, as a safe token for her trip with you to Xenith."

The loud clanging of cutlery sounded.

"*She's* coming with us?" Peter asked. Roland shook his head slightly as Duke Bernard scowled and Natalia smiled.

"Yes," Rosalie answered. "King Gerard's invitation was to

all of you. Now please, let us say thanks.”

She took her husband’s hand and her wine glass, lifting it up. The table joined in raising their own glasses, each taking a drink before beginning to eat.

Roland could feel Natalia watching him, her slender fingers refilling his cup each time it emptied. Any concerned glances from Elizabeth were met by Natalia’s harsh gaze, which in turn made Elizabeth cower. Roland decided to pay it no mind. His ears and eyes caught bits and pieces of the conversations that carried on across the table.

“The fiend made me sit here,” he heard Peter whisper to Dorian. Roland could see the ambassador hold his breath until Peter’s statement was over, careful not to let the ill-smelling remark come too close to the air he took in.

“What?” he asked.

“My sister.” Peter pointed his cutting knife toward Elizabeth. She’d likely heard, as Peter’s whispers were hardly quieter than a normal man’s speech, but she continued to keep her head down, eyes on her plate.

“I would’ve had her sit beside you,” Peter continued. “I know she wanted to, but that former betrothed of yours wouldn’t let me.”

“Wouldn’t let you?” Dorian asked. “Come now, Peter, you’re a man. Are you really going to let an empty threat keep your sister and me from sitting by each other?”

“Please, no one thinks me a man.”

The ambassador chuckled, his gold eyes looking across the table at Elizabeth. Her cheeks flushed when she caught his gaze. She took a sip of wine, followed immediately by a sip of water.

“Never, not even in your dreams, Ambassador,” William whispered. He shook his head and poked Dorian with a knife from behind Peter’s back. “You’d have to duel me first.”

Dorian swatted the knife away and grinned. “Perhaps I might.”

The conversation faded as another started. The party continued in their merriment, feigned and genuine, the emotions dependent solely on the person and the conversation at any particular time. Each reaction, excitable or irritable, was enhanced as the night carried on. All the elk the kitchen maids had prepared was cleared long after the first bottle of wine, and a course of the finest delicacies were brought out on Pierre's request.

Roland managed to keep his anger hidden, his usual carefree nature suppressed by the continual flow of liquid that met his lips. If not filled by Natalia, it was Peter filling his cup, a secondary but considerate gesture after filling his own. William filled it too as he challenged Roland to sparring matches in weapons both *called* and *touched*, each gamble confirmed by a pour and a clink of glasses. Even Dorian joined in the wine giving, which seemed more a gleeful gesture than a personal one.

Despite his now-blurred senses, Roland felt something resting against his leg. He looked down from his plate, noting Natalia's hand resting against his thigh. It was out of sight from watchful eyes, the table's surface covering it. With careful fingers, she took a key from beneath her dinner cloth and slid it under his.

"If you feel so inclined," she whispered.

Roland bit the inside of his cheek, grabbing the key angrily and hiding it in his palm. He didn't want to risk picking up the dinner cloth later and revealing it there, not with Dorian sitting just beside him.

"I'm guessing this is to the guest chambers my parents granted you?" he whispered tersely, leaning in close. Natalia's answer came in the form of a smile, one that seemed to ask if he was serious.

"I see. You're nothing if not persistent. You must know by now that I despise you."

He pulled away, not wanting to risk attention with his hushed remarks. Dropping the key intentionally on the floor,

he reached out and grabbed his wine. Natalia's hand continued to travel, shifting between light and firm motions.

When her fingers brushed higher up, just along the inside of his thigh, the glass in his hand shattered.

Elizabeth gasped. Dorian took notice too, cursing on Roland's behalf. Roland hardly realized what he'd done. He looked at his hand, shards of glass stuck within it. Blood quickly began oozing. Natalia's hand now rested in her lap, motionless and innocent.

"Are you all right?" Elizabeth asked. She handed over her dinner cloth, then quickly took Peter's and handed it over too.

Roland accepted them, pressing them to his palm. "No," he answered, shaking his head. He exhaled slowly, meeting his cousin's eyes.

It was obvious by his tone that he wasn't referring to his hand. Elizabeth slunk back in her seat, eyeing him with concern.

"Is that so?" Pierre called across the table. Roland looked up, not having realized his and Elizabeth's exchange had been overheard.

"That's surprising," his father continued—"I can't imagine any son of mine would be upset over such a minor wound."

Roland ground his teeth, his uninjured hand squeezing into a fist. He was acutely aware of the rest of the people at the table, each now looking between him and his father.

"Really, Roland," Pierre said, stabbing his fork into his food and taking a bite. When he'd chewed it and swallowed, he leaned back in his seat and angled his fork in Roland's direction. "Have you something to say? Or do you wish to just sit there, dripping blood and wine all over the table?"

Roland shook his head.

"I've got nothing to say. It was an accident is all."

"Are you certain? Because you've hardly said a word all night. And I can understand if you're upset about something. Really, I can. But I can't understand you having so little tact

and class toward our guests.”

Roland shot his father a glare, silently cursing him. Why had he waited until now to provoke him? Why, with both their family and their political rivals at their table, did Pierre choose their feast to press him?

“I’ve got plenty to say,” Roland answered finally, “but it doesn’t concern anyone here.”

“Care to tell us who you might be concerned with, then? Gerard perhaps. We did speak of him earlier today. I could understand if he were on your mind.”

Roland laughed bitterly.

“Yes, Father, that’s right. I’ve got Gerard Verigrad on my mind.”

“Gerard’s a good man. A man worthy of respect.”

“He’s a Lightless bastard.”

At that, Pierre stopped. Roland’s skin felt clammy, his breaths escaping sharply. Everyone around them sat perfectly still, no one offering a distracting word or gesture.

“His wife is dead,” Pierre said quietly, leaning forward and holding out his palms. “His daughter’s heart belongs to you, the one man he can’t permit her to marry. And he’s dying. Which he can’t tell Gwenivere, of course, because he knows how faithful a daughter she is, and how quickly she’ll wed a man if it means easing her dying father’s troubled mind. She won’t think the decision through. She won’t pick the best suitor. She’ll just wed herself off to the first person who asks. So tell us Roland, tell us all your reasons for calling him a Lightless bastard.”

Roland swallowed, saying nothing.

Pierre’s fist came down with a crash against the table. Roland flinched, not expecting his father’s outburst. A few glasses shook, one falling over and spilling. Peter reached out to try cleaning it up, but his hand immediately retreated when Elizabeth shook her head.

Wetting his lips, Roland opened his mouth to answer. He couldn't think of anything to say.

"I didn't know he was dying," he finally admitted. He fought back a wince as his father laughed mockingly.

"I suppose that would make it all right then, not knowing that." He sniffed and rubbed his nose, then placed both hands out on the table. "But, since you seem unable to distinguish what is and is not proper, I'll provide you some counsel: You're to respect King Gerard's wishes, and you're never to dissuade the Lady Gwenivere again. Any and all communication with her must cease, or it is you who'll be deemed Lightless."

He turned back to his food, continuing to eat. Roland sat quietly, knowing he'd be further reprimanded if he got up and left the table. He stayed, then, accepting some bandages from the servants his mother called in. The rest of the table eventually started speaking again, but all joviality was gone. No one, not even the calloused Natalia, could come back from hearing the King of Peace was dying.

There are many differing beliefs on auroras. Most agree that they are seen in what many refer to as “the mind’s eye,” and are what people pull from to draw elements and create called weapons. However, it is still undecided if these auroras are the same ones that appear roughly three days after someone has died.

From the studies of Deladrine, the Lady Oracle

CHAPTER 3

DIE TRICH



Dietrich stood within the shadows, what little existed in the hospital room, and watched the *auroras* emerge from the corpse before him.

He'd waited some time for them to expose themselves, their colorful, haunting presence like a derisive dance. Most found the emergence of *auroras* calming, tranquil even, believing they were the pieces of a person's soul on their way to the afterlife.

Dietrich could never believe such tales. *Auroras* didn't just emerge from the righteous and kind folk of the world. They emerged from anyone and everyone: thieves, rapists, murderers. Even fiends. How could a man such as he, forced to face such evils, possibly condone such a belief? How could he live knowing the enemies he'd slain now watched him from a place of peace?

He never could. At least, he'd never wanted to before that moment.

I'm sorry, Dietrich thought, grimacing as he looked at the corpse's neck. A clean, dark line lay dried against it. *I'm sorry they came for you.*

He stepped out from the shadows and walked toward the body. The *auroras*, swirling upward in an array of color, sighed woefully as he neared.

You didn't deserve this. He swallowed and reached his hand out, hoping terribly he would feel something, anything, as he touched the lights. He wanted to know the woman before him, his beloved, raven-haired Daensla, would live on. He wanted to sense her presence, her goodness, wanted to believe it truly was her soul that existed in the ascending *auroras*. He held his breath and extended his palm to touch them. He waited.

Nothing. Not coldness. Not emptiness. Not even a shiver.

The lights were nothing more than a solidifying display of Daensla's death.

"Yeltaire Veen?" a hesitant voice called. "It's Sam. May I enter?"

Dietrich took several breaths, his eyes still stuck to the jagged gash along Daensla's throat. Perhaps such a thing wouldn't exist if Yeltaire Veen were the only name she'd ever known to be his.

"Forgive me," Sam said, shimmying into the hospital's drifting room. He hardly glanced at the body, enough time spent with the ill and dying to grant him comfort with corpses. "When Prince Abaddon heard of your presence, he immediately sent word for you."

Dietrich nodded at hearing his brother's name. The *auroras* continued to pass through his outstretched palm. He pried his eyes away from them, facing the babbling healer.

"I'd thought you would be elsewhere, sir, somewhere else within the hospital," Sam continued. "Thus my haste. Other-

wise, I wouldn't ask of you to leave your . . . this woman."

Dietrich stood motionless. "I didn't know her."

Sam's brows furrowed over his spectacles. No one touched the ascending *auroras* of someone they didn't know. It was a horribly intimate intrusion on the deceased.

"Um, well, best to let her *auroras* drift in peace then." Sam clutched at the parchments in his hands and pressed them to his chest. "I suppose we should adhere to Prince Abaddon's callings. I'm sure this woman's family wishes to see her before she fades completely."

She had no family, Dietrich thought bitterly. She had a grandmother who survived the Prianthian enslavement, but that was all. No siblings, no parents. No one to remember her now that she's gone.

"It was the Redeemers who killed her," Sam said. It seemed the longer Dietrich kept quiet, the more Sam spoke. "That's what her neighbor told us when he brought her body in. He never actually saw them, but he heard her speaking ill of them often. Sad, but I suppose that's why we have our Assassin Prince. Perhaps *he* can bring her vengeance now."

Dietrich's angered musings were stifled as he heard his title. No matter how many years he lived in disguise, no matter how long he walked and talked among the people of his kingdom, he never could grow used to hearing them speak of him as the Assassin Prince. They all knew he existed. They all knew he fought the insurgence that threatened their alliance with the West. They simply didn't know his face. They only knew Yeltaire Veen, or whatever given alias he chose to share.

At least I'm spoken of with hope, he thought. Father would be so proud.

He grunted in amusement at the thought. The healer's brows laced further, but he otherwise ignored the reaction.

"I pray peace be with her," Sam went on, dipping his head toward Daensla. The spectacles along his nose dipped too. "I pray she finds solace under the Creator's grace."

Dietrich continued to say nothing. He looked at the eerie remnants of Daensla one last time, looked through her now nearly translucent form, then turned away and nodded.

Sam stood still for a time, unsure it seemed whether he should lead or follow. Dietrich eyed him with an unenthused expectancy until the healer at last pressed onward.

A distance formed between them as they walked out of Daensla's drifting room and into the hospital's hallways. Though he was never accustomed to his uncloaked guise, Dietrich kept his chin up and his neck high. His confident strides revealed nothing but prestige. Sam's nervous steps were a perfect opposition, his head snapping back from time to time to ensure Dietrich still pursued. It was an odd pairing, but the prince gave it no mind, knowing it was better the healers throughout the hospital thought him wonderfully unaware than exceedingly perceptive.

They did whisper, though.

"Is that Master Veen? Is that the fiend hunter who aids Prince Abaddon? He killed a cyclo'ghul just a moon ago . . ."

That was how it usually went, followed by, "My, he's quite scary, isn't he?"

Blissful naivety. He wore it convincingly.

"How fares the queen?" he asked, at last breaking the silence with Sam. It was a dull question, he knew, but he grew bored of eavesdropping on the people they passed. He needed to distract himself, needed to forget about Daensla. He already knew how Queen Lenore fared, though, as he'd just seen her a short time ago, but probing Sam for insight might prove wise. Gossip spread among the living in places where they fended off death. If Dietrich was to gain an idea of how much the people knew about his sick mother, the hospital was a good place to start.

"Is she here?" he continued. "Does she accompany Prince Abaddon today?"

Sam fiddled with the parchments he clenched. He nearly stumbled as he began his climb up the hospital's stairs. "Uh, no sir, she does not."

"How strange," Dietrich said. "You speak as though mention of Queen Lenore is forbidden."

"I know little of the queen and her state," Sam answered. "Anything I would say would only be speculation, concerned musings, if you will, and I think it best not to share such things. Gossip, it is, and better not said, I was told."

Dietrich tensed. "Told? By whom?"

The healer looked down, waving his hand.

"Uh, no, sorry, not ordered silent, if that's the impression I gave. I merely meant, uh, broader. In general, my parents always said it's best not to share something if I didn't know it to be true."

"I see." Dietrich couldn't resist the smile that pulled at his lips. "At times, though, sharing concerns can help prevent misunderstandings from occurring. If you think something not right with the queen, you can certainly trust my judgment to differentiate your thoughts from truths. Wouldn't you agree?"

Sam turned his head slightly and bit his lip, then shrugged.

"I've just noticed her absence from aiding the weary here as of late. She hasn't joined Prince Abaddon in his work, and the prince has seemed . . . ill at ease. Some of his patients, they're very sick, and he can't seem to find an elixir to cure them. He has managed to keep them alive, his genius prevails, but none have been completely healed—"

"You believe the queen to share their illness?" Dietrich interrupted.

The healer nodded.

That was bad. If Sam had been able to figure out Lenore was sick, who was to say the Redeemers hadn't? Or the Prianthians? Their enemies were always looking for a chance to strike, and now, with Lenore weak, this might be the chance. The Light

knew his father wouldn't be coping well with her illness.

"Sam," Dietrich said, quickening his pace. He caught up after a few strides, grabbing the young man's shoulder. Sam winced but halted.

"Thank you for sharing this with me," Dietrich said. "You're intuitive, clever; it's made you good at your work." He forced a smile, a pleasant, convincing one, then released the pressure of his grip. "I do, however, think you correct in your earlier statement: sharing such an idea is perhaps not wise for Sadie's well-being. The idea that our first queen since the Prianthian enslavement might be ill could give our enemies a newfound hope. And with Redeemers always amiss, heartfelt expression could be an invitation for their assassins.

"Know I say none of this as accusation. It was my fault to press for your confession. Retain your wisdom and remain silent." He patted Sam's arm and widened his grin. "Your parents were astute in such a command."

Sam hunched slightly and clenched his parchments tighter. His eyes were wide behind his spectacles. "Y-yes Master Veen." He swallowed, then attempted his own smile. It staggered as much as his speech. "I-I will say nothing of the sort again."

Dietrich nodded and pulled his hand from Sam's shoulder. Meagerly, the healer reached up and rubbed it.

"You may return to your work," Dietrich said. "The sick need you down below."

Sam finally propped his frames from the tip of his nose back to its bridge. "Yes, of course. Good day to you, Master Veen. My warmest regards to Prince Abaddon."

"I will relay them to him." Dietrich held his smile and watched as the healer walked away. He stood silent as he listened for the young man's retreat, shifting back and forth from his heels to his toes. When the clumsy patters ended, he lifted his hand and knocked on Abaddon's door.

"My Lord?" he sang cheerily. He tapped rhythmically and

randomly, knowing full well the incessant knocking would annoy his brother. "It's your good friend, Yeltaire Veen. I was informed by the healer Sam that you requested my presence."

He smirked as the door opened abruptly. Abaddon faced him, lips tight and eyes squinting.

"Well hello," Dietrich said. He peeked his head around his brother's shoulder, the study behind him filled with vials and vials of different colored liquids. Stacks of parchment lay strewn about, some in a straight line along shelves, others scattered in piles across the floor. Dietrich straightened and turned back to Abaddon, distressed suddenly as he looked at him again.

He wasn't just glaring from the annoying knocks. The dark skin around his lids was puffy, his jaw lined with black, unshaved stubble. His green eyes looked laden as they shone a bloodshot red.

"May I enter?" Dietrich asked. He tried to keep his jesting tone, tried to stay upbeat, but his voice had unintentionally softened.

Abaddon stepped aside and let him in.

"It's good to see you, Dietrich." He lifted his foot and kicked the door shut behind them, his dark robes nearly catching along the door's edge. Dietrich looked around and stood with unease, not favorable to sitting in any of the seats with backs facing the door.

"You should not refer to me as such with others so close." He grabbed a chair and turned its angle, fidgeting uncomfortably as he sat down. He hated chairs, hated all of them. They left him so terribly, terribly vulnerable. "Veen is the only name of which you should speak when I'm here."

Abaddon rubbed his face and plopped down in his own seat. He stared at Dietrich, more than likely waiting for him to stop shifting the chair's legs across the floor.

"Yes, well these walls are plenty thick."

The chair screeched.

“Especially in this room.”

Another screech.

“It’s not anything . . . for the Light’s sake! Cease your worries, both in your mind and your chair. If sitting so ails you then stand!”

Dietrich cleared his throat, sniffed casually, then halted. “Forgive me. I’m not fond of chairs.”

Abaddon chuckled. “Caution is good, but in excess it’s unbecoming. You can’t maintain such a demeanor when you go to Xenith’s masquerade.”

The masquerade. Of all the things for Dietrich to go to.

“I still think this a mistake,” he said. “*You’ve* actually crossed the expanse of the desert before and gone through the Dividing Wall’s mountains. *You’ve* sold your elixirs to the nobles of the West. *You’ve* charmed their material minds into believing such items are more valuable than the metals in our caves.” He poked at a vial of exceptionally red liquid, then smelled its rank contents and pushed it aside. “You are a name and a face they trust. I . . .” he leaned back and poked at his own chest. “They’ve never so much as met.”

Abaddon slicked his fingers through his hair and rested his foot atop his knee.

“You heighten my abilities to persuade and diminish my intelligence by insisting goods for armor are more valuable than liquid life. If not for my elixirs, the West would be plagued with illness.”

Words. Abaddon used a great many of them.

“Come now,” Dietrich countered with a pointing finger. “You know that even the most practical of things requires one to believe them to be of such. Reduced famine would be more favorable for any kingdom, yet feasts for royal mouths still seem more desirable for the noble classes. The begging hungry are not enough to outweigh a clever chef.”

“A clever chef has more senses on his side.” Abaddon leaned forward and tapped his own finger to his nose. “The hungry merely appeal to our pitying sight. Food appeals to our sight as well as our nose.”

Dietrich held up his hand to end their continuous cycle of besting. “We stray. My point is that you have a connection with westerners. They don’t even know who I am.”

“You insult your reputation!” Abaddon’s lips pulled into a grin. “Surely you’re aware of how intriguing your story is. Perhaps it’s more a legend than a truth now, but still. The names the Shadow, the Cloaked Prince, the Assassin—they’ve all preceded you. People are curious of the Sadiyan peasant-prince whose face is unknown.”

Dietrich scowled, at last denying the comforts of his chair. He rose and walked toward the window, looking out over the bright reflections of Sadie’s capital. He knew it was odd, but he felt more at home within its streets than within the luxuries royalty might have otherwise bestowed. How intriguing he was indeed. What common royal preferred sleeping in the crevices of his city’s roofs and the arms of a whore?

Dietrich blinked. The latter of such dwellings was gone.

Eager to cast his thoughts aside, Dietrich turned back to his younger brother. Quickly he noted the heaviness that resided below Abaddon’s eyes, the difficulty with which they fought to stay open. He was weary. Fatigued.

The search to cure their mother’s illness was consuming him.

“I must admit, I’m hesitant to take the Dagger,” Dietrich confessed. “I know we wish to save Mother, but the Xens and the Mesidians believe their roles as Guardians have blessed their nations. Faith and perception may be falsely intermingled, but it nevertheless guides their actions.” He waited for Abaddon to interrupt him, waited for him to try and dissuade his uncertainty. His brother just sat silent.

Doesn't even want to argue. Light, he really is tired.

Dietrich ran his hands through his black hair, the strands rough as he slicked them from his face. He thought back on his and Abaddon's last discussion, and the one before that, each visit since their mother had fallen ill having been filled with possible ploys.

It had been Abaddon's idea to draw on the Dagger of Eve's immortality. He wanted to try and convince its Guardian that Sadie's predicament was of merit.

Dietrich hadn't believed he could possibly be so persuasive, but Abaddon had been insistent he at least try. The younger prince knew as much about royals as he knew about remedies, and he was convinced that Roland Laighless might forfeit the Dagger if it meant he could marry Gwenivere Verigrad. Convince her to aid them, pull her to their side and have her promise herself to Roland, and the Dagger was as good as theirs.

To Dietrich, it was all just chatter.

"I understand Roland and Gwenivere may love each other," he said, "but I can't believe such an ordinary feeling would break the celestial force that qualifies their roles. The prosperity of their nations is instilled in them more than anything else. Temptations of the common man cannot so simply sway those beliefs."

Abaddon peered for a moment, his eyes turning away and looking at nothing and everything that lay atop his study.

Quick to persuade, but never quick to give a hasty reply. Not for the first time, Dietrich was glad their father wasn't opposed to Abaddon being the possible heir. Better the genius prince takes the throne someday than the peasant one.

"Do you remember the night the Redeemers first came?" Abaddon asked, tapping his fingers. "Do you remember how shocking it was, after our very father had freed Sadie from Prianthia, that some of our own men had been persuaded to risk their lives in an attempt at ours?"

Dietrich stood motionless. Only his eyes moved to face his brother's pressings.

"I would not forget that night, Abaddon," he answered grimly. "What game are you playing to ask such a thing?"

"Not a game." Abaddon stood from his chair and joined Dietrich by the window. "Just an effort for you to see the truth."

"I've lived that truth for the past fourteen years," Dietrich said. "I see it with every Redeemer who falls by my blade." Daensla flickered into his mind again, her slit throat weighing down on his conscience. He pushed the thought of her aside. Guilt was useless to the dead.

"And yet," Abaddon said calmly, "after killing so many people, have you managed to put an end to the Redeemers? If you have, why have you not returned to the palace? Why do you still walk among the shadows, nervous to sit with a door at your back?"

Dietrich ground his teeth, his shoulders heaving. He opened his mouth to respond but quickly stopped, reminding himself where he was. If any healer came to ask advice, came to inquire about some herbs or elixirs, they might find it odd to hear Abaddon being spoken to so forwardly. And about things vastly different from what the fiend hunter Yeltaire Veen would speak of.

Dietrich turned back toward his brother, his muscles tense.

"You know as well as I that Navar still lives," he said coldly. "You know the Redeemers still obey him. If you believe my efforts to kill them have failed, just say so. Don't dance about it."

Abaddon held up his hand and shook his head. "You misunderstand my meaning." He grabbed two glasses from the alcove below his window and filled each with a dark, golden liquid. Dietrich shook his head slightly in refusal. Abaddon shrugged and drank both himself.

"Is that bottle full because you drink from it so rarely?"

Dietrich asked. "Or because you have recently opened it after finishing another?"

His younger brother evaded the query with a guilty grin and wave of hand, then poured himself another drink. "We digress. I didn't mean to offend before, Dietrich. I'm sorry if you took it as such. I hold nothing but the highest respect for you.

"However, the inevitability of the Redeemers' growth has become more and more apparent to me as of late. They are formidable, both in number and in skill. They don't answer to their blood. Their eyes and tongues don't define them." He swirled the liquid in his cup before raising it up and swallowing.

"Their leader is the only man to have ever succeeded in unifying the eastern peoples," he continued. "While his cause is unjust, his ability to ally people from both Sadie *and* Prianthia is something that cannot be denied. Who else do you know who has accomplished such a thing?"

Dietrich didn't answer. He hardly wanted to reflect on all the Redeemers had done. They'd emerged during his youth, sent their men after him and his mother and Abaddon when his father had first left to pledge alliances to the West. The Redeemers believed the western kingdoms plagued the East with war and carnage. Worse yet, they believed the West was responsible for the East's turmoil, that any and all who associated with them were subject to death.

Their convictions were nothing if not committed. Their following had indeed grown, despite Dietrich's attempts to end it, the whole purpose of his cloaked guise continuing to lose merit the longer they lived. They'd not yet pieced together his alias to his face, not completely, the identity he portrayed in Yeltaire Veen still somewhat safe from their assassins. Dietrich had heard whispers, though, and tortured confessions, that the insurgence had their own assassin now, some Victor of the Black. The man's features were supposedly chosen for their resemblance to Dietrich's own. How the Redeemers had

discovered his looks—or at least discovered what he ought to look like now—he didn't know. They clearly had though, to some extent. Daensla's slit throat was testimony to that.

"The majority of our people are loyal," Dietrich insisted. He shuddered as he forced his mind blank. "Navar is led by the Fallen One. He only succeeds in unifying cowards, traitors—"

"Warriors, academics!" Abaddon's voice practically echoed against the walls. "Navar himself was a scholar, a man who advocated for the freedom of our people from his own. Though it might've been our father who freed Sadie from Prianthia, it's not always the names of the righteous that are remembered in the present."

Dietrich opened his mouth to argue, then decided to remain silent. Abaddon had, after all, let him ramble on about his concerns to take the Dagger. He could do his brother the courtesy of staying quiet while he relayed his concerns about their kingdom.

"The Holy Book itself reveals of a time when the Creator gave man miracles," Abaddon said. "It speaks of the Creator appearing before our very eyes, and still, within a century, we returned to our false gods." Abaddon looked to his desk, a torn copy of the Holy Book sitting atop its surface. Its pages were yellowed, its spine bent. Dietrich wasn't sure if he believed in its teachings, wasn't sure if he believed in its Creator, but he could at least respect that his brother did.

"That's what Navar is," Abaddon went on. "He's the evil that intrigues the content when too many a blessing has befallen them. He's a voice that makes them question, makes them go down a path of good intentions but leads them to the Fallen One. He's our people's false god . . . and I'll be damned if he convinces our kingdom of his heresy."

Dietrich remained silent, not bothering to sway his brother's better judgment as, once again, Abaddon filled his glass.

The image of Daensla, of her emerging *auroras*, continued to flash across Dietrich's mind. Their colorful streaks painfully agreed with Abaddon's words.

If only the necessity of Dietrich's role had been triumphant, the endless chase for Navar's life and the Redeemers' insurgence ended, how peaceful his life could be again. He picked up the glass his brother had offered, not bothering to give an explanation as he too poured himself a drink.

"What do you propose then?" He barely winced as he took a swig, the liquid burning down his throat. "I came to express my concerns for our mother, perhaps reverse our decision of the Immortality Dagger. Instead, I'm being reminded of our enemies' success."

"A success that will only grow when the pillars of this nation fall." Abaddon's response came with a clinking of glass, his hand striking his full cup to Dietrich's own. "Your pillar is already being taken by the vines, barely visible as they consume your royal stature."

Dietrich took another drink and narrowed his eyes, but kept quiet.

"My pillar," Abaddon continued, "mine is strong, albeit not as much as yours." He gestured to Dietrich's taller, larger physique. "But it's free of . . . foliage."

"Then there's Harold and Lenore, our great parents, the foundation of their pillars joined only to be separated at the top. They provide twice the strength, yet if so much as a crack begins to climb through one, it will weaken the other. If that pillar begins to falter, if the foundation breaks apart, it will force them both to crumble. I know not what you think, Brother, nor shall I ever, but I'm afraid you and I may not be strong enough to hold what's left of Sadie without them."

Dietrich nodded along, though he wasn't quite sure he followed his brother's analogy. "So, draw on the Dagger's immortality to mend the 'crack' that is our mother's illness, and

ensure Sadie remains strong. Is that what you mean?"

Abaddon shrugged.

"I can't seem to find an elixir to heal Mother," he said. "I have patients. I experiment. Nothing seems promising. I fear what will happen to this nation if we lose her—if Father loses her. And I worry about you. I often lie awake, wondering if I even have a brother left to pray for."

He paused, not meeting Dietrich's eyes. He licked his lips, staring down into the contents of his glass.

"So what say you, Brother? Will you try to bring the Dagger of Eve back for us?"

Dietrich let out a sigh, hardly able to look upon the defeated image of his brother. Once, before the Redeemers had come, the world had been theirs, the future a promising adventure the two would embark upon with sword and shield in hand. Wooden swords, and pillows for shields—those had been all they could wield as boys—but the vision they'd seen had been noble all the same.

He drank what remained of his cup, set it down, and faced his brother. He couldn't abandon that vision now.

"I will," he answered

Xenith is described as The Realm of Scholars. Gustav Halstentine is among the most famous of Xen's people, having written many—if not all—the common teachings on auroras. His most popular work is known as The Art of Calling.

From the curriculum of Garron Hillborne for the Princess
Gwenivere Verigrad

CHAPTER 4

GWENIVERE



“We will be within the capital in about a day’s time.” Gerard’s booming voice carried easily through the forest path. “I’ve sent word of our departure. I believe the people in Voradeen will be welcoming us when we arrive.”

The king’s knights grunted their approval, each beginning to talk to the men closest to them. Gwenivere didn’t bother listening to their conversations, her mind occupied by nothing more than the royal garb she’d been forced to adorn.

“Curse my father, Garron, curse him his persistent ways!” She desperately tried to loosen her bodice. It was absurdly tight, especially given that the day was to be spent riding. “I hate these damned clothes. So bloody uncomfortable.”

“Yes,” her knight said dryly. “Your clothes must be very uncomfortable.”

The princess looked up, catching the rare smile beaming across Garron’s face. His face was the only thing she could

see, his ceremonial armor covering the bulk of his body as his element-resistant chainmail covered what was left. A mighty sight it was, the Golden Knight almost glowing from atop his stallion's back. But he was, no doubt, enduring far more discomfort than she, a quick glance down reminding her how fortunate she was. Her tight bodice was really the only pestering article she wore besides perhaps her crown, which lay pinned in place against her red hair. Everything else she wore was made from nothing but the finest and softest materials.

"Albeit dreadfully heavy, I do admit your gallant attire quite fitting of you." Gwenivere grinned cheerfully, then cocked her head toward Garron's horse. "I pity Druke, though. I can't imagine he cares much for all that weight."

"He's a horse, and a fine one at that. I doubt he cares for much but a full belly and a caring rider." Garron's armored palm patted the horse's neck, clinking against the metal it too was forced to wear. "But to respond to your prior kindness, I would tell you that no number of jewels or lace would ever be fitting of your stature."

Gwenivere looked down and blushed, her smile replaced by sudden concern. *He is over twice my age, and my knight, but people are fools.* Garron's voice was deep, and had likely gone unheard, but the princess still looked around with unease. *If any of the men were listening . . .*

"I am grateful for your sentiment and your kind words, Sir Garron, but perhaps you've been too bold. I know where your heart lies, but other men do not. They will question our friendship if such words are exchanged often." Her statement was said under her breath, her eyes darting around the nearby band of knights. She hoped none of them had been in earshot.

Garron, as he always did, veiled whatever thoughts or emotions had surfaced.

"My apologies, milady, I only meant to return the compliment I'd received."

“I know,” she said. “Forgive me. I just I don’t ever feel like I know what is and isn’t proper to say. And with this masquerade coming up . . .”

Garron met her eye sternly. “Complimenting you on your nobleness is very proper. It’s a reflection on your abilities as our future queen. You haven’t been around many men in your lifetime, but to remark on such things will occur often. You should learn to become accustomed to such flattery.”

Gwenivere scoffed. Flirtatious banter with men was nothing she had ever mastered, the idea of it a useless and daunting chore only befitting of royal trends. She missed the days of her childhood when improper behavior was tossed off as youthful naivety. “I’m not sure I could ever become accustomed to that.”

“Well you’d better start,” Garron said simply. “Men will be complimenting more than just your stature at the masquerade, and you need to know which of those compliments are fitting.”

“And what shall I do if their remarks aren’t fitting?”

The knight glanced over at her, another rare smirk sneaking through his beard.

“Just call for me. I will do to them everything a lady of your dignity cannot.”

Gwenivere laughed at the thought, a small part of her now hoping crass behavior would unfold in her direction. She recalled specific faces, specific noblemen, their less-than-courteous glances having made their way shamelessly across her figure. How she had wanted to rip their eyes out, burn them with a lick of fire or shock them with a bolt, but alas, it was not the way of a lady. Perhaps she could find one of those men at the masquerade, take her knight up on his word. What a pleasantry that would be.

“Let us have some fun, shall we?” Garron said. Gwenivere’s vengeful thoughts were quickly forgotten as she glanced at her knight. She craned her neck and squinted incredulously.

“Your version of fun is never fun. When you say *us*, do

you really mean *you*?”

“Don’t be selfish. No one cares for a prissy noble.”

Gwenivere smiled and gaped, then released a quick bolt of lightning Garron’s way. It would hardly do anything, she knew, his elemental armor merely absorbing it, but the tingle it gave him was well worth her efforts. She laughed as she saw him squirm in his saddle.

“That’s perfect actually,” he said, scratching at his beard. “Element practice was what I was going to suggest.”

“Now?” she pressed. “In the middle of the forest?”

“Do you have a better way to pass the time?” His tone was as much a taunt as it was truth. “It’s not a dreadfully long trek to Voradeen, but it’s long enough. Besides, we haven’t trained in a while. If a fiend attacks and you do nothing but cower behind your dress, I’ll be the one to blame.”

“This dress would be the last thing I’d cower behind,” she countered. “There isn’t a thread in it that could absorb an element. My crown on the other hand, I might cower behind that as it’s made of element-resistant silver, but certainly not my dress—”

“Gwenivere—”

“All right, fine!” The princess held her amusement in, knowing very well she shouldn’t mock her knight’s good intentions. “What element, and where?”

The swift trots of horses behind them interrupted Garron’s reply. They came from Aden and Maximus, who gained ground toward where they rode. Gwenivere waved at them and smiled as she noted her brother’s armor. The little prince looked more like the toy soldiers he played with than a royal boy.

“May we join?” Maximus asked. Gwenivere didn’t bother looking to Garron before nodding, too excited to share in her training to risk her knight dismissing it.

“I so rarely see my brother’s abilities,” she answered. “I welcome them.”

“A challenge!” Aden raised his arm in excitement. In truth, it attempted to rise, but was cut short halfway up by the bulk of his armor. “I bet I’m as skilled as you now, Sister.”

“My, my, must everything be a competition to you?” Her eyes rose from Aden to his knight. She squinted at him with feigned disgust. “Typical tykes, always turning tasks into trials. What’ve you been teaching him, Maximus?”

The young knight’s cheeks reddened despite her tone, the color at odds with his broad face and square jaw. Gwenivere decided a man as big as he needed something to soften his build, something to keep people from thinking him a muscled brute. Even bears had their honey.

“Quite a lot, actually,” the knight answered, giving Aden an approving nod. He chanced at a grin, matching Gwenivere’s own as he pointed to a tree up ahead. “See that branch there, the one hanging over the road? Use your air to shake its leaves onto Sir Nicolas when he passes beneath it. Whoever succeeds in doing so first shall be the victor.”

Garron grunted beside them, clearly entertained by Maximus’s choice of victims. Nicolas was a pretty knight, so much so that he almost looked like a woman, the smooth skin on his face without hair and his lashes thick. Other knights matched close to his looks, but none his demeanor, the rest of the men too mindful of being proper to risk having pride. Gwenivere imagined Garron would love doing the deed himself if not for the lesson he was trying to teach.

“Deal,” she said. Aden echoed his own agreement immediately after. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and attempted Maximus’s request.

The *auroras* shone brightly in her mind, the colors swirling fancifully with one another. They danced, in a way, some twirling slowly, others swiftly, their auras an alluring ballroom of celestial lights. Garron had told her everyone’s shone uniquely, that each individual saw their *auroras* in their own

way, all dependent on how in tune they were with them and how much time they dedicated to seeking them out. Anyone could find them, he'd said, anyone could control and draw from them. How well they did so was mostly determined by the training they had.

Gwenivere, under his watchful wing, had gone through plenty.

Air, air, where are you? She rummaged through the *auroras*, searching through the maze of colors for the clearness of air's light. The colors matched each element, the red and oranges of fire and the crackling white-purple of lightning always overly prevalent in her mind. The hues of blue were second to the others, the snow and water that came with them always relatively easy for her to find. The greens and browns of earth were third after that. Air, drawn from the clear *auroras*, always gave her trouble. It tricked her as it hid behind and beside the other lights.

It usually did, at least. The memory of the window shutting in her father's chambers flashed through her thoughts. She quickly pushed it away. She was determined to beat her brother in this match.

With her eyes still closed, Gwenivere snatched the first few air *auroras* she could find, opening her lids when she had her grip. She was tempted to cast her hands toward the branch, but she refrained, fearful her young brother would hurry his attempt along if he saw her do so. For all she knew, clear *auroras* were the easiest for him to find. She inhaled deeply, tried to keep her gaze steady, and slowly released her element.

The sensation drained her, if only a bit, the effort not enough to cause her fatigue. She beamed when she sensed contact with the branch. Her mind forced her element to twitch beneath her hold.

Just as the first leaves began to fall, Aden's armored arm shot forward. The slight shaking in the branch was quickly

dominated by the strength he released. His element was too strong, though, the thinness of the tree's limb not able to withstand his force. It broke with a loud snap, the might of the air's gust propelling the branch forward and atop Sir Charles's—not Sir Nicolas's—back.

"Dammit!" the old knight yelled, turning to find his assailants. The royal siblings froze. Maximus and Garron pointed at them from either side. Charles shook his head, furrowed his brow and frowned, but said nothing more as he grumpily snapped his stallion's reins and hurried away.

When he was out of earshot, Gwenivere, Aden, and Maximus all burst into laughter.

Garron's beard shifted slightly.

"I might cry I'm laughing so hard," Gwenivere said, dabbing at her eyes. "Though I would've enjoyed that falling on Sir Nicolas, I think Sir Charles was a good second. I suppose it serves him right for always correcting you for cursing, Maximus." She grabbed at her bodice, the muscles of her stomach tense, and cleared her throat.

"Aden might not have much control yet, but he certainly has strength." She turned her gaze to the prince's knight, nodding to him with a grin. "I have no doubts as to where he learned that from."

Maximus blushed again, his gaze cast down as his broad shoulders hunched. Garron leaned in toward Gwenivere, gently whispering, "Quite the little flatterer you are," before sitting back up in his saddle. The princess's cheeks took their turn to beam.

"Not bad, Aden," the Golden Knight said, returning their fun to learned boredom. "But has Maximus taught you your academics on *auroras* and elements? Have your tutors? Have you read *The Art of Calling* by Gustav Halstentine?"

Gwenivere groaned, and Aden shrugged with indifference, outing his knight as he answered, "A little."

“A little, eh?” Garron attempted to give Maximus a glare, but the young knight seemed to suddenly find interest in the trees. “Perhaps I shall quiz you then: What happens if too much of an element fills into elemental armor?”

The little prince smiled, clearly knowing the answer. “It explodes!”

Garron furrowed his brows but didn’t correct him. His answer was close enough.

“Which nation is known for having the strongest elements?”

Gwenivere rolled her eyes. She thought she was five again as Garron questioned her brother.

“Um . . .” Aden looked at her for help, and she obliged by tapping the Amulet on her chest with a wink. He squinted, confused, before piecing her hint together and smiling triumphantly. “Eve!” he answered. “The Land Across the Sea!”

“Correct, though perhaps next time you shan’t have assistance.”

Gwenivere met the chastising look she knew was coming, smiling coolly as the Golden Knight shook his head.

Gwenivere opened her mouth to tease him but stopped when she noticed Sir Charles and Sir Nicolas urging their mounts hurriedly up ahead. The trio beside her joined in her worried glance, a heaving cough breaking through the cantering of their horses’ trots. The princess panicked as she realized the sickly sounds were coming from her father. She didn’t wait for the Golden Knight’s approval as she hastily quickened her mare’s pace.

The cough had become violent. Gwenivere tensed as her father’s empty hacks morphed into harsh, forceful barks. His hand rushed from its civil place in front of his mouth to a clenched grip against his chest. With no command to steady his still trotting mount, he slowly began to lean to the side, his body bending more and more.

He’s going to fall, Gwenivere realized. *He’s going to—*

He collapsed from his saddle, landing with a heavy thud on the ground.

“Father!” Gwenivere’s yell was accompanied by a quick dismount, and she hastily ran to the king’s side. Aden leaped from his horse and ran forward as well, attempting to follow her, but Garron’s swift hand was there to hold him back.

To fall off of one’s horse was a great embarrassment, a dreadfully belittling act to occur in front of so many dutiful men. Gwenivere knew Gerard was loved by his knights, though, and none in that moment thought shame upon him. They only appeared to want insight on his wellbeing, each inching forward to help but halting as Gwenivere blocked their way.

“I’m fine, really,” Gerard insisted, waving his hands as his cough ceased. “It seems I’ve forgotten how to breathe in my old age!” The men around him laughed hesitantly, uncertain relief washing over them as the king began to rise. He patted Gwenivere’s shoulder and smiled, then headed back to his now still horse.

“Father, if you are not in good health, we should turn back around.” Gwenivere followed behind him, careful to keep her words quiet and her voice low. The knights were already beginning to settle back into their places, likely too far to hear her words, but she heeded caution nonetheless. It would only do her father’s image more harm to have her questioning overheard.

“Really darling, I’m fine.” Gerard cupped her face in his hand and smiled at her again. Quickly he kissed her on the forehead, turning himself back to his horse and hoisting himself into the saddle. Gwenivere’s breath caught as she noticed small specks of blood covering his sleeve.

“Your tunic, it has—”

“Enough Gwenivere,” he interrupted firmly. “Go back to your mare and ride.”

The princess stood still for a moment, her turquoise eyes glaring. Her father wasn’t in good health; she knew he wasn’t,

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his weariness evident in the way he held his shoulders with lingering fear. She readied herself, told herself to defy him in that moment would be to exert sensibility, but such an opportunity wouldn't come. The Golden Knight was already there, pulling her gently away.

Gwenivere looked down, her father already straying from their standstill. Cursing her weakness, she took the reins Garron held out to her, not bothering to look him in the eye as she returned to her saddle.

It's not at all strange for you to question the forbidding of marriage between Xenith and Mesidia. There is much behind the history of the decision, and there are many different aspects that come into play. Let us for now say the root of the decision lies in the power of the Artifacts.

From a letter between Dorian Cliffborne and Prince
Abaddon Haroldson

CHAPTER 5

ROLAND



“Where’s that bloody wench?”

Roland chuckled as Peter glanced around, eyes darting about. The young noble sat atop his horse and scratched his head, shaking it in frustration before at last reaching for the wineskin in his satchel.

“Are you mad?” Elizabeth scolded, snatching the leather pouch. Peter scoffed, throwing his hands up in protest.

“What? It’s just a bit of juice is all.”

“I’ll be damned if that’s juice!” She unscrewed the top rapidly and brought her nose down to smell the contents. Based on the way her face scrunched, it would seem it wasn’t juice.

“That’s enough,” William said. He took the wineskin from his sister and placed it in his own satchel. “And get off your horse, Peter, for the Light’s sake. We haven’t even said our goodbyes.”

“Not true. I said all mine this morning.”

“No you didn’t.”

“Yes I did.”

Roland smiled as he approached his cousins, unable to hide his amusement at their constant bickering. He knew he should be more concerned about Peter’s drinking, and William’s for that matter, but for now he would just relish in the humor it produced. He turned toward the ambassador beside him.

“How long till they notice us?”

Dorian chuckled and shrugged. As if sensing they were being talked about, Elizabeth looked over and spotted them.

“Oh, hello!” She quickly lifted her hand and smacked her squabbling brothers. William stood tall, politely nodding to Roland and Dorian, while Peter continued to stay on his horse.

Dorian smiled, tapping Roland’s shoulder as he whispered, “Wish me luck,” and made his way to join the trio. The prince laughed and walked behind him, then curled his finger and beckoned Elizabeth over.

“Me?” she mouthed, pointing at her chest. Roland nodded, the parchment beneath his cloak held firmly in his grasp. He took in a heavy breath as his cousin approached, unsure still if he would go through with his plan.

Elizabeth was standing before him before he was truly certain.

“Hello, Roland.” Her voice was sweet and pleasant. Roland reached one arm around her and hugged her tightly, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

“You know you’ve always been my favorite, yes?” He gestured to her brothers, and she giggled quietly.

“Of course I am. I’m the only one who’s ever sober enough to remember the conversations we have.”

Roland laughed, his breath clouding in front of him from the chill of the morning. He hardly felt it, hardly noticed the way it bit at his ears and nose or evoked shameless tears in his eyes. He felt the parchment under his cloak and nothing else, the smooth seal of the Mesidian leaf protruding from its even surface. Elizabeth continued to smile, too kind to question his silence. She

stood shivering as the sun refused to warm her little bones.

“I have a favor to ask,” he said finally. He revealed the parchment, his lungs filling with another deep breath before he placed the paper in her hand. She glanced down at it, biting her lip, but remained quiet.

“It’s a letter, to the Lady Gwenivere. I know it’s been ordered to keep such things from her, but I promise I only wrote to assure her of Mesidia’s allegiance. When the day comes for such concerns.”

It was treason, what he asked of her, his words to Gwenivere forbidden by both Pierre and Gerard. Elizabeth had every right to refuse, had every right to tell him she would not partake in such an act. Instead she just smiled and bobbed her head with reassurance.

“Of course, Roland.” She took the envelope, then placed it in the satchel at her side. Grabbing the edges of her skirts, she gave him a jesting curtsy, then rose back up and kissed his cheek. He pulled her close and squeezed her tightly, noting how her small body shook. He hoped it was simply from the cold morning.

“My, my, Elizabeth, your own cousin?” a voice called.

Roland and Elizabeth pulled away from each another, both turning to find Natalia Barie approaching.

“I must say, I hadn’t thought incest within your capabilities,” she said. “I have to admit, though, it does explain a lot.”

She smiled coyly and gestured toward Peter, who—still atop his stallion—struggled to keep it from turning in circles.

Elizabeth’s cheeks colored. “I was just saying goodbye.”

Natalia continued to smirk. With Peter cursing like a drunk at his horse, Elizabeth didn’t have much to say. She gave Roland one last look, her round eyes conspiratorial, then made her way back to her own horse.

“You really can’t be pleasant for even a moment, can you?” Roland asked.

Natalia shrugged irrationally bare shoulders, waving the query off.

“Did you know our fathers spoke recently?” she asked.

Roland frowned. Her question seemed genuine and amicable, and her questions were never genuine and amicable.

“It’s true,” she went on. “They were meeting with the leaders of your Elite. My father was discussing something with yours he thought important enough to cast aside our families’ rivalries for. Don’t bother asking what they discussed. I wasn’t able to pry that out of him. Just know that, regardless of what impressions your family might have of my father, he is indeed a decent man. My mother, perhaps not, but my father cares a great deal for this kingdom. Somewhere my ancestors are cursing him, no doubt, but be careful, and don’t waste his extended hand. Whatever he felt worth mentioning, it more than likely involves all of us.”

Roland continued to stand silent. It was almost too difficult to believe the cold duchess-heir would show any form of camaraderie. Her loyalty was to her Victorian lineage, and she always pinned Pierre and Rosalie as the enemies.

If he knew something that endangered their people, though, wouldn’t he share that with her? Mesidia would always come before petty attempts at the throne. He could certainly believe her capable of that mindset as well.

“Thank you, Natalia. I shall.” He nodded his head respectfully. “And . . . the same to you.”

She tilted her head. “Hard for you to say it, isn’t it?” She breathed into her hands, brushing them together before sliding on a pair of riding gloves. “Don’t think this makes us allies, Prince. If you will not have me for a wife, you should still consider me an enemy.”

“I would think of you as such regardless.”

Natalia laughed, genuinely, the sound a much more pleasant one than what usually came from her. Its showing nature was

gone as quickly as it had come.

“Dravian Valcor, Rellor Bordinsua, Odin Iceborne, and Markeem the Mute,” she said, listing off names of his father’s Elite. “They’re all accompanying the al’Murtaghs and Dorian and me until we part ways at the Forest of Fiends. Before that, I shan’t need to be careful—your father’s Elite will be careful enough for all of us.”

She grinned again and blew him a kiss. Coming from her, the cloudy breath it spawned seemed fitting.

Roland stood motionless as Natalia grabbed her stallion’s reins and gestured behind them. From the gates of Stonewall Castle came the troop of Elite, the finely trained men and women who wielded no *touched* swords and bore no *touched* shields. At their head rode a dark-haired man, the only one among them to adorn armor. The garb was not meant as a defense but merely a means to distinguish him from the rest. Roland knew him as Dravian Valcor, the Inquisitor and leader of the Elite. He nodded to Dravian as he approached, and Dravian nodded back, but gave no other respecting gestures. He met Roland with a cold stare, then led his soldiers toward Natalia, Dorian, and the al’Murtagh siblings.

Roland gave one last look to the duchess-heir, her eyes filled with knowing warning, and resigned himself to the castle. If Natalia had been telling the truth, he’d need to find out what her father had told his own, and why some of their best soldiers had just been sent away.



PEACE AND TURMOIL

There are a great many kinds of serpent fiends throughout the deserts of the East.

An excerpt from *Fire and Fiends*

CHAPTER 6

DIE TRICH



Dietrich awoke in the same manner he had the days prior—overheated and covered in sweat. The desert sun came like a wave over the chill of night, the brightness blinding. He looked up to his horse, the stallion smug as it accepted the heat it'd been bred for, no sweat trickling from its brow as it did Dietrich's own. Envious, he wiped his forehead and ripped a piece of cloth from his threadbare blanket, wrapping it against his head in an effort to keep his eyes free of sweat. A few adjustments granted him comfort, but eventually he pulled the hood of his cloak up for more cover.

It hadn't even been that many moons since he'd left Sadie's capital, but he already hated this quest.

He looked out over the dunes, his eyes still at war with the light in their efforts to settle. When they did, his cracked lips

gave way to a smile, the pain of their splitting a small deterrence to the sight ahead of him.

“See there, Zar.” He pointed toward the mountains ahead of them. “A day’s ride, two at most.”

The horse continued to stand steady, indifferent to the merriment that overcame his master. Dietrich patted him roughly in triumph and cast his squinting eyes at the wondrous heights that towered beyond. Centuries had marked the Dividing Wall’s mountains, centuries still unseeingly altering their paths, their immovable conviction distorted by the dancing of the heat’s waves.

The prince packed his belongings quickly, a newfound energy pulsing through him. Just within the mountains’ depths the landscape would change. Rocky, jagged cliffs would be replaced by rolling hills and lush forests. Leaves would be turning colors and ice, cold and unbearably harsh, would be melting from peaks and plummeting into streams.

The prince hoisted himself onto his stallion and tried not to create the vivid musings in the mirages of the sands. Excited, he rallied himself and the horse onwards. Zar, who usually complied, stood locked in place.

“Zar, friend, come now, we must make haste. Go!”

He urged the stallion forward again, kicking his heels and clicking his tongue. The mount didn’t obey.

Sighing, Dietrich decided Zar must have grown fatigued from carrying his weight after so many days. He patted him on the neck and began to dismount.

Sensing his master’s return to the ground, the stallion turned toward familiar sands. Dietrich was barely still on as Zar began running.

“Whoa whoa whoa, settle down!” Dietrich tried to turn the horse back, but the stallion wouldn’t listen.

Defiantly, he erupted into a frantic gallop.

“Zar, stop!” Dietrich yanked against the reins, desperately

attempting to get his mount under control. The horse fought against him, thrashing his head. Not knowing what else to do, Dietrich *called* a gust of wind, using it to force Zar back.

When they'd turned back around, Dietrich at last caught sight of what Zar had sensed.

A fiend.

Motionless, and praying his horse would keep still, Dietrich watched the massive serpent emerge from the sands. Its body was covered in golden scales, and seven long, sharp tails unwound from its back. Lowering himself against Zar, Dietrich tried to comfort him, the horse's hooves treading fearfully in place.

He'd seen three – and four-tailed serpents, even a five-tailed serpent once, but never a seven-tailed. Just his luck he'd find one during his venture to Xenith. The serpent, at least five times larger than Zar, didn't appear to have seen them yet, perhaps not even heard them. Slowly, carefully, Dietrich began guiding Zar onward, his eyes never leaving the fiend as they attempted to slip away.

Its tongue flickered. Its head twitched.

It knew they were there.

Dietrich waited. He'd fought his fair share of fiends before. The alias he portrayed in Yeltaire Veen had granted him more than enough encounters with the creatures outside the capital's walls. Anything from teradacts to cora'cahn had fallen victim to him, but an encounter with a seven-tailed serpent had not yet made his list. Accounts of the serpent family were all classified together in *Fire and Fiends*, the Holy Book for fiend hunters, but such a lumped categorizing was highly unhelpful. Even a four-tailed differed greatly in ability than a five, and which elements proved useful and which proved useless were not fleshed out.

Uncertain which tactic would be best to follow, Dietrich kept the expanse between him and the hissing seven-tailed

serpent large, searching through the *auroras* in his mind.

Red, red, red, he thought, reaching out to the blazing flashes. They were there, crackling brightly within his mind. He rallied them together, his focus strong as he brought them to life in his hands. With a thrust he cast the flames forward, a whirlwind of fire burning against the fiend's scales.

His energy drained, but the serpent reeled its head at the attack. An ear-piercing shriek escaped its throat.

Dietrich smiled in triumph and gathered his *auroras* again. Before he released them, he caught sight of the first wave dimming. The flames were sinking and retreating into the serpent's body, making it glow red. Its scales absorbed the fire until nothing remained of Dietrich's attack. The menacing slits of the serpent's eyes now also burned a reddened hue, hungry, it seemed, for Dietrich's blood.

"Go!" he yelled, leaning low against Zar's back. The fiend was much faster than the mount, its body gaining ground at an alarming rate.

The prince pinned his legs down firmly. With one hand clutching tightly against the reins, he freed the other. He began *calling* his crossbow, trying to imagine the weapon as he and his stallion raced against the fiend. He could see it in his mind, feel the infinite bolts that took aim within its grips, the perfect weight forming itself into existence. When its structure was complete, the prince sent his and Zar's path at an angle, took aim, and fired.

The first bolt stuck into the fiend's neck. The tip pierced through the beaming scales as the creature neared them. It reeled back, another shrill call stabbing through the air as Dietrich steadied his grip and released again. The fiend slowed its retreat, bolt after bolt holding true.

As Dietrich readied another shot, a wall of fire formed in their path and forced Zar to halt.

The sudden stop sent the stallion on its back legs and

Dietrich to the sands. He grimaced and lost focus. His cross-bow faded as he clutched his now-aching stomach. Weaponless and exposed, the serpent slithered toward him.

Dietrich dodged the first of the serpent's tails, but another struck where the first had failed. He rolled quickly to his side, one tail shredding through his cloak. He managed to get to his feet, then caught sight of Zar.

The horse was trapped in one of the serpent's tails. Faintly, through the cloud of dust and sand, Dietrich could make out the muscles of the tail tightening.

"No!" He snatched a blue-white *aurora* from his mind and cast out a sheet of ice. It'd been an instinctive *call*, but it proved resourceful as it cut through the serpent's tail. Writhing, the serpent retreated. Its wall of fire vanished.

Dietrich knew he could take it then, knew he could slay it if he advanced. Instead, his feet foolishly went to his steed.

He unwound the severed tail that lay wrapped around Zar's body. The horse whinnied and trotted helplessly, but Dietrich managed to get it freed. He summoned more *auroras*, creating a barricade of ice to protect them.

The defense wouldn't last long. Already Dietrich could feel it draining him. He released one side of it, the other still blocking the fiend out, and smacked Zar harshly against the back.

"Flee!" he yelled, striking his horse again. It whinnied and kicked its legs in protest, refusing to leave his side. Dietrich panted as his elements continued to drain him.

"Zar, go!"

The horse snorted, but at last ran. When he was far enough away, Dietrich turned toward the serpent. He *called* a sword into his grasp and a sturdy, circular shield. He released his melting barricade and revealed himself exposed to the beast, weak and alone.

The serpent propped itself up, flicking its slit tongue. Dietrich stood unfaltering, waiting for the creature to strike as

each of its remaining tails encircled him.

Before he could blink, the bladed tails were upon him.

He rolled and pivoted, narrowly avoiding being slashed and stabbed. If his feet failed him, his shield was there. If his defense proved futile, he swung his sword. He would err eventually, he knew, the rapidity of his guard already waning. He searched again for his clear *auroras*. Summoning what small amount he could, he cast it out, a narrow whirlwind thrusting against the blade-like tails.

Seeing the fiend reel back from the element, Dietrich dashed toward it. He lifted his sword, fighting to preserve his blade, and plunged it toward the serpent's body. With a heavy strike, he severed its neck.

A single tail, errant and unyielding, pierced through his uncovered shoulder.

With thick adrenaline pulsing through him, Dietrich grabbed hold of the tail and ripped it out. The serpent's body, headless now, swayed slightly. After a moment it fell to the sand.

Dietrich tossed aside the tail he held, well aware that the pain of his wound had yet to reveal itself. There was too much energy in him still, too much thrill from the fight. He refused to look down at his injury, afraid it might worsen somehow if he did. Instead he stood back up, only then realizing he'd collapsed to his knees, and whistled between bloodied fingers for his stallion's return.

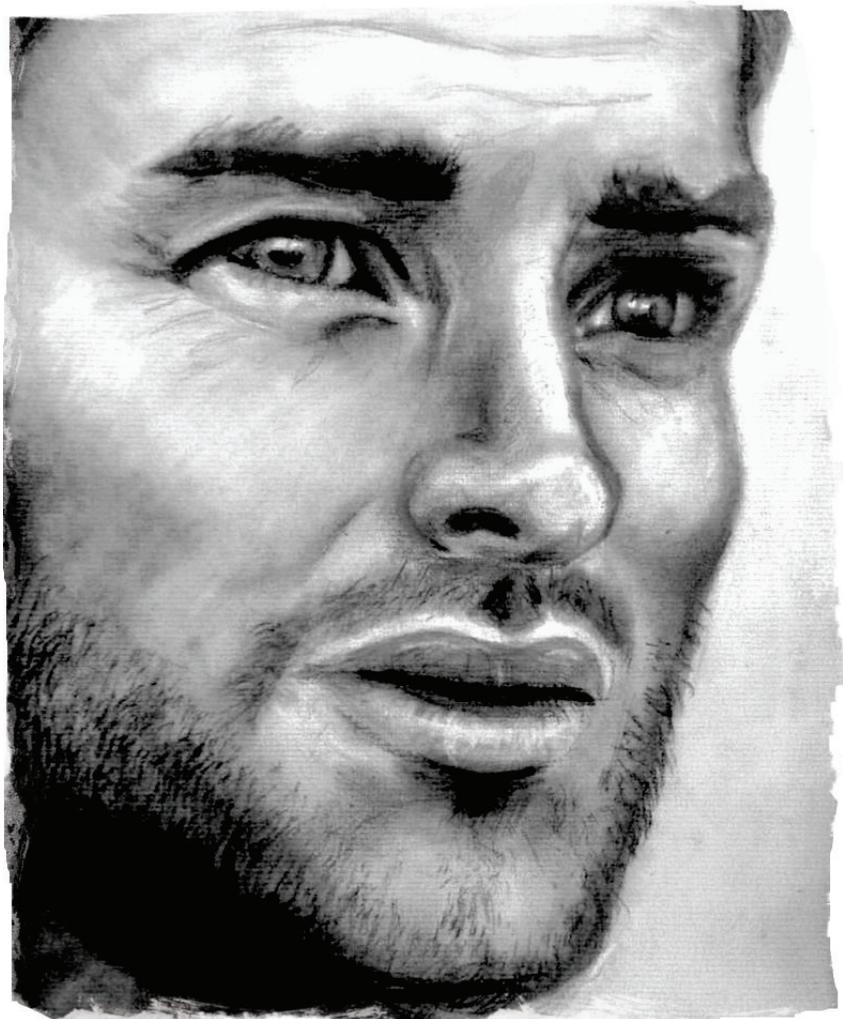
"Zar!" he yelled, trudging toward where he'd cast the horse away. As he lifted his feet, the sand seemed to grow deeper, each step sinking farther and farther than the steps before. He tried to keep his legs moving, tried to continue his triumphant trek, but his muscles would move no more. He once again fell to the ground, the pain in his shoulder at last beginning to surface.

"Zar," he muttered weakly. His vision began to blur, his eyes finally traveling down to inspect his wound. Small specks of black were all he could see. He closed his eyes then, grateful

his tattered cloak kept the burning sands from searing his skin, and allowed himself to fall into the seductive call of slumber.

A mild nudging interrupted his attempt at rest. The darkness faded as the light of the day brightened once more. Dietrich inhaled deeply, his focus lost, something reflexive forcing his eyes to open. Through his dim sight he could see the black outline of his stallion, the wetness of its nose waking him from his feeble state. Energy sparked through him, his muscles strengthened as he rose back to his feet. He leaned against his devoted companion, his hands shaking as he hoisted himself onto its back.

“Ride,” he whispered. Faithfully, the loyal horse obeyed.



Roland Laighless

At times Roland feels more like a brother to me than my own brothers. Perhaps it's just that I wish he were my brother, as I love him dearly. He's a good man, and an honest one. He's not boastful, despite being a Guardian, and he's the only man of noble birth I've met who has a way of being liked by anyone.

He is destined for great things. And I don't believe that solely because he's my cousin.

From the sketchbook of Elizabeth al'Murtagh

CHAPTER 7

ROLAND



“They say this tapestry belonged to Daniella Corrins, my ancestor, and hung in Castle Goddjvek before it was sacked.” Roland examined the tapestry he stood before, his hands behind his back.

“My great grandmother said her great grandmother had found a servant who had stolen this when the castle was being destroyed, a man by the name of Redfroi, who was hoping he could sell it and make a fortune off of it. Instead, my great grandmother’s great grandmother and Redfroi fell in love, and he gave her the tapestry as a wedding gift. It is said he’s the part of my lineage where the Laighless name comes from. Apparently he was ‘without law’ because of his thieving ways.”

Roland paused from his tale and glanced over at the quiet Elite beside him. He waited for the man to respond, give some kind of nod or noise of acknowledgement, but his expression continued to stay hard and squinting as he stared at the tapestry.

“What do you think, Merlin?” Roland asked. The man

always seemed to know something about everything, when he actually spoke, though such a thing was always a rare and interesting occurrence. The prince was genuinely curious what the soldier thought of his lineage's legend.

"I think this Redfroi fellow was a great liar," Merlin answered. Roland raised a brow, surprised the man didn't show more respect to his blood's past. It didn't make a difference if he did. Merlin was a good soldier; he followed orders, and he executed them well. That was all he really needed to do.

"Why's that?" he asked.

"When Castle Goddjevok was sacked, it was burned," Merlin answered. "The ruins are still black from the ashes, and the fields around where it once stood still don't grow trees, only thick blades of wheat-grass. Do you really mean to tell me that Redfroi managed to get this tapestry out of the burning castle without even a bit of soot marking its face?"

The Elite didn't laugh, not aloud, but the peculiar twinkle in his eyes meant he thought of something amusing. The look was practically a guffaw for the reserved man.

"What?" Roland pressed.

"Perhaps Laighless shouldn't have been his name," Merlin said. His mouth twitched at a grin. "Perhaps it should've been Honorless."

Roland cocked his head as the soldier stood expectant.

"Because he was without—"

"I understood, Merlin, thank you."

"You're most welcome."

Roland took a few more moments to admire and ponder the tapestry—and ignore his Elite's uninspiring brand of humor—before at last walking away. His father had said the night before that he wished to speak with him and Merlin when the sun rose. What he wished to speak of Roland didn't know, but he'd tossed and turned throughout the night pondering what Pierre wished to share.

The warning Natalia had given before her departure still rang clearly in Roland's mind. The idea that her father, Bernard, had cast aside their families' feuding bloodlines to share counsel with his own father was a strange and terrifying thought. What could be so awful that the duke would be willing to abandon his pride for? What could have happened for him to extend an aiding hand?

Roland and Merlin made their way to the center room of the castle. The War Room, as it was called, was a room with no windows or doors save the one they walked through. Pierre was there, his body looming over the room's large stone table. Torches along the walls flickered shadows along his weathered face.

He hardly glanced up as Merlin and Roland entered.

"I believe I asked you to be here when the sun rose." Pierre finally abandoned what he was examining on the table, his gaze now resting scornfully on Roland. "The sun has not yet risen."

Roland smiled, if only to keep from cursing.

"You're right, Father. I apologize." His voice held little sincerity, but the glare the king shot him was not expanded on further. Instead Pierre stepped away from the table and extended his arm out toward it, a set of maps revealing themselves from under his shadow. Merlin crossed his arms beneath his chest, resting his dark eyes where the king pointed. Roland looked too, but didn't take much interest in what he saw. Two of the maps were of Mesidia, and one of the entire continent, but besides a few markings that had been etched into each, none looked to be anything peculiar. Roland tried to remain patient, the drama of his father's actions making him anxious.

"I've sent Dravian Valcor and his soldiers to our sister nation in Riverdee," Pierre said, tracing his finger along the map of the continent. The nation he spoke of, Riverdee, rested on the coast, more a neighboring nation to Xenith than Mesidia. The easternmost point of the sea-trading kingdom did extend

up to Mesidia's southern border, though, the chunk of land called the Forest of Fiends. It was dense with coastal trees and mighty mountains, and despite never having been there himself, Roland knew it was filled with fiends.

"Bernard spoke with me," Pierre continued, "two nights before the al'Murtaghs, Natalia, and Dorian left. He told me the reason the Duchess Yvaine hadn't accompanied him to Stonewall was because she'd fled to aid the rebels. According to him, the Victorians are planning to attack Riverdee soon."

Roland cursed. Natalia was certainly unpleasant, but her mother was far worse. He'd always suspected she was plotting more than just slanders.

"Why attack Riverdee?" Merlin asked. "Why would it matter to us? The nation is good for trade, but Mesidia has allies in other places. Riverdee as well. Even if the rebels are successful in an attack, there are a handful of nations that would come to her defense."

"Xenith certainly would," Roland added. He glanced at the map again. "Riverdee is the only nation on the entire continent that has no enemies. If someone attacks it, as Merlin said, surely other nations would intervene."

Pierre placed a firm finger against Riverdee's place on the map. "Yes, but not until *after* an attack has occurred. As her ally, Mesidia can't just sit back while innocent people die. Riverdee is good to the world, one of the few nations that is. Someone has to rise up to protect her."

Roland was about to protest again, insist that it was foolish to split their army over a rumor, but Merlin's voice chimed in first.

"It's a trap," he said. Pierre glared at the soldier, a glare fierce enough to turn a man to stone, and Merlin quietly added, "Milord."

"I agree," Pierre said, "but even if it is, half of our soldiers in Stonewall and half in Riverdee are still enough to defend

us against a rallying of rebels. The Elite are the highest trained element wielders in Abra'am. The Victorians are uneducated farmers and stable hands who get worked up by rumors and lies. Besides, Stonewall has withstood countless attacks before. She never fell during the War of Fire, and she won't fall now. Those are chances I would bet on."

Merlin chewed on his lip and Roland sighed, neither man having much retaliation. It was true what Pierre said of the rebels. They were mostly ignorant and poor, a vast majority of them only having their qualms to unite them. No leader had ever emerged from their ranks. No one rose up to guide them with strategic tact. They really only held influence over a small plot of land to the south, and even that wasn't much to worry them.

Roland wondered how many of the rebels even knew how to *call* a weapon or draw from their *auroras* to cast elements. All he could imagine were straw-chomping men, pitchforks in hand, standing outside Stonewall's fortress as they pondered how to get in.

And all because they felt Natalia's ancestors should've been given the Dagger and the throne instead of Roland's.

"Why would they bother attacking Riverdee at all?" he asked. "If it would bring about the fury of the entire continent, shouldn't we be . . . glad, they are plotting this? After all, there are some nations who wish the Barie family were in power. Perhaps this would be the perfect opportunity to show them we deserve to rule."

Pierre's lips thinned. "So you propose we just let innocent people die? You propose we let the Victorians continue their ruse because it's convenient for the Laighless name?"

"No," Roland answered, forcing down frustration. "I'm trying to agree with you. Aiding Riverdee's people *would* be the right choice. I'm just pointing out that there has to be more to this, more than just the possibility of an attack on

Riverdee or a trap for us. The Duchess Yvaine is too smart a woman to plan something so foolish.”

Merlin nodded his agreement.

“I believe that as well,” Pierre said. He rested his weight against a chair beside him, his blue eyes narrowing as he slowly shook his head. “In all the years we’ve held the throne, there has never been anyone as deceitful and malicious as Yvaine. Know that I know this, Roland, for it’s the very reason I gave you the Dagger of Eve instead of Dorian. Blood doesn’t define my heirs. Dorian is my son, and he would’ve made a fine king. But Natalia is Yvaine’s daughter, to her very core, and Dorian fell victim to her seduction when he named her his betrothed. Had I given him the Dagger, I would’ve been handing our kingdom over to her.”

Roland shifted his weight. His father had never said those things to him before. It felt strange to finally hear it, especially with Merlin standing next to them.

“You did what was necessary,” he said quietly. He watched as Pierre nodded, surprised at the regret in his gaze.

“So,” Merlin said, rubbing his chin, “what do you think the duchess is plotting? What’s her purpose in splitting our men if she can’t take advantage of it?”

Pierre’s jaw moved slightly as he ground his teeth. “That’s what I want you to find out.”

He reached down to the maps on the table, settling on one and pressing down its corners. The ends seemed eager to roll themselves back into a scroll.

“Bernard said Yvaine is hiding in the old castle ruins in the heart of the rebel lands. He said he’s followed her before and believes she meets with some of her allies there. Who those allies are, he wasn’t sure, but he said he didn’t think they were Mesidian. He said they looked too pale and had too dark of hair.”

“Didn’t think anyone got paler than us,” Roland said jestingly. Merlin and Pierre just stared at him, unamused.

“Yendorians have dark hair,” Pierre continued. “And they’ve always seemed eager to be involved in our politics. I don’t think it could be them, though. Their skin is too olive to be considered pale.”

“Agreed,” Merlin said. He stared at the maps, noting the different countries that pressed against Mesidia’s borders.

“It certainly couldn’t be the Arctic tribes,” Pierre continued. “Their hair is white and their skin is black. Exactly the opposite of what Bernard described.”

“Theatia’s people aren’t all that pale either,” Roland added. His own hand now settled against his chin, his face scrunching as he tried to think who the mysterious allies of their enemy could be.

“Regardless,” Pierre said, lifting his hand, “exactly who they are is not our most pressing concern. What we need to know is if Yvaine is indeed plotting something against us, and, if so, what that might be. Bernard said he believes Yvaine is staying in the castle ruins now, and that, if haste can be made, perhaps we can catch her in her deceit. I would trust this task to our soldiers, but now that they’re split, I can’t risk dividing them any further. Two men, though, two men I trust—perhaps they could get through the rebel land unnoticed.”

Roland’s head rose and his eyes widened. He looked to his father, then to Merlin, then back to his father again.

“You mean to send us? Just us?”

The words came out excitedly. He hadn’t meant for them to; he knew what Pierre was asking was dangerous, and he knew it was serious. Still, the idea of sneaking through Mesidia’s ruins and capturing the duchess in her deceit seemed quite enticing.

“Aye, Roland,” Pierre said. He looked at him, the corners of his mouth turning, and clasped him on the shoulder. “Aye.”

Smiling, Roland glanced down. He’d have to start paying attention to the maps his father had set out.



A few hours later, Roland and Merlin collected the notes they'd taken from Pierre and made to leave. It'd been a productive conversation, and a telling one of what Pierre must have been like back during the War of Fire. Roland had only ever known his father in times of peace, but he'd heard stories. Pierre Laighless, according to most older nobles, was not a man to make enemies with.

"Roland," Pierre called. "Stay back a moment. I wish to speak with you alone."

The prince sighed, nearly to the door. He was eager to be on his way, but beyond that, he was tired of being in the War Room. It made his eyes weary from the dark, and his skin slick with sweat.

He didn't admit any of that aloud, though. He merely nodded and waited for Merlin to leave.

"I want you to know that I'll send another if you wish it," Pierre said. "Say the word and you'll stay."

Roland stood silent, his mouth agape for a moment before the taste of soot rested on his tongue. *Merlin was right*, he decided, sealing his lips. *There's no way the tapestry could have come out of the burning castle unscathed.*

"I wish no such thing, Father. I'm honored to be assigned this task."

Pierre's shoulders sank. He looked down and pinched the bridge of his nose before rubbing his temple.

"All right. I think that's a fine choice." He brought his gaze back up, the piercing blue of his eyes almost orange as the flames glowed against them. "It's a dangerous mission, what I ask of you, and one that could risk you being captured

by the very people who wish us dethroned. These are people without honor, without merit, and they will kill you if they have the chance.”

“I know, I—”

“Hush Roland, listen.” The king raised his hand for silence, then slowly brought it back down. “We can’t allow the Dagger to be in the rebels’ hands. I need you to leave it here, in case you’re caught. Don’t take this as an assumption that you’ll fail, I just . . .”

Roland stepped forward, swiftly reaching down as his father’s voice trailed off. He removed the Dagger from its sheath against his thigh, his leg instantly feeling lighter.

“Don’t fret, Father,” he said, trying to sound reassuring. “The rebels won’t capture us.”

Pierre nodded, reaching out and taking the Dagger. Roland tried to meet his father’s eyes, hoping to see confidence in them, but Pierre just stared absently.

He didn’t seem convinced.

There is much debate on when the Elite were first established. Some believe they date back to the breaking of Mesidia, when the son of Daniella Corrins needed protection against the Victorians. Others believe they should be credited to King Pierre and the War of Fire, as Mesidian soldiers were incompetent with calling when compared to the soldiers of Concord and Tiador. Thus they had to master the art in order to turn the tides of war. As King Pierre himself was not an expert in calling, he captured those who were best with the skill among his enemies' ranks and forced them to teach his soldiers.

Mesidian Historian

CHAPTER 8

ELIZABETH



Riding through the rainy hills of Mesidia had proven dreadfully dull. The land was beautiful in the fall cycle, the skies a constant shade of grey against the falling leaves and darkening grasses, but it was a sight Elizabeth saw far too often. Sharing the blood of a king made her and her brothers constantly called upon for local endeavors, each season often frequented by saddle-sore bums and achy backs.

Continental affairs, however, were few and far between.

The titles she and her brothers held—or, rather, the title their *uncle* held—did little to grant them worth in the eyes of most nobles. It didn't help that Elizabeth's mother was her relation to Pierre, and thus her surname was that of her father's. Al'Murtagh was a poor man's name, and common, images of fiddle playing, pale-skinned halfwits coming to most people's minds when they heard it. Elizabeth wanted to bring it honor, prove the worth of her beloved mother Catherine

and her witty father Joel, but her brothers Peter and William always seemed to diminish any good deeds she managed to accomplish. She glanced up from her sketchpad and watched them, both singing loudly as they drank with her uncle's Elite soldiers around the campfire. Peter's tunic was already stained red from all the wine he'd spilled.

Elizabeth might have been more bothered by the act if she wasn't so distracted by Natalia's dancing. The duchess-heir swayed her hips and flung her hair to the song the soldiers were singing, her clothes far too revealing for the cold of the coming night. She had taken off her shoes, her bare feet covered with dark soil, and when the song ended she fell into one of the men's laps. She laughed and stroked his chin, her slender fingers pointing and beckoning for him to wash the dirt away from her skin.

Peter and William banged their mugs together and began their pitchy singing again, neither of them seeming to notice how terribly Natalia acted. Elizabeth suppressed her annoyance, insisting to herself that it was only her brothers' nature to be so oblivious.

I'm just holding a grudge. She turned her attention to Ambassador Dorian, who sat quietly by the campfire. He was sitting near the finest of the Elite's men, Rellor Bordinsua to his left and Odin Iceborne to his right, but he still appeared lonely as his lips remained sealed. She looked to Natalia again, watching as the beautiful woman leaned in and whispered in the soldier's ear whose lap she sat on.

I cannot blame Dorian for being reserved, she thought. I would be quiet too if my former betrothed whored about like a bar wench . . . That was cruel of me. Forgive me, Light. I don't mean such things.

Elizabeth was startled suddenly as a thud of footsteps sounded beside her. She clutched her drawings to her chest and looked up, surprised when the dark eyes of a man met

her own. She recognized him as Dravian Valcor, the Inquisitor and leader of the Elite, the soldier supposedly known for his ability to glean truth from any captive. The heaviness in his stance, and the hard way his jaw was set, did little to dispute the reputation.

Peter and William had told her stories of the man, recalled gruesome tales that were too bloody for her to bear. She tried not to shudder as he sat down a few feet to her side, his scarred hands opening up the binding of a large book. When his fingers flipped the pages, Elizabeth could hear his calluses scrape against them.

"I can move if you'd like," he said, eyeing his story. "I don't have to sit here."

Elizabeth knew Dravian was speaking to her, but still she asked, "Away from me?"

She felt dull as soon as the words escaped her lips. The soldier glanced up from his book with a nod and what she assumed was a smile. She was not entirely sure, though. His mouth only curled up a little, and only on the left side. For all she could tell, the right side—unseen from the position he sat in—still looked hard and foreboding.

"You can sit wherever you please." She tried to sound sincere as she gave her statement, but she couldn't help feeling she'd belittled his stature. *Light, what a snob I must seem. But goodness, he is frightening.*

"I know I frighten you," he said, as if knowing her thoughts. "Rest assured, my book will read the same here as it would over there, or there, or there." He lifted his dark-haired head toward different directions around them. "Not over there, though. The story would be utter nonsense over there."

Elizabeth furrowed her brow until that half smile grew larger, the soldier's grey-blue eyes looking to her. His head moved too, revealing the other side of his face. It seemed to be grinning as well.

He's jesting, she realized, forcing a smile to her lips. *Perhaps I was wrong to judge him. What do my brothers know, anyway?*

"So," she started, pointing a finger to where he'd gestured, "what would be wrong with your book over there? That is the eastern part of the camp. Perhaps the book would suddenly be in Prianthian?"

The Elite raised his hand and waved it dismissively.

"No, no, it has nothing to do with direction, and it's far more difficult a language than that."

"Ah, Concordian? Alivadian?" She felt herself relaxing as she played along with his jest. "I've heard Alivadian is very hard to learn. The same word can mean five different things depending on how high or low your voice is when you say it."

He pursed his lips in thought. She realized then it wasn't his smile that was crooked, but his nose, likely broken from his years as an Elite.

"Well," he started, "I suppose I don't know those languages, but I'd reckon the Old Evean tongue would be the most difficult to translate. And that's what my book would be if I sat over there. Old Evean." He paused, his head shaking with feigned dismay. "I'm afraid I don't read a lick of it."

Elizabeth laughed and nodded, responding with, "I suppose you can sit here then," as she eased her sketchpad back against her knees. She looked up at the campfire, the loud, jolly singing of her brothers having faded as Peter began to vomit. William patted him on the back and guided him away from flames, but his lips held a mischievous grin. The rest of the soldiers guffawed hysterically at her younger brother's expense.

I will never understand men, Elizabeth decided. She blushed as Dravian turned toward her, the stifled smile on his face and a raised brow revealing she'd spoken the words aloud.

"I can fill you in a little," he said. "I know what motivates a great deal of those men."

“All right,” she said, anxious to be rid of her embarrassment. She gestured toward the men near the campfire. “That one, with the reddish-blond hair sitting beside the ambassador. His name is Rellor, yes?”

Dravian’s jaw twitched slightly. “Indeed. Rellor is the second youngest of the Elites’ leaders. He’s my second when we take prisoners captive, and he . . . delights, in what he does.”

Elizabeth felt a chill run down her spine as she looked at the wiry man again, his gaze almost aglow from the blaze of the fire. The ghastly thinness of his cheeks made his face appear sunken in, his mannerisms sharp and manic as he looked between the other men. Elizabeth almost wished she hadn’t asked of him.

“He is better than I at what he does,” Dravian continued, “when the victims are to his liking. Most men fear hurting someone if they’re unsure of their faults, or if they don’t know the entirety of their crimes. At times it even alters our interrogations, these fears, because the shame of harming someone who should never have been harmed is a guilt unlike most others. Young people barely older than children, a woman with child; those are all people who are difficult to bring justice upon. Rellor loves those kinds of prisoners, the ones most of us are too afraid to touch. He has never failed in avenging the people who died from the blades of those who look innocent. He is crazed—cruel, most would say—but many more would be dead if his sanity were clearer.”

Elizabeth swallowed, her fingers trembling. She’d not thought her uncle would allow such a man in his Elite, let alone be the second in command. “Someone else then,” she said hurriedly. She was eager to stray from the disturbing images she envisioned. “Odin Iceborne, the older man on Ambassador Dorian’s other side. He is a leader too, yes?”

“The lowest ranking of the four, after Markeem and Rellor, yes,” Dravian said. “He fought alongside King Pierre and King

Gerard in the War of Fire and is said to be the only man the Golden Knight of Xenith could not defeat in a duel.”

Elizabeth relaxed slightly at the mention of the Golden Knight. Sir Garron had always ruined her and the Xen princess’s fun when they were girls, his constant insistentcies of Gwenivere’s training still a vivid remembrance in Elizabeth’s mind.

Dolls are fine, dear, but if Xenith is ever attacked, the dolls will not be able to save anyone. Painting is pretty, yes, but Gwenivere really must read The Art of Calling by Gustav Halstentine. It was not often that Elizabeth got to see Gwenivere growing up, especially not after Queen Rose passed, but when she had, Garron had rarely allowed his charge’s time to be rededicated to her guests. Swinging swords and casting elements were far more important to him.

“So, Sir Garron cannot defeat him,” Elizabeth said. “But has anyone actually seen Odin defeat Garron? Or has it just been determined they would finish at a draw?”

Dravian’s forehead wrinkled. “Well, the rumors are they finished at a draw after Odin made an insult to Sir Garron. But while he might be an Elite and one of my men, I would not put Odin against the Golden Knight now. Garron trains with the princess of Xenith almost every day, hones both her skills and his own in *touched* and *called* weapons and shields. Odin’s gut grows wider from his drinking and his coin purse lighter from the brothels. He would tip over before Garron even nudged him.”

Dravian turned to Elizabeth and motioned toward her drawing, his half smile returning as she realized her now crossed legs revealed its image. She yanked the sketchpad up frantically, embarrassed that it had almost been seen, and hoped the soldier had not been able to decipher any of it in his quick glance.

“Perhaps I shall speak of you now,” he suggested. “Women are hard for many people to understand too, you know.”

Elizabeth swallowed roughly as her hands shook.

“All right, go ahead,” she said defensively. She had ridden with Dravian and his soldiers for some time, their shared paths having yet to part, but not once had she engaged in conversation with any of them. Certainly Dravian could say nothing of her that was above whispered assumptions and queries among the men. Certainly not . . .

“You are kindhearted,” he started, “but you seek to find strength for your family’s name.” He held out his hand and lifted a finger, as if she could be summed up in a handful of qualities. “You chastise your brothers because they bring you dishonor, but if anyone were to speak ill of them, you would be fiercer than they in their defense. You mentioned the men you asked me of in relation to where Ambassador Dorian is sitting, which means you either hate him or fancy him.”

Elizabeth’s cheeks flushed as she opened her mouth to protest.

“Fancy him,” Dravian gathered. “And you despise the duchess-heir Natalia because . . . because you know in your heart the ambassador still loves her. But if not for that, you would pity her for being the daughter of the Duchess Yvaine and would try to befriend her.”

Dravian stopped, his amusement seeming to soften as he took in Elizabeth’s saddened appearance. She had not wanted to ruin what was only meant as a jest, knowing the man only meant to be cheery, but the truth of what he’d said made her happy spirits falter. She hadn’t thought her feelings for Dorian were so obvious.

“There is a reason the title *Inquisitor* goes along with my name,” Dravian said, his hand reaching out and nudging at the drawings she clung to. “Rest assured, girl; the ambassador doesn’t know.”

Elizabeth nodded as she at last let him see her sketch, the scene she’d depicted hardly different from that of the men just

beyond them. The flames of the campfire rose into charcoal smoke, soldiers laughing jovially as Peter and William sang in the background. In the forefront was the skinny outline of Natalia, her breasts purposefully uneven and her back arched awkwardly in her dance. Her face held a laugh, her eyes squinting with seduction, but the tail of her dress and the ends of her hair were caught afire as she danced too close to the blaze.

Dravian burst into a booming chuckle, his hand releasing his book as he clutched to his chest. After a moment, Elizabeth eased her stiffened shoulders, her hesitant giggle abandoned for a fullhearted laugh.

The two quickly stifled their amusement as the camp took its turn to stare.

PEACE AND TURMOIL

As someone who is praised for creating healing elixirs, you would think I'd have discovered more in regards to regenerative healing. Alas, I seem to be behind in the advancements of our enemies, as reports have indicated some among their ranks have succeeded in making such concoctions.

From the journal of Abaddon Haroldson

CHAPTER 9

DIE TRICH



The weavings of darkness interlaced with the piercing splendor of light. It came with agony, pressing Dietrich back into the calm of black. He saw his beloved Daensla there, her raven hair falling like waves along her back, her golden skin gleaming in the candlelight. And then she turned, eyes cold, lips pale, the jagged scar along her neck open as blood poured out of it.

“You knew I would die,” she whispered. “You knew they would come for me.” She rose, her nightgown stained in crimson, and stabbed a blade at his shoulder.

“Why would you not leave me?”

Dietrich yelled, screamed in guilt and pain, the light returning as he reached up to hold his beloved Daensla.

“Rest,” a voice soothed, pressing him back down to his bed. “Rest.”

The prince obeyed the voice, its tone unfamiliar but kind, and slowly let it guide him back down to the softness of his pillow. He tried to open his eyes, eager to know who it was who spoke, but only a blurred outline would reveal itself.

The darkness beckoned with every blink.

“Do you remember your name?” the voice asked. It was fading now, his mind returning to the haunting of his dreams, but still he tried to answer the query with his alias. Whomever he spoke to could not know he was the prince.

“Vvv . . . vvvv . . .”

Veen.

“Shhhh,” the woman commanded, something cool dabbing at his chest. “It’s as I thought.”

Dietrich nodded, continuing to hear the woman speak. He thought she said something about Prianthia, about his triumph, but his mind was foggy and his thoughts likely misconstrued. He kept motioning his neck in agreement as the pain subsided, heavy lids once again casting out the light.



Dietrich awoke quietly, his eyes skimming the room as he tried sleepily to decipher its contents. It was morning, the dawn sneaking its way through the clamped windows, the shielding drapes assisting in keeping the light of sunrise at bay. He wished terribly one window would open, the rank smells of blood and sweat trapped within the still air. He glanced down, the warmth of his blanket covering the dampness of his bed, the former white of its sheets now a faded scarlet and copper. If the colors were any indication, it would appear the smell was coming from where he lay.

“Ah, you’re up,” a voice said cheerfully. Dietrich leaped from his sheets and *called* instinctively for a blade as the air chilled his skin. Enough nights seeking out the traitors who led the insurge in his lands made him accustomed to sudden bouts of wakefulness.

The woman before him smiled, her round, green eyes looking away courteously as she pointed to a wardrobe beside him.

“I fetched you some new attire.” She sounded as though she were holding back a laugh, dimples forming against her cheeks. “I couldn’t wash the blood from the things you adorned before.”

Dietrich looked down, at last realizing the absence of his clothes. He *vanished* his weapon hastily and reached for the things she pointed at.

“Wait!” she said, shaking her head in scorn. “You will dirty them if you don’t bathe first. Come, I have prepared a bath.”

The prince didn’t reply, still unsure of where he stood. He looked around the room, his eyes and mind now less under sleep’s grasp. He ignored the woman’s insisting hand as she urged him to follow.

“Why are my things covered in sand?” he asked, recognizing his satchels on the floor, “Where am I?”

The woman laughed, walking over to him and nudging him along.

“It will come to you soon, I promise.” She was careful to only touch the skin along his back. “But first, the bath.”

Dietrich at last obeyed, allowing the woman’s hands to guide him forward. He rattled his brain, tried desperately to remember what had occurred, but the sweet smells of soap and the steaming warmth of water were all he could think of. He slipped into the bath’s hold, muscles he hadn’t known were sore gratefully unwinding. He heard the woman mutter something about the water being too hot as she put a hand in it, then saw a bead of sweat form along her forehead as she *called*

the smallest bit of ice.

She wasn't good with elements; the visible effort she put into getting the water the right temperature proved that. That was helpful to know. While she might appear to be helping him, it might be a ruse. Maybe she wanted something from him, or maybe she was just keeping him alive until someone she worked for came to question him. Well, he'd just have to accept that. Being naked and disoriented, he doubted he could do much to defend himself. Best to regain his strength.

Gradually he allowed himself to close his eyes, his lungs taking in the steam as his head rested against the bath's edge. Perhaps he would heed the woman's words, let the memories come to him. No need to rush them while such perfection tempted.

"Better, is it not?" she asked. Dietrich glanced up. The woman's dress now rested at her feet, her smooth figure joining his scarred one as she lowered herself into the lavish, perfumed waters. He watched without a word, only admiring the stranger as she sat across from him. She smiled, catching his silent gaze, and unfastened the tie that held her hair.

"Truly," Dietrich said, grinning, "where am I?"

The woman laughed again and closed the distance between them. She took a cloth from beside the water's edge, filling it with the soap before wiping it across his chest. Gently she brought it up to his shoulder, a slight pain resonating through him as she cleaned off the blood.

"It still hurts, I see," she said, noting his grimace. She removed the cloth and set it aside, fingering the spot with careful examination.

Healers never did this in the capital, Dietrich thought, glancing down at where her hand rested. The dull remnant of a quarrel revealed itself from beneath her fingers.

The image of the desert fiend, of the serpent, flashed back to him. He saw it then, the blade-like tail puncturing through him, his sword severing through its scaled neck. How long ago

had that been? The wound was already a scar.

The woman's hand was suddenly against his jaw, bringing his gaze up to meet her own.

"My cure healed you," she said. With a comforting smile she gestured over to a tray of elixirs at the room's edge.

"You haven't been here all that long," she added, reaching once more for the cloth. "The Dividing Wall, that is. I know you asked earlier." She glanced up at him and grinned again, holding his gaze for a moment before continuing on.

"I found you and your stallion on the outskirts of the city. You were near death, and I was not sure if you would make it, but here you are."

She ended her words with a chuckle and added some kind of small, dried petal to the bath before continuing with her self-appointed care.

Dietrich tensed. Why was this woman doing this, taking him in when he had given her no payment? What incentive did she have to help him, a man she knew nothing of and had nothing to give?

Dietrich's initial intrigue faded as rightful caution took its place. He quickly grabbed the woman's wrist, peering up at her searchingly as her smile vanished.

"Who are you?" he demanded, rising above her. "Why are you aiding me?"

The woman winced, her hand unwillingly releasing the cloth from the pressure of his grasp. It sunk in the bath's warm waters.

"Brelain Sandborne," she stuttered. She fought to free herself as his other hand grabbed her. "I know who you are. I know to keep your name and your purpose hidden. Thus I have aided you, as is my calling, hoping to assist you where others might intervene."

Dietrich watched her as she spoke, her words spilling out with a tempo that begged for release. He felt her pounding

pulse in his hands, but it was not from deceit that it carried so quickly. She feared him, feared the ferocity with which his dominance held. He eased his grasp and released her, knowing her words weren't a lie.

He hardly understood, though, hardly comprehended how she knew his true self or his cause. He must have revealed it when she had first found him, ramblings often evoked when one was near death.

He had no memory of it, though.

Just be thankful she's not a member of the Redeemers, he thought, noting her quivering lips. You wouldn't be alive, or sharing her bath, if she were.

"Forgive me," he whispered. He swallowed and lowered himself back into the steaming waters. "I know not whom to trust."

The woman—Brelain—remained silent, her body still as she looked over him with mercy. Her hand cautiously rose, her green gaze watching him as she returned her fingers to his skin. Slowly, gently, she traced the scars scattered across his chest.

It was not the first time a woman had discovered him Sadie's eldest prince, and it was certainly not the first time a woman presented her loyalty through such intimate means. He felt guilt at such offerings, yet a life of solitude often pressed him to oblige. How else could he, the Cloaked Prince and peasant nobility of Sadie, ever think to find companionship? It wasn't as though he could pursue women as his fiend-hunting alias. Any courtship then would simply be a façade, and one that, as Daensla's death had shown, could ultimately prove fatal.

Casual acceptance of an offered bed, implied as it may be, was best. Dietrich rested his fingers against Brelain's side, grabbed her waist, and pulled her with eager agreement toward him.



Hours later, after having parted with Brelain and walked about the streets, Dietrich decided night came too quickly in the Dividing Wall. The town rested at the base of the monstrous mountains, and they seemed to devour the sun just as men began to withdraw from the mines. Soot and grime lined their faces, their pickaxes thrown carelessly over their shoulders as they made their way to the brothels. Eager was each for the warmth of a drink and the skin of a woman, all taking pleasure in the flattery and lies their rich voices spoke. Few of the men could afford to hear more than words, their coin purses dry as their glasses filled, yet words were all they needed, a pleasant compliment more payment than a bed shared. They sauntered home, drunk and happy, none paying any mind to Dietrich as he quietly strode past them.

Brelain had been helpful in providing him guidance for the Dividing Wall's towns. She gave him back his coin purse—still full save for the expense of the new clothes she'd bought him—along with a few vials of elixirs and a somewhat detailed map that she'd marked up with where she recommended he get supplies. She claimed she knew of his mission to Xenith's masquerade, which must've been another apparent, barely conscious slip of tongue, and suggested he try finding Zar at one of the stables along the outskirts of town. She apologized profusely for not having remembered where Zar was taken, but Dietrich insisted it was fine. Her almost religious means of aid had far exceeded what he expected, and he made certain she understood her preparations in assisting him were worthy of nothing but gratitude.

Her preparations for him had been so well organized that

he might have thought her expecting them to meet, if not for the chance happenstance that it clearly was. Still, despite her hospitality and his genuine appreciation for her efforts, he could not bring himself to share any more time with her than was necessary. As soon as their passion had ended and his items and memories had returned, he'd promptly departed.

Even then, rude as it was, she seemed to expect it.

"My, my, well what can I do for you?" a woman asked Dietrich as he walked into a building with a sign naming it *THE MERRY LADY*. It was the barkeep who had spoken, a stalky woman with pinned up hair, and Dietrich noted with a sense of swollen pride that she looked him up and down appreciatively. No one ever looked at him like that, even the women whose beds he shared. They examined his scars and admired his build, and occasionally commented on the tiny flecks of blue in his green eyes, but few ever seemed pleased by his appearance. He was frightening, like his father, and attractiveness was rarely a trait he thought of for himself. Feigned as it may be, Dietrich appreciated the barkeep's attempts to make him feel wanted. He reached into his vest's pocket and placed a generous amount of coins on the counter.

"Food," he said with a grin. "And a drink, if you've got it."

"Well of course we do, handsome." The coins were gone before the words were spoken. "And handsome you are. You want someone to keep you company while you dine tonight?"

Handsome? Dietrich smiled again at the lie, wonderfully entertained by the lack of formality. He shook his head politely, glancing at the scantily clad women throughout the room. They were pretty, all with good figures and varying appearances, their voices like songs and their laughter like instruments. They evoked a permanent grin, an unflinching sense of happiness, but the temptations of their merriment would only be temptations at most. His morning with Brelain had left him plenty satisfied.

It took him a second glance to see that—despite *lady* being in the brothel's name—some of the workers were men. That was common enough in Sadie. Their nation had endured so much, and had so little, that no one was going to condemn what little joy each person found. Not during enslavement, and not now.

“Hey, I know you!” someone called. Dietrich glanced over, more curious than concerned, the voice having clearly been that of a young boy. He thanked the barkeep as she returned with his food, grinning at the wink she gave him before turning to face the small finger pointing at his side.

“How's that?” Dietrich asked, taking a drink from his glass. He looked around the room and searched for the boy's parents, hoping to find a concerned mother rushing through the door or a scolding father scurrying in. No one did. He looked back to the blue-eyed boy, clearly western, and lifted his glass to his swollen face. “And where'd you get those bruises? You try to fight me or something?”

The boy waved his hands and shook his head. “Nah, them is from my master.”

Dietrich stopped chewing for a moment, enraged at the thought. After years of hearing his father speak of the beatings he'd endured as a slave, of the lashings and the abuse, Dietrich's blood boiled knowing it still happened. Especially to a child.

He forced himself to calm and gestured for the boy to continue.

“Yeah, you's was that man who rode in all bloody. The healer lady said she'd take care a' you, and that I should take care a' your horse. And I did, sir. He's been rowdy for my master, but he's been good to me.”

Dietrich nodded and patted the chair beside him. He thought about sitting himself, but the simple fact that the chair's back would be facing such a crowded room of people

sent a shiver down his spine. Awkward as it may be, he'd continue to eat standing. "That's what you do?" he asked, watching as the boy hopped to reach the stool. "You're a stable hand?"

His query was met with a bobbing head, the boy's small hand reaching out and taking a swig from Dietrich's glass. Dietrich knew he was faster than the boy, and he knew he should likely stop him from consuming so strong a drink, but for curiosity and amusement alone he let it happen. The squinting eyes and squished features, and the *bleh* sound that escaped the boy's chapped lips, were almost enough to offer him more. He motioned to the barkeep and smiled at her kindly, pointing to his plate before nodding at the boy.

"So if you work in the stables," Dietrich continued, watching the barkeep scurry back to the kitchen, "what are you doing in a place like this?"

The boy shrugged and swiveled in his chair as he glanced around. "My ma works here. She's usually done by now, but I guess she's busy."

Dietrich thanked the barkeep again as she brought out another plate and placed it on the counter. The boy already had half his bread consumed before Dietrich could give the woman his payment.

"So, young man," he said, leaning over, "riddle me this: If your mother works here, then why did I just buy you that food? Couldn't you have gotten it for free?"

The boy stopped his persistent stuffing and paused for a moment as he met Dietrich's questioning stare. He looked back toward his plate and finished the bite in his mouth before smiling again.

"I like Josie," he said, lifting his scabbed chin toward the barkeep. "She's nice, she gives my ma money and a place for us to sleep. If you's willin' to pay her, I's willin' to let ya."

"Ah, well, clever enough," Dietrich answered. He hoped the bed the boy and his mother shared was not the one she lay

in now. "How about this then: If you're the one who's good with my stallion, and you're here, then does that mean you left my Zar alone with that master of yours? The same one you said is no good with him? The one you said hits you?"

At this, the boy hurriedly looked back down and shoved bite after bite into his mouth. Dietrich nodded, patting his hand on the boy's shoulder as he placed another coin on the counter for Josie.

"That's what I thought. Eat with haste, my friend; we're going to the stables."

The boy—Zain, as Josie eventually called him—did as he was told, inhaling his food as though it were the only food he had. Josie reached down and grabbed his freckled face in her hands, whispering to him quietly as she glanced back up at Dietrich. Her flirtatious grins were now abandoned, her eyes only conveying warning as she kissed the boy goodbye.

"Be safe, and swift," she told him, nudging him onward. "Your ma should be back soon." Zain nodded, holding his face where her hands had clenched, and looked back up to Dietrich with obvious embarrassment. The prince kept his grin withheld, at least on one side, his amusement emerging with a single curl of lip.

"How far are the stables you tend to?" Dietrich asked, saving the boy's pride. Zain pushed the door of The Merry Lady ajar, holding it for a few soot-covered men before allowing himself to exit.

"Well I tends to a lot of 'em," he said, sure-footedly walking into the torchlit streets. "The Dividing Wall's a bad name for this area, 'cause it's a name for everything. Them mountains is the Dividing Wall, this town is the Dividing Wall, all the towns north 'a here's the Dividing Wall. *Everything's* the Dividing Wall. So I goes between all the stables in a lot 'a the towns, mostly the southern ones, and help whoever has the most work. Used to be that I helped the north ones—they's

have more Mesidian's up there like my ma and me, but they's also got more Prianthians. Some of 'em was pretty nice, but some of 'em were them Redeemers, and they started killing all the western folk." Zain pointed to himself, his finger circling his blue eyes.

"My ma moved us down here, said the farther south we went, the less of 'em there'd be. More Sadiyans down here, like you, and she said Sadiyans ain't about killing their own. She was wrong about that, though; the Redeemers started persuading some of you green eyes, and now, blue eyes, green eyes, brown eyes—it don't matter. We don't know who to trust.

"But still, Ma says it's safer down here, less chance of them killin' us. So some 'a the stables is far, but most 'a the ones I tends to are pretty close."

Dietrich sighed and took in the boy's ramblings. He knew much of his capital's tendencies, knew which parts of the city to bear caution and which parts to bear pride, but he had little knowledge of the towns to the west. It would seem his killing Redeemers in Sovereignty, Sadie, were pushing them to new places.

"And which towns' stable has my stallion?" he asked, clarifying his prior query. "Is that stable far?"

"Nuh-uh, that one's here." Zain looked up for a minute, glancing between the signs above the shops. His eyes squinted, his sight obviously bad as he tried to decipher the words on each hanging slat. He pointed to one and turned back to Dietrich questioningly.

"Do you think that shop there sells nice fabrics? My ma, she don't have much nice things, and I's been savin' to buy her somethin' nice, somethin' she can make a nice dress outta. All her dresses are torn and dirty."

Dietrich read the sign **FINEST FABRICS** and saddened as he realized the boy's illiteracy. He smiled kindly, nodding his head as he glanced inside.

"I believe they do," he said, "but it doesn't appear they're open. Perhaps you can go tomorrow?"

Zain shrugged, then looked back to the ground and continued on.

"So how'd you get all bloodied up anyway? And how'd you heal so fast? The pretty healer lady do that with her cures?"

"She did," Dietrich said, taking in all their steps. *First a left, then a right by the currency station, then another left by the plaza with the shops.* "She's quite good with elixirs. Prince Abaddon himself would be impressed by her work."

"You know him?" the boy asked. The torch lights flickered in his gaze.

"I work for him," Dietrich answered. "I fight fiends, fetch him their blood, their fangs, their poisons, and he makes elixirs from them. That's how I was injured, by a fiend, outside the . . . Dividing Wall."

"Sounds pretty hard," Zain said, his voice filled with wonderment. "I hears lots of people been attacked recently. Like the fiends are preparing for something. Was the one that attacked you like a panther, a big cat with bluish whiskers? I hears a lot about a big cat recently."

"No, a serpent." *Slight left at the baker, right at the seamstress.* "Interesting beast you describe, though. I have a book, a categorization of sorts, that helps healers and fiend hunters know what fiends will give them what they need. It's called *Fire and Fiends*, and it's quite an interesting read. There are a great deal of paintings in the book, and descriptions, but unless I'm mistaken, I don't recall ever coming across a fiend of that sort before."

"You's lucky then," Zain said. "You probably wouldn't 'a lived if you had, and if you did, you'd have had some strange black marks on ya."

Zain stopped suddenly and lifted his hand toward the battered building in front of them. The whinny of horses sound-

ed from inside. "This is it though," he said, "the stable with your horse."

The prince glanced up, a sign reading STABLES and the smell of hay confirming the boy's words. He could hear a commotion stemming from within its slatted walls, vile shouts and curses directed at the rowdy steeds inside. It was Zain's master, more than likely, the one who had delivered the bruises on his face.

Dietrich leaned low to the ground, anxious to free Zar, and grabbed the boy gently by the arm.

"I am greatly indebted to you," he said. "First you helped care for my horse, then you went out of your way to bring me here. Many grown men wouldn't be so courteous."

He opened the boy's dirtied palm, reached into his vest, and transferred a small fortune into his hand. Zain stared at it in shock, his blue eyes wide beneath his swollen skin.

"Listen to me very carefully," Dietrich instructed. "There's enough there to get you by until the next half moon, and enough for you to buy your mother something from that shop. But"—he stopped, raising one finger and pointing it sternly—"you have to promise me, *promise me*, that you will not return to this stable. Not ever. Do you understand?"

Zain said nothing, only standing silent for a moment before nodding profusely. Dietrich smiled, returning to his full height and patting the boy kindly.

"Go on now, you've done your share. I'm sure your mother is back by now, and probably very worried."

Zain nodded and shoved the coin into his trouser pocket before hurrying back to The Merry Lady.

Dietrich stood still and watched protectively over the boy, waiting patiently until his footsteps were lost somewhere between the baker's and the seamstress's shops. When he could hear them no more, he headed for the entrance to the stables, cast out what little light the torches around him held, and *called* a black blade to his grasp.

The stable master would not beat another child after he was through.



“You’re back?”

Brelain’s voice was high, surprised it seemed to find Dietrich standing at her door. Her heavy lids lifted as she saw the bundle of hay he held and the black stallion a few yards behind him, which was tethered loosely to a post outside her home.

“Forgive me for disrupting you on this late hour,” Dietrich said. “I . . .”

“Know not whom to trust?” She stood to the side and smiled, beckoning him indoors with a wave of hand. “Come. I don’t wish to let the night air in.”

The prince set the hay down and removed his cloak’s hood, then quickly followed Brelain inside. The smell from his wounds still clung faintly to the walls of her home. He wondered how long it would be before the remnants of his injuries completely departed.

“Your elixir, the one you healed me with,” he unfastened the clasp of his cloak and rested it against a nearby chair. “Does it only work on flesh wounds? Or does it also aid the sick?”

If it heals the sick, I won’t have to continue with this foolhardy quest. I can just take this back for Mother—

“Only wounds,” she answered, snatching his cloak and draping it over her shoulders. She grinned as she caught his glance, then sat beside a modest table in her study. “It regenerates flesh, quickly, as you discovered, but it does little else I’m afraid. And speaking of such things, have you gone killing tonight? The tunic I gave you has blood.”

Dietrich started at her forwardness, never once having had

a woman so casually speak of his deeds. She was not a typical woman, though, he supposed, the very brilliance of her work distinguishing her so. Nonetheless, he leaned against a wall, choosing a spot where he could see every entrance to her home, and shook his head.

“What I do in the night should not concern you.” He wished then that he still had his cloak to shield his tunic. Evidently, he was incapable of keeping his clothes without blood.

Brelain said nothing, only abandoning her chair and walking toward a few glasses beside her window. Dietrich watched her, intrigued by how little she seemed to ponder his words. She looked through a cabinet of liquids, hand on hip as she studied each bottle, then reached for a red one and filled two glasses. Cheerfully she returned to where he stood, handing him a cup as she began drinking from her own.

“Answer or don’t. It makes no difference to me.” She wiped her mouth and gave him a grin. “The masquerade is not for some time, and I know that’s where your travels take you. If your feet bring you here each night until its arrival, I find no inconvenience in that.”

The prince didn’t answer, only drinking from the glass she’d given him. He swallowed the liquid with surprise, not having expected its tart flavor.

“I am a creator at heart, I suppose,” she said, noting his interest in the drink. “I seek to make all things better. Would you like another glass?”

“I have had my fair share of drinks already this evening.” Dietrich placed the empty cup on the table and cleared his throat. “Thank you, though.” He glanced back over at her, realizing for the first time how little she wore under his cloak. He quickly turned away, too late it seemed, her proposition to house him more tempting as his mind conjured less noble thoughts.

“More reason to stay,” she said. She finished what was left of her glass, then took their cups and placed them within a

small basin. She washed them quickly, drying them with a thick cloth before placing them back perfectly where she'd found them.

"My injuries have set me back," Dietrich said, trying to ignore the healer's implications. "My time with you has as well."

"Are you blaming me?" Brelain asked teasingly. She leaned against the wall beside her, the edges of his black cloak opening slightly. The sight did little to cast away his thoughts.

"No," he said, smiling. His neck strained to stay up. "Though you don't seem eager to dissuade."

Brelain shrugged, dimples forming in her cheeks.

"My calling is to aid you, and aid you I have done. Forgive me for taking pleasure in my task."

Dietrich looked away and laughed. He'd not shared with Brelain his mother's illness, nor had he been foolish enough to share his and Abaddon's ploy for the Dagger, but somehow the healer seemed to understand the weight of his venture. He was going to the masquerade, she knew that much and he hadn't denied it, but that seemed the extent of her knowledge. He supposed asking her for a bit more guidance would do little to harm his cause.

"I don't believe I'll make it to Xenith in time for the masquerade," he admitted, still averting his gaze.

Brelain pulled the fabrics of his cloak back over her shoulders, seeming serious now as he relayed his concerns.

"You say the masquerade is not for some time, but it's coming sooner than I think possible for me to attend. And I don't know how to quicken my trek's pace."

Brelain lifted her hand up to her chin.

"You could befriend the Dragon Keeper," she said. "I've heard of some people riding his dragons before. Though I suppose I've never heard any firsthand accounts."

Dietrich stared at Brelain for a moment, surprised when what he assumed was a jest was not expanded on.

“Dragons?” he asked incredulously. “Fiends?”

“Well supposedly Zoran’s are tamed,” she countered. “Zoran is the Dragon Keeper.”

“Fiends?” he asked again, tapping his shoulder. Despite the elixir’s healing, the wound still ached when he touched it. “I should befriend fiends, after one just nearly killed me?”

“Or you can stay here with me,” she said with a grin. “It’s not as if you have an obligation to our people or anything.”

Dietrich glowered at her, the healer seeming more entertained than fearful. He tossed her dismissal off.

“So how do I find this Zoran?” he asked, humoring her suggestion. “Does he have stables?”

Brelain shot him her own glare, clearly noting the mockery in his tone.

“The Path of Dragons is somewhere in the mountains. Zoran is thought by many to have sold his soul to the Fallen One for the power to command his dragons. Speak of him to the wrong people, and they will have you bound with element shackles.”

Dietrich shuddered. Element shackles were what the Prianthians had used to keep his people in slavery, what they’d used to suppress his father’s and his ancestor’s elements.

Brelain, seeing his dismay, held up a finger.

“Speak of him to the right people, though, and perhaps you’ll find some aid.”

Dietrich closed his eyes and shook his head. “So you can’t just walk me up to his dragons’ lair and convince him of my merit? You can’t solve *all* my problems? My, my, aren’t you proving useless.”

“Useless, eh?” Her fingers undid the ties of his cloak and revealed her thin garb beneath. “I suppose you’re right. I’ve only saved your life, let you stay in my home, gifted you with elixirs and poisons, and let you taste the wonderful drinks I’ve created.” Her dimples formed again as she smirked. “I thought, when you brought your horse and hay, that perhaps

you were going to dismiss me of my uselessness and keep me company. But if you feel so compelled to leave, I suppose my heart will bear it.”

She tossed him his cloak before walking into her sleeping room. Amused and convinced, Dietrich rose from where he leaned, set his cloak aside, and followed.

I'm not a Redeemer sympathizer—I think what they preach is detestable. However, I would be a liar if I didn't admit that wealthy Western women are the absolute worst when it comes to providing decent payments for working girls like myself.

Dividing Wall serving girl

CHAPTER 10

DIE TRICH



After a lingering farewell with Brelain, Dietrich led Zar from the southernmost end of the Dividing Wall and headed to the northern towns. Traveling by horse was a much more preferable means of transport through the old mining towns than walking. Beggars were less likely to ambush riders than simple men afoot. Thieves also grew wary of robbing men on horseback, most knowing it was far more difficult to escape the canter of a mount than the sprints of a man.

A few *touched* daggers, each strapped in plain sight along Dietrich's thighs, were certainly a deterrent as well. No one was foolish enough to disrupt his leisurely ride about the towns. Leisurely it was, albeit only in appearance, the careless stroll meant to detract any attention a more purposeful one would bring. With purpose it was, the Assassin Prince intent on the destination he sought.

Intent, and penitently nervous.

The north of the Dividing Wall's towns had much reason for Sadiyan men to be afraid. Solitude was enough to mark them outside the Redeemers ranks. More parties of brown and green eyes appeared the farther Dietrich's travels took him, the strange alliance of Prianthian and Sadiyan men a result of the insurgence's hold. Zain's words had proven true, it seemed, the constant hunt for the radicals in the capital indeed having led the hateful group into the Dividing Wall's borders. With confidence they spoke, no apprehension in their words, former Sadiyan slaves speaking in the tongues of their previous Prianthian captors as openly as men bargained for goods. Dietrich kept his cloaked green eyes cast to the ground, grateful Brelain had gifted him with more poisons and elixirs.

Nightfall came dreadfully early, Dietrich cursing the wondrous mountains for stealing the sun so swiftly. Without the burning heat of day, more people withdrew their hoods, at last allowing their features to feel the crispness of dusk before the bitter cold of darkness came. Suspicious he would seem, then, to keep his cloak up, but he had little choice, his wiser thoughts telling him it was better than risking recognition among such crowds. To the inns he retired, his belly full from their food and his muscles eager to continue moving. He read, he drew details on his map and documented the seven-tailed serpent and the panther-fiend Zain had described, then attempted to greet slumber. It was always elusive and infrequent as his *touched* blades rested within his grasp.

Few miles remained after moons of travel, the character of the northernmost town different from those he had visited before. Hardly a Sadiyan strode through the streets, blue eyes of westerners taking the place of green, golden skin replaced by white. More blond and red hair rested atop heads and through brows than any Dietrich had seen before, a colorful contrast to the black he was accustomed to. He drew back his

hood, comforted to see the Redeemers' victims outweighing their men, and tethered up his horse.

"Pardon me for such a bold request," he said, spotting a solitary blonde as he walked into the inn. "But may I join you?"

The woman looked up with bright blue eyes, her face pale and mature despite the deceptive youthfulness of her face's powders. It almost made him nervous just to see her, so obviously western, in an area where Redeemers dwelled so near. They hated westerners, believed them responsible for pitting the eastern nations against one another. He rarely witnessed western women in the East who didn't have to hide who they were.

"I am a traveler from Sovereignty, Sadie," he continued, "Yeltaire Veen is my name. I plan to travel to the West, but I'm afraid I know little of their customs. I shall pay for your meal in exchange for your knowledge of such things, if you would be so kind as to share them."

The woman stared for a moment, then placed down her book, *From the Victor's Victims*, and pushed out the seat beside her.

"It would be a delight," she answered. Her voice was somewhat deep, but held an enchanting lilt. She leaned back and caught the eye of a server, waving her over to her table. "No need to buy, though," she said, looking back to Dietrich, "I am a wealthy woman who enjoys the company of interesting men. I shall pay."

"Is that custom in the West?" Dietrich teased, quickly ordering a grand meal from the young girl who approached. He eyed the seat the woman had offered, hating the idea of sitting in the middle of a tavern, but he supposed a fine meal might be enough to distract him as he sat. *If you's willing to pay her, I's willing to let ya.* Zain had been wiser than he had seemed.

"For our women to be wealthy, or for us to pay?" the woman replied with equal jest. Dietrich grinned, already amused by the company he'd chosen.

"Either. Both."

The woman took a sip from her glass, handing the empty one back for the server to fill before waving her off.

Not the politest woman, it appeared, but the server would be paid handsomely.

“To answer the first query,” she started, “no, it is not custom for all women to be as wealthy as I. Though many in Mesidia do not struggle and earn what they deserve. On the contrary, Xenith has many women of my stature, and many more above mine. Most, if not all, are highly educated.”

“What of you?” Dietrich asked, finally removing the cloak from his shoulders. “You speak with formality, you read historical books, you drink wine when most drink mead. Are you well educated?”

“Indeed,” she answered, not bothering to thank the serving girl as she brought back another glass.

The prince made sure to whisper, “My gratitude, dear,” as the server handed him his drink, her eyes twinkling at his notice. She shot a glare at the woman, unbeknownst to her, before scampering off dutifully.

“I grew up in Mesidia,” the woman continued. “I excelled in my academics despite having farmers for parents. A wealthy patron took interest in me when I was fifteen, said he would pay for me to attend his school in Voradeen, Xenith. I accepted and went on to be educated there. I told myself I never wanted to be poor again, so I married the patron’s brother, a wealthy man good with coin.”

“How did you end up here then?” Dietrich asked. “Seems a rather unlikely place for such an intelligent western woman.”

“Yes, well,” she shrugged the compliment off. “My husband is good with coin, but not in the most traditional ways. He finds opportunity where others don’t. The mines here, for instance. No one’s to properly manage them now that the Prianthians don’t use your people for slaves. Barbaric it was, certainly, but you cannot denounce their effectiveness to loot

anything of value from here.”

Dietrich nodded, if only to keep from standing up and walking away. He had nothing against the westerners, but comments like those were why the Redeemers felt the West's people were so callous and evil. It was how they were convincing others to forsake alliances with westerners and keep loyalty to the East.

After all, how could a decent person speak so casually of slavery?

Her parents were farmers, not slaves, he told himself. She doesn't know what it's like to hear the stories of her ancestors in chains.

“My husband, Gregory, came,” she continued, not noticing his internal rigidity, “seeing it was only adventurers, treasure hunters, people of that sort, that came to the caves here. He figured they needed someone to manage their plunders. He deals with traders in the West, helps the miners sell their profit, and in return gets a heavy portion of their coin. Smart, really, seeing as most of the miners are dimwitted and don't realize how much he cheats them. But it pays for me to live in luxury, and no one is really harmed in the process. So, to answer your former query, no, most women do not pay for men's meals. But my husband is older, and a cowardly bastard, so I snatch the company of any fascinating guest I can.”

Dietrich grinned. He was simultaneously annoyed and entertained by the woman's selfish confidence.

“So I'm fascinating to you?” he asked. He dug his knife into the meal the server brought and took a purposefully large bite. He was almost tempted to eat the meal with his hands, see the look of disgust the woman would give him, but he decided against it. She possessed knowledge he wished to gain. It was best not to dampen her ready tongue.

The large bite, though, forcing him to chomp loudly, did earn him a haughty glare.

“I have heard the name Yeltaire Veen, read it rather,” she answered, cutting her meal with delicacy. “Gregory doesn’t just trade in elemental metals, or jewels or rocks, but in anything my people are willing to pay for. Your Prince Abaddon, many of his remedies travel here, travel through my husband’s hands, and I often see the name *Yeltaire Veen* listed as one of the chief aiders. You fight fiends for a living, but you are intelligent enough to know what parts of them to keep before they drift. So yes, Veen, I find you very fascinating.”

Dietrich used his meal as a reason to swallow. He cursed his younger brother in his head.

“I had not realized my name had gained so much recognition. Prince Abaddon should not humble himself to such lengths and give others so much credit. He is the true genius behind the elixirs.” *But not a genius when it comes to discretion.*

“Humility is a fine quality for a noble to have, although I agree that one in your country’s predicament should not be so keen to make it known.”

Dietrich paused. “Our predicament?”

The woman took another tiny bite before sipping her wine. Her painted lips stained the chalice. “Well yes. It was not so long ago that the Prianthians held your people in chains, and even a shorter time ago that they sent their troops to your borders. King Harold was smart to slaughter them in the streets, torture them for all to see. It scared the Prianthians away. The true Prianthians, that is. Now you have the Redeemers, bloodthirsty Crossbreeds eager to unify the East by shutting it off from the West. They blame the West for the brokenness of the eastern peoples, claim that the West’s wars have turned Prianthia and Sadie against each other. They hate your King Harold because he has allied himself to the western peoples, and they hate the Prianthian royal family for the same reason. They want to overthrow the current nobility and try to unify the East as one nation, and though their tactics

may be brutal, the idea of unity is one that appeals to a great many people.”

I know my country's history, Dietrich thought irritably.

He kept eating his meal.

“With such strong opposition from this cult,” the woman continued, “Prince Abaddon should not be so eager to hide his intelligence, as you’ve stated. I mean, for the Light’s sake, your eldest prince, Dietrich Haroldson, is now reduced to a glorified vigilante. Effective in the capital, certainly, but the Redeemers seem to have plenty of men at the ready in most of the Dividing Wall’s towns.”

Dietrich wiped his mouth with a napkin and took a swig from his glass. Was this the kind of conversation he had to look forward to when he reached Xenith? Would all the wealthy westerners be like this woman? He wasn’t sure he could continuously feign tranquility while he, his family, and his people were spoken of so absently.

“Do you fear them?” he finally asked, trying to steer them to a slightly different topic. “The Redeemers, I mean. Are you afraid of them?”

“I would be foolish not to be,” she muttered, her confident aura slipping as she looked at the reflection in her cup. “But to live in fear is foolish, especially when I live such a grand life. If they kill me, at least I can say I enjoyed my time alive.”

Dietrich drained the remains of his own drink. “Interesting perspective.”

The server was there in an instant, filling his glass promptly before hurrying off and escaping any requests the woman might have.

“I don’t believe refills are free,” she noted, her eyes falling to Dietrich’s second glass. “You are a man of opportunity, I see, snatching up the chance to gain what you can from my generosity.”

“It’s your husband’s money, is it not?” he pressed. He held

the glass up to her, tapped it to hers in cheer, then took a sip and exhaled contentedly. “And if you take him to be a cowardly bastard, then I believe you. So yes, I will seize the chance to take from a man that you take from daily.”

The woman’s brow arched, her red lips pulling into a smile as her forehead lines deepened.

“Cheers to that,” she stated, taking a drink of her own. “Now what things do you wish to know? I’m afraid I’ve spent a dreadfully long time speaking of myself and my own thoughts.”

“None of which I haven’t enjoyed.” Dietrich forced the words with a feigned grin. He finished what was left of his meal, wiping his mouth again with his cloth before setting it atop his plate. The server was there before suddenly whisking away, she and the dirty dish gone before he had time to thank her.

“You seem to know much of politics,” he started. “I’m interested in such affairs. Rumors, facts, gossip—all of it. I assume you have gained a great deal of this in the trading industry, yes?”

The woman nodded and shrugged modestly as she called for more wine. “One might say that, I suppose.” When the server returned, she ordered two delicacies, despite still having her plate half full. The server nodded and rushed off.

“I shall start with Mesidia, as I know much of its history.

“Currently Pierre and Rosalie Laighless rule, and their son Roland is the heir to the throne and Guardian to the Dagger of Eve. Duke Bernard the VII and his wife Yvaine are thought to be the true royal bloodline by many, though not enough to evoke civil war. Yet.”

“Why the discrepancy?” Dietrich asked. “And which do you believe?”

“Oh, I care little for one side or the other. Mesidia is relatively well off, not as much as it once was, but enough that I think it proper to keep the Laighless—Pierre’s bloodline—ruling. But if it switched, and the Barie family did just as well, it

would make no difference to me.

“The feuding bloodline started before my lifetime. I have read many texts on the matter, though many have a different bias depending on the author. Bias aside, the story is that, years ago, King Veldigar and Queen Victoria could not conceive a child. Veldigar took a second wife, Daniella Corrins, and had a son with her. Five months later, Victoria, his first wife, gave birth to her own child, a boy as well, and insisted Veldigar divorce Daniella and denounce the second wife’s child from their bloodline. Veldigar refused, keeping both women for his wives, and both children as his son’s. Fourteen years later, Victoria died, and Daniella was now the sole queen of Mesidia—”

“How did Victoria die?” Dietrich interrupted. “Sounds as if Veldigar wished to be rid of her. Picked a convenient time too. Both sons would have been old enough to inherit the Dagger.”

“Precisely! And many historians would agree with you. Some say it was the plague of that time that took her, others say Veldigar poisoned her. Nonetheless, it was she who was the former Guardian of the Dagger, and therefore it should’ve been her son to take the title. But Veldigar did not heed the counsel of his advisors, or his late wife’s will, and gave the Dagger to Daniella’s son. He made a lot of enemies when he did that, made a lot of enemies for his remaining wife and her child as well. Attempts at the throne have been made by Victoria’s descendants, the *Victorians*, as they’re called, ever since.”

“Hard to blame them,” Dietrich said. “If I was one to care about bloodlines and political honor, I’d have to agree that Victoria’s ancestors should have the throne.”

“I too, though Pierre is more kingly than the duke. Although recently, if such gossip intrigues you, the throne was almost returned to the Barie family.”

“Oh?” Dietrich bit into the dessert as the server set it down. It was cold and sweet, different from anything he consumed in

the capital. Nothing stayed cold there for long. "How's that?"

The woman sat up, almost giddy, like a youth sharing secrets with a friend. "For some time, Pierre and Rosalie could not conceive, and they took in a Yendorian orphan by the name of Dorian and raised him as their own. Though he was a peasant, he was charming and witty enough to pass as otherwise, and many were not in opposition to name him the next king, even when Rosalie did finally give birth to Prince Roland. However, after years of holding back, Pierre decided to give the Dagger to his son, much to Duchess Yvaine's contempt. Natalia, Bernard's daughter, was betrothed to Dorian. When Pierre named Roland heir, Natalia and Dorian's engagement was broken."

"Seems Pierre didn't want to hand back the Dagger to the Victorian bloodline."

"It would appear so, yes," the woman agreed. "Though Mesidia is the closest it has ever been now to erupting into civil war. Yvaine has started a campaign of ill-thought on King Pierre, spread rumors and gossip of his 'betrayal.' I pity her daughter Natalia, always being thrown back and forth between whomever her mother needs her to bed. Some said she truly loved Dorian."

"Prince Abaddon has shared accounts of their meeting with me," Dietrich recalled, remembering the unnecessarily detailed descriptions his brother gave of the duchess-heir. Most were about her looks, and most were inappropriate, but laced between Abaddon's fondness of her appearance was a dislike for her tongue. "He said Natalia was cunning. And cruel."

"I would be too, in her position." The woman shrugged, seeming to contemplate what it would be like to fill the duchess-heir's shoes. "Perhaps not."

You would have more coin and your beauty would be greater, Dietrich thought, smiling at the server from across the room. She blushed, but not before smiling back. *Those seem to be the only things you delight in.*

“What of Roland?” he asked. “I’ve heard he pines for the heir to Xenith.”

“All men pine for the heir to Xenith,” the woman said bluntly. An odd annoyance sounded in her tone. “She could be hideous—or a man for that matter—and every nobleman would still desire her. She is attractive enough, from what I have heard, and bold, a characteristic I admire in other women, but she is to inherit the wealthiest and most powerful nation from the King of Peace. Wealth and power are enough to sway men’s hearts as it is. Add a decent-looking girl in, and the chance to father the next Guardian of Eve? As I said, all men pine for that.”

Dietrich’s jaw tightened, his nerves unsettled. “You believe Roland’s romance for the girl stems purely from political greed? You don’t believe he truly loves her?”

“I know naught,” she answered, finally finishing her first plate. She pushed it aside and placed her knife neatly at its edge before taking a sip of wine, dabbing her lips, and breaking into her dessert. “Love for nobles is not the same for common folk. It has to be practical, it has to uphold expectations. Rarely are such things fulfilled for those outside the royal sphere.”

“I see,” Dietrich said, trying to hold back his frustration. Their conversation had been informative, despite the woman’s slights, but nothing up to that point had been anything he could take advantage of. Delicately, he tried to probe for more.

“Do you believe Gwenivere loves him?” he asked. “I’ve heard Roland is quite the dashing young lad.”

She shrugged. “I met him once; he is quite fetching. Tall, rugged but beautifully handsome. For such a guarded, protected girl like Gwenivere, I could say it’s possible she believes she loves him.”

“Why do you say she’s guarded?” he asked. “Is she guarded any more than the past heirs of Xenith?”

“Goodness, yes, far more! King Gerard’s wife, Queen Rose,

passed giving birth to their son Aden five or so years ago. After that, the king moved his family from the palace in Voradeen to their castle fortress in the forest. He became very protective of his daughter, overly so one might say. On a side note, if you are to venture to the capital, you should tour the palace. It's the grandest thing I've ever laid eyes upon. It overlooks a lake, waterfalls are visible from all its balconies, the finest paintings adorn its walls. And the gardens—I've never seen so much color in one place. Really, it's a marvel. Breathtaking."

Dietrich sneezed, twice, grateful for the abrupt disruption to the woman's elegant and useless musings.

"Pardon me, where were we? Ah, yes, Princess Gwenivere. Tell me, um . . ."

"Fiona Collinson," the woman said, answering his nameless beckon.

"Yes, tell me, Fiona, do you think Gwenivere and Roland will try to marry? I know it's forbidden, they both being Guardians, but I am curious about all the speculation and gossip around such a thought."

"They would be foolish to try," Fiona said, "though nobles have done things more foolish in the past. Their families would never allow it, and I believe both to be too wise to pass their Artifacts on to someone so they could wed. They would lose too much power, too much prestige. Most nobility are smart enough to know no human is worth that. Not to mention it's treason. There are treaties that forbid Xenith and Mesidia from unifying. They were one nation in the past, before the marriage of Guardians was forbidden, and the amount of strength their unity possessed sent the rest of Abra'am into peril. Greedy hearts always brought war to their borders, and even if they were nearly indestructible, their people were not. It was better to be allies, in castles and palaces of their own, than to share in the title of king and queen for such a large landmass. Not only that, but the Dagger of Eve grants immortality, and

Gwenivere's Amulet is the only thing that could reverse it. If they were conquered, and someone drew on the Dagger's powers, the conquerors would then possess the one item that could nullify it. No one would ever be able to end their reign."

Dietrich said nothing, his full stomach suddenly queasy. Fiona carried on, still too infatuated in her telling to notice his sudden shift. The red of her lips faded with every bite and drink she took.

Curse you, Abaddon, to convince me of this ploy. Dietrich shifted uneasily in his chair. *Use the Dagger to heal our mother? I'll have your head for sending me on this implausible quest.*

"Do you think the Dagger only grants immortality?" he asked, cutting off whatever useless thing Fiona rambled on about. "Or do you believe it makes one invincible as well?"

She stopped eating for a moment and looked up in thought. "Why, that is a peculiar thought, isn't it? It's never been used, not to my knowledge, so I'm afraid I don't know for certain. I'd imagine it grants some sort of invincibility, though. The two go hand in hand, do they not?"

"I don't know," Dietrich said, forcing a smile. "You're the educated one."

"Well," she said, smoothing out her skirts. "To be immortal means never to die. One's body must always be healing itself, cleansing itself of wounds that might cause infection or viruses that might make them ill. Now, if the wielder were beheaded, or his or her heart ripped out, I'm not so sure."

"Those are quite gruesome depictions you paint."

"I've read worse."

Dietrich noted as Fiona's eyes looked down at the book she'd been reading when he'd first approached. She seemed suddenly lost in it, likely thinking through some morbid, fascinating tale from it she would impress someone with later.

He took a deep breath, trying to take in everything she'd told him. Was this quest Abaddon had convinced him of even

possible? Would Princess Gwenivere ever help them persuade Roland to give up the Dagger?

Likely not, he thought, fighting off disheartenment. His doubt was confronted with the way his mother had looked when he'd last seen her, the way her bones had so prominently stuck out from beneath her clothes and the way her eyes had looked on with such fatigue. How much longer did she have? How much longer until their enemies knew she was ill?

This plan isn't going to work, he told himself, taking another breath. *It isn't going to work . . . but I still have to try.*

"To change the subject," he started, stealing back Fiona's attention. "I have a query of a more local sort."

"I've learned a great deal of that as well," she said smugly. "What is it you wish to know?"

Dietrich looked around the room and leaned in close to Fiona, curling his finger toward himself. She glanced around the room herself, her expression a mixture of annoyance and curiosity, then slowly leaned in too.

"The man they call Zoran," Dietrich whispered. "The Dragon Keeper."

"Ah." Fiona grinned as she declined the server's attempt to fill her glass. Dietrich cursed under his breath, assuming the refusal of drink meant their meal ended. *Speak of him to the wrong people, and they will have you shackled*, he heard Brelain say. He was nervous now that Fiona was one of those people.

"I no longer wish to be here," she said, gathering her things. "Though I do wish to spend more time with you. I shall tell you all you wish to know, but perhaps as pillow talk, rather than table talk."

Dietrich stood up as Fiona did and noted how little she left on the table for the server. He glanced at the band along her finger, a sizeable elemental diamond atop it as she clenched her book. He forced a smile, neither agreeing nor dismissing her request.

“You are married, to a wealthy man who takes good care of you.”

“I’m married to an old man,” she countered. “One who only takes care of my financial needs. He hardly satisfies me any other way.”

She grinned, then turned her back and headed confidently toward the exit. Dietrich pulled some coin from his pocket and left it atop her pay, winking at the server as he followed behind. Truthfully, she was more a temptation than Fiona.

“I shall accompany you home,” he said, holding the door open for her as she walked. “But I’m afraid that’s all I can do.”

“A shame,” Fiona said, though the seductive lilt in her voice still held. She smiled and laced her hand through his. “Perhaps another day then. Now go on, ask away about the Dragon Keeper.”



Dragons are amongst the rarest of known fiends. From all accounts of them, they are intelligent, dangerous, and able to absorb any elements forced upon them.

An excerpt from *Fire and Fiends*

CHAPTER I I

DIETRICH



Many a road connected the East and the West, some mighty as they swiftly rose to great heights, others moderate as they slowly wound and twisted about. To the north led voyagers to Yendor and the Arctic, snow always present as an endless winter grasped their lands. Few took the paths that led there, even fewer willingly, most footsteps marking the chained feet of prisoners sentenced to bitter deaths.

The southern roads led to cheerier lands, well-crafted signs indicating the pleasantries that awaited varying trekkers. Adventurers, eager to find purpose throughout the world's corners, would pass through to see the wonders, checking off their maps hastily as they searched for the next marker to set. Others, more inclined to complete their faith's callings, journeyed to the temples of Alivad and Stormhold, giving their bequests to the priests and priestesses before slowly venturing

to the next points of their pilgrimages.

It was neither for pleasure nor for religious fulfillment that Dietrich traveled along the mountains. His was a journey still set in obligation, forcing him to imagine the lands beyond each path he passed. A rose with no thorns, the image of Xenith, nearly bloomed before his eyes, the vivid reds and dark shadows along the sign's slats almost enough to sway him to lean in and smell its budding petals. He sat atop Zar for a time, bringing the horse to a standstill as he gazed at the rocky road beyond and tried to convince himself he and his steed could hasten through its terrain.

Had time permitted it, he would have gladly accepted the coolness of the cliffs over the heat of the desert, but time itself discouraged his hopeful thoughts. His injury had set him back, too many days gone by and too many nights wasted in the comforts of taverns' beds. Afoot, or along Zar's back, it didn't matter. A different creature would have to bring him across the borders.

"Damn Abaddon and his mad plotting," Dietrich muttered, kicking Zar along. It wasn't really his brother's fault, he knew, as his own dabbling in local matters had been the true source of his altered travels, but he was too fatigued to blame himself.

Grey hair, grey beard, even grey eyes, he heard Fiona say. *Grey eyes. Rare, wouldn't you say? I myself have never been so close to see them, but I've seen the man from afar. And when the mountain man is among us, his dragons linger in the sky.*

Dragons. Fiends. Ancient beings from the Age of Old, susceptible to no element, in control of all. Highly intelligent, many said, or more accurately many read, few having actually laid eyes upon them.

"Ah, my dear brother, if only you knew what you asked of me," Dietrich said, his eyes lost in the words before him. Another sign, a good distance from any of notable passage, stood erect, strokes of blood conveying the words **PATH OF DRAGONS**

in several tongues. With warranted caution, Dietrich dismounted from his wary horse, gently tugged on the reins, and sang nervously as he led them down the narrow path:

First there were many, ladies aplenty,
Come, they came, each to my door.
Prudes there were few, my experience new,
Come morn, come morn, they left a bit sore.

Dietrich grinned, the words to the old song slowly coming back to him. His and Abaddon's watchman Culter had sung it to them as boys, the meaning of the lyrics lost on the younger prince. Dietrich had been of age, though, laughing as much at Culter's crudeness as he did his brother's humored but confused expressions. He paused his singing for a moment, realizing Zar had calmed at his voice, and continued.

Then there was Lassie, a lady so classy,
Come, she came, in the cover of night.
But she fell from such squander, over cliff down yonder,
Come morn, come morn, her head wasn't right.

Then there was Crole, a beautiful soul
Come, she came, a book in her hand.
'Twas poems she talked, then the bed she rocked.
Come morn, come morn, she could hardly stand.

Zar gave an approving snort. Dietrich laughed, singing louder as the tenseness in his muscles loosened.

ELLIOT BROOKS

Haggard or dumb, more still seemed to come,
Over and over, to the neighbors' dismay.
We tried to be quiet, but still caused a riot,
Come morn, come morn, no more words they could say.

Then there was Klister, this one a mister,
Come, he came, for the sleep he had lost.
With a yell and a roar, I was knocked to the floor,
Come morn, come morn, my manhood the cost.

In the end there was none, the ladies all done,
Come, they came, to Klister's dwelling.
Now *I* had to listen, to all the fun *I* was missin',
Though come morn, come morn . . . he'd be itchy
and smelling.

As the song ended, a loud call took its place. Instinctively Dietrich ducked and pulled the bucking steed over to the mountain walls, *calling* a crossbow and scanning the sky. He lifted his weapon to take aim, but the Path of Dragons had plunged them deeper and deeper into a narrow canyon.

His view was obstructed by the rocks surrounding him.

Quickly Dietrich cast up a thin wall of ice, tall enough to ensure Zar couldn't flee. The stallion whinnied, begged for them to be free, but Dietrich kept his element steady. He stood still, made sure the balance on the ice and his weapon were set, and slowly tiptoed forward.

Silence, aside from Zar, was all he heard. The air was painfully still. Each tiny step he took thudded like stomps, the thin gravel sliding beneath his feet. He held his breath. The canyon was winding farther down as it curled, his view of what lay ahead narrowed even further. He crouched down,

sweat beating down his brow, and lunged around the corner.

Nothing.

He held his weapon up, adrenaline forcing his heart to pound violently. He kept his stance, his feet sturdy beneath him. His eyes darted across the new clearing. With a hesitant grimace, he lowered his arms and *vanished* his weapon.

The call returned, louder now, fire suddenly plunging toward where he stood. Dietrich ran, barely able to outrun the swooshing of wings. The shadow of them closed in on him as he tried to return to his stallion. He stumbled on the jagged path, scarcely managing to keep his balance, but the ice element he held dissipated as his grasp on it faltered. Zar was nowhere in sight. Dietrich was left with the feebleness of his own feet to escape.

He could feel the heat of the flames behind him. The fiend barely missed him as its breaths of fire cascaded down. He *called* back his crossbow, slowly but steadily, cursing each dreadfully long second that passed. Knowing he couldn't outrun the winged beast, he took aim and released. Bolt after bolt fired with frantic precision. The flames ceased, replaced by a wounded bellow. The dragon above him crashed into the canyon's depths.

Dietrich watched, his chest burning as he took the moment to refill his lungs. The scaled creature cried out in pain, dust and dirt swirling around it.

Guardedly, the prince stepped forward, one foot cautiously following the next as he held up his weapon. The dirt and sand floated into nothingness, the sight of the injured dragon now laid out before him.

It looked at him with slit eyes, almost humanlike, surveying him as he neared. Mesmerized, Dietrich released his crossbow and took in the mystic creature, its watchful gaze an icy blue against the charcoal of its scales. He sensed its suffering, felt compelled to ease its pain, somehow as much a part of

him in that moment as it was a part of the dragon itself. He stepped closer still, warily, his own eyes watching the fiend's as they followed his every step.

Its wings. That's where the bolts had struck. There was no evidence of the now-faded bolts, but dark blood spilled from where they'd pierced. Anywhere else and the bolts would've likely been deflected, the thick scales like a suit of armor around the dragon's body. The wings were thin, though, a skin-like substance no different perhaps than a bird without its feathers. Dietrich thought of Brellain's elixir, tucked somewhere in his satchel along Zar's back. Perhaps if he found the stallion and retrieved the elixir, he might be able to use it.

Not likely it would work, he thought, oddly tortured as the beast lay wounded before him. *It's not meant for fiends.*

The dragon was large, bigger than Zar even in its curled position, but not as large as he'd expected.

A swift death would be the more compassionate choice.

He exhaled in lament and leaned down beside the beautiful creature. He extended his hand out toward where it lay. It didn't move, though he knew its legs and body could, instead lying still as his hand met its neck. The scales were cool, despite a sense of warmth beneath them, likely remnants of the fire it had cast. He stroked its side, comforted it, wishing terribly its slit eyes would look away as he reached for one of his *touched* daggers.

I am not your enemy, a voice said. Dietrich froze, instantly releasing the hilt of his blade. The dragon continued to stare, knowing he had heard, yet Dietrich couldn't find it in himself to believe it as truth. It was a trick; dragons were known to deceive men, trap them within their lairs with elemental metal and fortune only to devour them. That was what this was, a mind game, some form of element from the Age of Old. Fearful, Dietrich again reached for his dagger, this time with no hesitation as he released it from his sheath.

As he raised his arm to deliver the fatal strike, a heavy blow fell against his head. Blackness, and the knowing eyes of the dragon, were the last thing he saw before he collapsed to the ground.



Drummers, from the desert tribes, pounded on their drums, their garb laden with colorful layers of pinks and greens and blues as their jewels sparkled from the sun. The women danced and spun, sheer cloths shielding their faces and stomachs as their feet jingled with repetition. The constant pounding, never ceasing, never ending, the twirling and jumping never stopping . . .

Dietrich at last opened his eyes from his dreaming, vertigo bringing about what little rested in his stomach. When he'd finished, the smell of his breath nearly made him hurl again.

"You're dehydrated," a man said. "You'll feel better soon."

Dietrich hardly heard, the pounding still continuing to pulse against his head.

"I hadn't thought you'd be out for so long," the man continued, "but it seems I struck you harder than intended. You must forgive me of that. You would've done the same if a blade was about to be cast on your loved one."

Dietrich sat back and wiped his mouth with his sleeve until the sensation of vomiting subsided. He opened his eyes again and squinted as he tried to keep the light from beaming against him. Slowly he brought his gaze to where the man stood, the body of a dragon lying calmly beside him. It hardly moved aside from the steady rise and fall from its breath, its reptilian lids keeping its eyes hooded.

"You're Zoran," Dietrich muttered, noting the man's grey

beard and hair. The man said nothing, only continued to mend the wounds to the dragon's wings. He didn't face him, more concerned with his strange pet, but Dietrich was certain grey eyes would peer at him if he turned.

Curious, he glanced around, not looking for but a moment before the glare of another dragon faced him. It was larger than the other, and darker, not a blink or a twitch to distract it from its guarded watch. Dietrich sat motionless, knowing the creature despised him, something startlingly human emitting from its stance.

"It attacked me," he said, as much to the man as to the new dragon. "I had no choice."

Zoran remained silent. He looked down at the dragon he tended, met its stare, then spoke again.

"Savine thought you were another," he said simply. He walked away from the wounded dragon, draping a blanket over its back before wiping his hands clean in a washbasin. He grabbed a towel and padded his hands dry before tossing it to Dietrich.

"Clean it," he demanded, cocking his head toward the floor. "I've had my share of tending to the mess you've made."

The man walked to a chair in the corner of the shed and fell into its embrace. The prince did as he commanded, careful not to lean forward too quickly as he wiped his vomit up. When he completed his task, he looked back over to the man, wordlessly asking what to do next.

"There is a waste bucket over there," he said, pointing.

Dietrich stood carefully, trying not to get any closer to the glaring dragon than needed. As he walked across the room, he knew the eyes of the beast followed.

"Who are you?" Zoran asked, leaning back in his chair. Dietrich thought on the question, never fond of revealing his stature, but one quick glance at the fiend beside him and he knew which name to give.

“Dietrich, son of Harold, son of Rorik, prince of Sadie.” He grimaced slightly, the titles sounding overly pompous to him. With as many times as he had heard Abaddon introduce himself in such a way, he hadn’t thought he would hate it so much when he spoke it of himself. The Dragon Keeper seemed to care little of the formalities, though, his grey eyes glancing over at the larger dragon briefly before turning back to him.

“I believe you, Dietrich, son of Harold, son of Rorik.” There was a hint of mockery in his tone. “I am Zoran, son of Eva’uhl and Vorin. I have no ancestors beyond them.” He grinned slightly. “Why have you come here, Prince? What purpose do you have with me?”

Dietrich looked regretfully at the wounded dragon—Savine, as Zoran had called her—before responding.

“I wish to make it to Xenith, by way of your . . . dragons.” It sounded foolish, now that he said it aloud, but he kept going. “I have pressing matters that involve the royalty of the western peoples, matters that concern the continuation of Sadie’s prosperity and freedom. I would take the footpaths to Xenith, but a fiend attacked me early in my crossing and made travel by horseback . . . ” he paused, nervous suddenly as he thought of Zar. Where had the stallion gone? Had he made it out of the canyon, or had the other, larger dragon . . .

He didn’t want to think about it.

“Making travel by horseback too slow.”

Zoran again turned to look at the other dragon. They stared silently for a time.

“Your stallion is safe. He’s residing in my stables.”

Dietrich furrowed his brows, daunted by how strangely perceptive the Keeper seemed to be. As if to mock him, the larger dragon showed him her fangs.

“As for whether you can make passage by way of dragon,” Zoran continued, “that depends on whether Seera can forgive you for what you’ve done to our beloved Savine.”

The prince met Seera's icy glare, somewhat defensive as she glowered with unwarranted hatred. After a moment he traded her vengeful eyes for those of the resting Savine's, remorseful as he took in the sight of her tattered wings.

"Will she fly again?" he asked quietly. Oddly, despite it having been her who had attacked him, it was she of the two dragons he felt drawn to. *The other can rot in darkness.*

Zoran exhaled loudly. "Dragons heal, but slowly. There are few flesh wounds that can truly harm them though. She'll be fine."

Dietrich nodded in relief, grateful his defense had not been fatal. He wanted to reach out to Savine, feel her tranquil spirit again as he did in the canyon, but he refrained. He didn't need to do anything impulsive after the damage he'd caused.

"You said she thought I was someone else," he started. "Who comes against you? Perhaps I can aid you in exchange for your—for Seera's help."

Zoran grinned, as if Dietrich's very offer amused him. He shook his head, his chair rocking as he rested his hands in his lap.

"The people I fear are not insurgence members who meet in the alleys of Sovereignty, Sadie. Your enemies are dangerous in their own ways, I do not contest that, but they aren't as powerful as the beings I seek solace from. Your offer is appreciated, but useless. Seera will decide your worth on other terms."

Dietrich nodded in acceptance, surprised by how much the elderly man knew of Sadie. He supposed Fiona and Bre-lain had both mentioned his passing through the towns, the man likely gathering what little he needed from the shops and the markets. News of the continent was likely something he overheard from conversations of passerby.

"I am tired," Zoran announced suddenly, rising from his chair. "I, unlike you, haven't been asleep the past few hours. Drink some water and drink some tea with my herbs if your head bothers you. I'm going to rest."

The Dragon Keeper brushed past the prince, not bothering to say any more as he walked away. Dietrich grinned uncomfortably at Seera, his hands clenching tightly as he remained alone with her and Savine. He headed toward the cabinet Zoran had pointed to, curious of the different herbs the mountain man possessed. With nowhere to go and nothing to do, the prince grabbed an herb, smelled it, and decided to indulge.

I am writing to you from the halls of Voradeen's palace. It is the most remarkable of things, though I write that with the limited experiences of a former slave. I'm sure to you, my beautiful queen, this place would pale in comparison to your sky city. That still doesn't make it any less wondrous to me.

Queen Rose is an avid supporter of the arts and has told me she will commission a painting of the palace so that I may show it to you. Hopefully it will not be damaged when I make my return to Sadie.

*I gave your gift to the princess. She seemed quite fond of it.
All my best to our sons. Kiss them each for me and tell them I love them.
I pray safety for all of you.*

A letter between Harold and Lenore of Sadie

CHAPTER 12

GWENIVERE



Gwenivere lay in her bed, birds singing their songs as the sun peeked through her window. She stretched with invigoration, every morning waking in Voradeen's palace like waking up to a dream. It was such a contrast to the castle fortress, which had prisonlike walls that seemed to keep the very thought of the outside world at bay. Her mother had hated it too. She'd insisted, over and over and over again, that unseen mold made her lungs ache. Coughs would follow her complaints, and a convincing hand would press at her chest, but as soon as Gerard's gaze drifted away, she'd give Gwenivere a wink.

They'd both preferred living in Voradeen's palace.

Gwenivere lazily rolled from her bed, the carpet at her feet sneaking through her toes. She scrunched them tightly, pulling the soft fabric tight against her skin, then strolled to her

window and pulled the drapes open to her balcony. With a firm press to the glass, the window creaked slightly, the cool breeze of morning slipping through. She took a deep breath, listening to the sounds of her capital, and watched as it slowly began to wake.

This was what she loved. This was what she cherished.

She wondered how often she'd have moments like these when she held the throne.

And then it hit her, the memory she'd tried so hard to forget. The specks of red, the terrifying bark of her father's cough. The horse he'd fallen from as he'd clung to his chest . . .

I need a distraction. Gwenivere shut the window harshly, blocking out the pretty song a bird was about to sing. She headed toward her library, the crammed shelves running from floor to ceiling, and searched for something to read.

A vast array of history texts and religious teachings lay unevenly scattered, fantastical stories mixed in throughout. A ladder was needed to reach the highest of them, though what lay on the top shelves and what lay on the bottom was in no particular order. As a girl, Gwenivere had insisted her mother hide the most boring texts where she couldn't reach. The queen had happily obliged, even going so far as to tell Garron the ladder was a fearsome and unsafe mechanism to be used by a small girl. It was a constant battle then, Rose against the Golden Knight, both moving the books they thought worth reading to the most accessible places. Meanwhile, Gwenivere would steal away to the balcony, blissful in her moments away from tutors and training as she stared at the pictures of her favorite books.

Without thinking, she reached out and grabbed the first binding she saw. She brushed off the dust and read the title, *The Breaking of Mesidia*, holding her breath to keep from sneezing. When she was sure the dust had settled, she opened the cover and stared at the first page. Squinting, she read through

a handwritten note that had been placed inside the text.

Your tutor has an ass for a chin. I feel like a scoundrel just looking at him.

It was jest, from Roland. She laughed at the writing, the elegant penmanship so opposing to its words. She'd tried so hard to shut out memories of Mesidia's prince and fellow Guardian that she'd nearly forgotten the spring he'd spent studying alongside her. Her father had thought it wise, and Roland's too, to have her best friend around in the months after her mother had died. It had felt perfect at the time, as if her broken heart had found its mending, but now . . .

She forced the book shut and shoved it back where she'd found it. She'd find a different book.

After a quick scan of everything eye level, Gwenivere decided to search on the ground. The shelves up high were filled with more books from her studies, more boring texts like the ones Garron insisted she read. She was certain more jests and flirtations from Roland lay within their covers, so she opted for the texts she'd read as a girl. Surely something for a child couldn't harbor solemnity.

The Tales of Eve, she read, kinking her neck to see the tiny spine. The book stuck to those surrounding it as she pulled it out, too many seasons having gone by with it lying untouched by human hands. This would be good then, for her and the book, as she needed her thoughts occupied and it needed reading. Stories weren't meant to go untold.

Quickly, though, Gwenivere realized she couldn't read the text. Many of the pages were in another language—an ancient one, if the different letters were any indication—and the ones that were readable had been too damaged to make out. The paintings themselves were stunning, though, vibrant and vivid, and she remembered cold winters by the fire, curled up beside her mother, guessing at what was happening in each scene. She could practically smell her then, the scent of wildflowers

on her hair and vanilla on her skin. It was a fond memory, and one, unlike those that recently plagued her, that she allowed herself to see.

What do you think this is here, Gwenivere? What do you think is happening on this page?

Turquoise water, gently crashing against the white sand of a beach. And at its edge, just out of its reach, stood a man and a woman with grey eyes, both looking back at a forest of long-leaved trees with tears along their cheeks.

I think they're leaving Eve for Abra'am. And I think they're sad.

Gwenivere stared at the page, pushing it down to marvel at its beauty. *Light, I was a dreary child*, she decided, remembering her reply. She flipped to the next painting to see what came next, to hear her mother's velvety voice in her head as she took her turn to decide when a knock at her door interrupted her musings.

"Milady, it's Becca!" a voice called. "May I enter?"

Sighing, Gwenivere shut the *Tales of Eve*. She adored Becca, loved her as closely as an heir could love a servant, but the girl's incessant chatter was enough to make her ears bleed. She'd want to discuss all the royals, all the handsome men who had come to negotiate at the Peace Gathering and dance at the masquerade. And Gwenivere would want to bury herself in the ground, hoping there was enough soil between her and Becca to keep her endless ranting unheard.

"A moment," she answered. She trotted across the room and swung open the door, her chambermaid waiting with hands twirling between her hair.

"You're . . . blond?" Gwenivere said. Becca, once having hair a red shade similar to her own, giggled and flipped her head.

"I used pepper tree leaves," she whispered, leaning close as if it were a secret. She pulled a small bag out from her waist pouch and lifted it up, her blue eyes wild with excitement as she opened it for Gwenivere to see.

“I brought some for you!” she exclaimed, answering Gwenivere’s raised brow. “I remember how you used to tell me you didn’t think anyone in all of Abra’am would know who you were if it weren’t for your hair. So, I thought, hmm, perhaps we should test that theory before you’re married and chasing after tykes!”

Gwenivere shuddered at the thought. She smiled at her servant, though, deciding the offer was kind enough, and hoped the girl didn’t see the dread the image had evoked.

“Thank you, Becca. You’re very considerate.”

The servant beamed, only hearing the words and not the tone.

“What’s that?” she asked, pointing as Gwenivere accepted the bag of leaves.

The princess looked down, confused, before realizing she still held the *Tales of Eve* in her hand. “A book I used to look through as a child.”

Becca gaped, staring at the story eagerly. Gwenivere handed it over, watching her servant’s mouth hang open as she flipped through its pages.

“It’s stunning!” she said. “Where did you get it?”

Where had she gotten it? She stood silent for a moment, raking through the hundreds of people who had bestowed her gifts on their ventures through Xenith. Most often the gifts had been portraits of boys her age, sons or nephews foreign kings thought would make good husbands for her when the day came. Few royals had brought her gifts she enjoyed. There had been one, though, a bear of a man, the memory of him slowly sinking back into place. She remembered her mother’s hands rigid against her shoulders at their meeting, the man’s golden skin stretched from muscle and lined with scars. He’d had a beard, a bird’s nest compared to her father’s trimmed one, and his face looked spotted from years in the sun. But his eyes, dark green beneath hooded lids, had held an air of kindness and hope.

“King Harold,” she answered, “from Sadie.”

Becca looked up in shock. “Sadie? I wouldn’t think the desert slaves had anything this nice.”

Gwenivere snatched the book back. She wanted to chastise Becca, tell her off for being so poorly informed, but instead she chose to hold her tongue. The girl was hardly past her sixteenth spring, and with three sisters and a mother to look after, she hardly had time for an education. Besides, Garron had scolded Gwenivere herself enough times for saying something she shouldn’t, and she’d always felt the fool for it. She softened her voice as she answered, “Harold was nice, and so was his gift.”

Becca’s head bobbed. Her now-blond curls bobbed too.

Behind her, casually striding down the palace’s halls, a foreign diplomat approached. There had been a handful of them since Gwenivere had come to the capital, many having arrived early in hopes they might speak with her father privately. The Peace Gathering would be a public affair, a jumbled mess of ambassadors and monarchs arguing on behalf of their nations, and the masquerade would simply be to celebrate the fact that no one had killed one another negotiating. It was already plenty for the King of Peace to offer, but greedy nobles were still eager to snatch him aside for themselves in hopes of secret arrangements. Xenith was powerful, and wealthy, a nation of scholars amid ruffians and thieves. No other nation was regarded so highly or sought after so fervently for political pull.

The man’s pace quickened down the hall, and Gwenivere hurriedly tried to usher her servant inside her chambers. She’d been told not to engage with other royals if it could be avoided, not without Garron or her father himself around, but before she could get the door shut—

“Lady Gwenivere!” the man called. He waved jovially and trotted over, his long legs placing him feet away. Gwenivere held in her sigh, placing her best smile on her face before

turning back around and facing him.

“Edifor,” she said, dipping her head. With all the nobles about, she was sure she’d forget at least one person’s name, or mispronounce them. There were already hundreds of foreigners residing within the palace, and most weren’t even people of significance compared to who would attend the actual events. But Gerard had been insistent she learn to place each name with each face, and Garron had been adamant in following the king’s orders. She’d flipped through page after page of portraits, running over again and again who each person was, what nation they resided from, and what they likely wanted to gain from the Peace Gathering. Edifor of Yendor, a lean, sharp-eyed man with round spectacles and snug clothes, was one of the few whose interests her father had decided she shouldn’t know.

It made him all the more intriguing.

“You’re up and about early, milady,” he said, gesturing toward the sun through the hallway’s windows. It was far from early, and her sleepwear certainly confirmed she wasn’t “about,” but Gwenivere supposed he couldn’t say she was lazy and should be dressed. Especially when she had a reputation for being temperamental.

“I enjoy the palace,” she answered, “my chambers most of all.”

She hoped he would get the hint, intriguing as he may be, and leave her and Becca alone. The chambermaid, however, looked as if she were starving for him to say more. She’d likely never heard a Yendorian accent.

“As do I, of my own chambers,” he said. “Your father is most hospitable to allow us to stay.”

Gwenivere smiled weakly. She stood silently for a moment, hoping the awkwardness of it would make him scamper away, but again he stayed put. His eyes, gold beneath his spectacles, looked down at her chest, resting there far too long. She felt her cheeks flush, her throat bobbing as she remembered her

knight's words on their woodland trek: *Just call for me, and I will do to them everything a lady of your dignity cannot.*

She opened her mouth to scold him, to rehash a foul jest she'd heard of Yendorian men, when she realized what he was staring at.

Her Amulet.

"I may be bold to say this," he started, "but I've been told you would have married Prince Roland of Mesidia if not for both of your Artifacts." He raised his eyes, his expression inquisitive as he awaited her answer. Beside her, Becca tried to hold back a gasp. Unsuccessfully.

It was bold, and rude, the red *auroras* in Gwenivere's mind brightening. *Let us burn him*, they seemed to say, *let us sear his flesh! How dare he speak to you of such intimate affairs!*

She pushed the *auroras* down, however tempting they might be to *call*, and gave him a warning grin.

"He's a dear friend," she said. "But I suppose Mesidia wasn't ready to place a Yendorian on its throne."

The reference to Dorian Cliffborne was low, she knew, but she hardly cared. The ambassador was her friend, a brother figure to Roland and a likeable man, but Edifor shouldn't have asked of her marital prospects. Drawing on Dorian's Yendorian roots, implying it was his blood that kept him from being fit to rule, was an insult to Edifor and his people. She stood steadfast, hopeful his pride was damaged enough to bid her farewell.

Instead, he met her false grin with one of his own. His gold eyes practically glowed.

"Perhaps you're right, milady," he said. "Although, the way I saw it, King Pierre's decision to bestow Roland the Dagger and the throne was more to keep Natalia Barie from being Mesidia's next queen. It's certainly no secret she and Dorian were once betrothed." Edifor pulled a hand from behind his back, glancing at his nails before giving her a bored glance.

“Perhaps the conclusion then is not that Mesidia needn’t have a Yendorian on the throne, but that it needn’t have a Victorian. But I suppose we shall see about that soon enough.”

He nodded to her, then to Becca, his spectacles dipping down his nose as he wished them a good day. Gwenivere leaned against her door, her chest rising and falling with angered breaths. What reason was there to bring up Mesidia’s civil disputes and her romance with Roland? She looked to Becca, hoping she might voice her concerns, but the girl’s gaze was following the Yendorian until he was out of sight.

“What was *that* about?” she purred. She seemed more fascinated at the implying comments then worried. “Interesting, wouldn’t you say?”

Gwenivere pulled at her lace robe, folding the fabric over her Amulet. She wished the fabric was thicker, if only to shield the incessant, shifting glow.

“Yes,” she replied, staring down the massive hall. “Very interesting indeed.”



Though her mind had been consumed with the morning’s encounter, Becca’s restless chatter eventually pulled Gwenivere out of it. The chambermaid spoke more about her new blond hair, the blond men she’d seen and thought handsome, and then of any men she’d found handsome. Gwenivere knew her servant wasn’t simpleminded; the girl’s conversations were often petty and shallow for Gwenivere’s own benefit. Most of her days were filled with sparring Garron, honing in her skills with *touched* weapons and shields, *called* weapons and shields, and elements. If she wasn’t doing that, then she was reading about all those things, and usually from that Light-forsaken

book Garron loved so dearly, *The Art of Calling*. From there it was more reading, researching fiends and languages and histories, then it was dancing and etiquette, then harp lessons, then whatever other thing her father could fit in her days. He wasn't around often, the calls of war so tempting for other nations that they needed his wisdom to help ease their quarrels. Philanthropic ventures consumed most of his time, and thus, knowing she had no one but her younger brother Aden to speak to, he used her academics to pass the time. She was lonely without her mother, and she was burdened without Roland to write to, so an unending, tireless routine was his solution to make her forget.

She didn't forget, though. Not with the Amulet hanging around her neck to remind her.

Becca may like to chat, but she does it to help me. She glanced at her servant through her vanity's mirror, waiting patiently for the girl to catch her gaze through her intricate braiding. Anytime one of Gwenivere's hairs didn't quite stay put, Becca would—with great effort—*call* a bit of heat to smooth it down. Given how inept she was with elements, Gwenivere used to think Becca would burn her hair off, but the servant seemed to have mastered *calling* just enough to control it for varying hairstyles. She did love hair so very, very much, and thus, it took her a great deal of time to pull her attention away from it long enough to notice Gwenivere's stare. She beamed at the smile that accompanied it, then carried on.

"I forgot to say so earlier, but I believe the al'Murtaghs have arrived. Isn't that grand? They're very kind, and amusing, especially Peter."

Gwenivere had spent her fair share of time with Roland's cousins, and she loved them each as her own family. Peter, she decided, *was* especially amusing.

"I'll have to seek them out later."

"Yes indeed. Natalia is with them, though, but so is Dorian.

He makes up for her awfulness, wouldn't you agree?"

Gwenivere looked at Becca through her mirror again. She knew that tone, knew the implication of it. She wasn't in the mood to speak of marriage, though, or the fact that her father expected it of her so soon. Circumvention, unfortunately, had never been easy with Becca.

"I agree that Natalia is awful, yes," she said. She winced as Becca tugged at her hair.

"And Dorian? What do you think of him?"

Gwenivere sighed, confined to her chair and trapped into speaking. She gave the query time, thinking through how best to answer her servant. She wanted to make it very clear that she had no intention of marrying Dorian. Not when Roland thought him a brother.

"I have no sisters," she started, "not like you. I only have Aden, and he's fifteen springs my younger. For many years, when the al'Murtaghs and the Laignesses and I would get together as children, I only had Elizabeth, and she only had me. We're both twenty springs, and we're both girls, and I hold her very dear to my heart.

"It's a secret to most, but Elizabeth is very fond of Dorian. She may even love him, though I doubt she'd ever admit that. So, to answer your query, I think he is a fine man, and I hope someday he and Elizabeth find happiness with each other."

Becca grunted, chewing on her lip as she stared at her own reflection. She pondered the hair atop Gwenivere's head, looking at it from multiple angles, then nodded. Whether to the braiding, or the answer to her question, Gwenivere wasn't sure.

Gratefully, before Becca could toss in more implicative questions, a knock sounded at the door. Gwenivere shrugged at the expectant look Becca gave, uncertain who else might have come to visit. Garron had been given the day off—or she had, depending on how she looked at it—and Aden had insisted Maximus teach him more about elements after their

challenge in the forest.

To Gwenivere's delight, when Becca opened the door, a fresh-faced Elizabeth stood waiting.

"May I enter?" she asked.

Gwenivere laughed, hurrying from her chair to greet her friend. The two embraced tightly, the smell of a bath still clinging to Elizabeth's skin and her satin gown. The fabric was likely impossible to wear in Mesidia's colder climates. It was flattering, though, the soft curves of Elizabeth's body outlined nicely where thick wool and fur normally lay.

"Well I have to be going now," Becca said, cutting in. She gave Elizabeth and Gwenivere a warm farewell, then left the room.

"She seems very kind," Elizabeth said. "I remember her from when we were children, when I'd visit you here in the palace. She's the one with all the sisters, and the father who left her mother?"

Gwenivere stared at her friend, perplexed at how casually she referenced a memory she had no need to store. Becca had, after all, only interacted with Elizabeth a few times over the years, and always very briefly. The serving girl had waited on her once or twice and had been around Gwenivere often enough that Elizabeth was bound to see her, but the intimate details of her life were nothing most nobles would bother remembering. Gwenivere admired Elizabeth, for her kindness and her retention. Few others possessed such traits.

"Yes, unfortunately, and I've often tried to give her extra coin beyond her wages, but she always refuses. She says she's only worth the work she does, and she won't accept any more than that. Respectable, certainly, but she's very stubborn—and chatty."

Elizabeth gave a sheepish smile. "Stubborn, hmm? Sounds like someone I know." Her smile broadened to show teeth, her cheeks rounding. "Chatty, though; that's less like the person I know. Does she speak of anything interesting?"

Gwenivere blew air from her cheeks and shook her head. "Marriage proposals," she answered. "Not my favorite topic as of late, but it's the only one anyone seems interested in." She headed toward a set of chairs and ushered Elizabeth to follow.

The pleasant smile Elizabeth wore slipped, her fingers fidgeting as she folded them neatly in her lap. "Whom did Becca suggest? Sometimes those servant girls have better insight than we do."

Gwenivere wished she had a glass of wine, if only to have something occupy her. Before she had wished to brush off Becca's attempts to find her a suitor, but her admittance of Elizabeth's feelings had not been a convenient deterrent. Elizabeth did indeed fancy the ambassador, and while Dorian hadn't the slightest insight, her fancying continued nonetheless. Catherine al'Murtagh, Elizabeth's mother, would never approve. Not with the way Pierre's reputation had been put in question when he'd accepted Dorian into his home, and certainly not after Dorian had courted Natalia Barie. Those years had been difficult for Elizabeth, and Gwenivere was the only one she'd been able to confide in. Peter and William wouldn't understand. If they were sober enough to listen, they would simply tease her, or call her incestual, despite there being no true blood between Dorian and them. And if they weren't sober, they would likely let the secret slip. Someone as sweet as Elizabeth couldn't face the protective wrath Natalia would put on her. The duchess-heir might have broken off her and Dorian's betrothal, but she still preyed on those who stole Dorian's glances.

"No one worth mentioning," Gwenivere said. She gave Elizabeth's hand a reassuring squeeze, then leaned back in her seat. "Though I always enjoy your visits, I'm a bit surprised to find you here so soon after you've arrived. What bit of gossip are you so eager to share? Or is it that you've at last abandoned your pining of men and decided, 'to the darkness with

them all, let us see how ladies differ?"

Elizabeth's cheeks flushed as she shook her head profusely. Gwenivere grinned, amused at her friend's sensibility, and tried with little success to shun her jest's delight.

"I-I have a letter," Elizabeth stuttered. She reached into a pocket in her dress and pulled out a parchment. Along its top, elegant and sapphire blue, lay a four-cleft leaf. "From Roland."

Gwenivere stared at the letter, blinking at it silently. After a moment, she frowned, and glared viciously at her friend. "Why would you bring this? You know my father has forbidden this, do you not?"

Elizabeth winced, her throat bobbing. "Aye, I do. But please, Gwen, I come with good reason. Roland only wanted to convince you that you still have Mesidia as your ally, regardless of whom you marry." She stared at the letter, ran her fingers over the wax of the leaf, and extended it out for Gwenivere to take.

I can't, she thought, peering at the beautiful leaf she'd wanted so badly to see again. *I can't. Father forbade it, Pierre forbade it . . .*

But there it lay, perched so tightly in her friend's grasp. Gwenivere knew she should leave it unopened, leave its words unread and its seal undone, yet the pain of such a thought was almost more than she could bear. She had longed for this, ached for it even, and though she refused to admit it, she had prayed that the Light might grant her one last word with her beloved. They had practically been betrothed for so long. How did he fair now after so many moons? Would he hate the man she married? Would he respect him?

She looked back to Elizabeth, the girl's eyes wide as she shifted her weight in her chair. Her lips tightened, beads of sweat trickling down her cheeks.

If she says it's only to assure alliances, surely there can't be any harm.

She took the letter and tore its seal.

To my Dearest Gwenivere,

Forgive me my unable hand and persistent ways. Shame resides in a man who disobeys the will of his king, and certainly more so the will of his father. Yet I could not sit without action, allowing you to believe I had accepted this fate without protest. Albeit difficult, I have come to accept the words of Gerard as truth, the marrying of our great nations too dangerous so long as we both hold the title of Guardian.

Know that it is with sincerity I admit my disdain for such an outcome. Though it makes no difference to state, none of this would have come to pass had my father given Dorian the Dagger of Eve. He is deserving, noble and strong, yet the woman he had chosen to take as his queen would have ensured my bloodline no longer hold the Mesidian throne. My father made his choice, and though its outcome has negatively altered our fates, he did, as any king should, what he felt was best for his nation. I know Gerard has done the same.

My intention for such statements is to assure you I hold no ill-regard toward your father. The King of Peace is a leader beyond many, his heart mighty and his sword merciful. Yet he commands with the power and respect deserving of his name. I hold no contempt for him, and I hold no contempt for you as you search to find another.

Know that, though it's no longer proper to say, I love you very dearly Gwenivere. I will forever hold you with the highest reverence. Your name will always hold nothing but admiration in my mind.

If ever another were to come along whom I could trust to take my place, so it would be, our hands no longer forbidden from one another. Though, be it that we both still hold our titles, I am afraid such a longing will likely never come.

*Trust in faith and reign with justice.
Your ally and friend,
Roland Laighless*

Gwenivere read the last paragraph over and over, hardly able to withhold her tears at the possible proposition it presented. She folded the letter back up in defiance, refusing to humor the thought of another taking Roland's name as Guardian. The suggestion alone could be seen as treason, especially under the circumstances it had been delivered. She looked back over at Elizabeth, shoving the parchment in its envelope and slamming it in a drawer.

"Have you mentioned this letter to anyone? Does anyone else know it exists?"

Elizabeth shook her head.

"Good." Gwenivere rose from her chair and pointed toward the door. "Speak of this to no one and be gone from my chambers. Best we not give the servants any more to talk about."

PEACE AND TURMOIL

So shall be the beginning of destruction, when the city of the sky will fall, and all the world will know evil.

From an Evean Prophecy

CHAPTER 13

X'ODIA



X'odia sat in the alcove beside her window, the glass propped open to let the ocean breeze come into the room. She lay with her back against the wall, her feet out in front of her and a large book in her hands.

She'd been staring at it for a time before finally realizing that she'd not registered any of the words. Closing it shut, she gazed out over the expansive mass of blue beyond her window.

From where she sat, X'odia could hear the gentle crashing of the water against the sands. The occasional call of a bird, lost from its flock, was the only disruption to the repetitive calm. As the wind brought the taste of salt to her tongue and the Day Star gazed down at its distorted reflection, she wondered if someone else on the other side of the world shared the sight.

She longed to see Abra'am, the dark shores across the sea. How marvelous it would be to feel the snow that fell there, to see the blinding brilliance atop the dark mountains. The trees too would be a wonder, foreigners telling tales of building homes within the trunks and decks across the branches. Even the deserts, filled with grains of gold, stretched as far as the eye could see, an ocean of sand where water dared not saunter.

How different everything would be, so much grander, so much harsher. Continuous contradictions, nothing in harmony. Even the people were provoked by the constant conflict of their kingdoms.

X'odia thought of her father, wishing then that she could speak with him of those troubled peoples who had once brought war on their lands. Alkane of Old, the Savior, Protector, and Guardian of Eve, had lived for centuries, his heart and body made to beat ever-strong by the jewel within his Shield. The darkened barbarians of his time were brought down by his strength, the restoration of a tattered nation preserved.

He was a myth to most, a hero told of in Evean books such as the one she held. X'odia was among the few who knew her father's existence to be truth. It was a hidden truth, the innocence of her people not permitted to know a man of such Knowledge still reigned supreme in the High Council. Her life was one of seclusion, then, as was his, the swirling of her gaze and the nearly ageless body she inhabited proof of the Shield's powers in her veins. She glanced over at her mirror, its likeness the only companion she had, and watched as the colors of her eyes shifted like those in the Shield's jewel.

She cast her ponderings aside and looked back out her window, at last setting her book down and walking outside her cottage. She gently kicked off her sandals and sunk her feet into the warm sand, the tiny white grains falling smoothly between her toes. The ocean crawled to where she walked, extended out to her dark skin, her path hardened as the sand beneath her turned to mud. She smiled and swiftly slipped off her outer garments. Her slim legs carried her from the sun's warmth to the ocean's cover. With a paranoid glance, she crouched down, hid her exposed body under the waves, and submerged herself fully into the clear waters.

As she brought herself back up to the surface, everything around her began to spin. Her swirling eyes glowed brightly,

their shifting colors reflecting with a blinding radiance off the surface of the sea. She tried to bring her hand to her head, tried to make the sudden spinning stop, but every muscle in her body now refused to move.

No, please, no, she begged, I don't want to See anymore!

She tried desperately to cast away the painful vision she knew was coming. Struggle as she might, she couldn't keep it away.

The Sighting was excruciating. It sucked on every ounce of energy, every bit of strength and endurance she had. When it was over, she came to with a convulsion of coughs. She gasped for air, trying to remove the water that'd crept into her lungs. Hurrying out of the sea, she collapsed onto the shore, her eyes burning and her muscles aching. Her bed called to her, the comforts of its soft sheets begging her to rest, but she couldn't keep what she'd Seen from the council of her people.

When she could control her legs again, she rushed over to her clothing, hastily snatched a few of her belongings from her cottage, and began her trek to the High Temple.



“X’odia Daer’dee, Born of Nevaeh, Sky City of Eve . . . ”

X’odia listened to the formalities of her presence, silently praying the old councilman announcing her would hasten his speech. Her thighs and calves burned and her feet ached.

Her priestess’s gown was what she’d chosen to adorn, the veils easily suppressing her swirling eyes. Unfortunately, the thinness of her garb did little to hide the impatience her shifting weight conveyed. She clenched tightly to her soft skirts and hoped the dampness of her palms wouldn’t transfer to the elegant threads.

“Watcher of the Guardians,” the councilman concluded. He looked up, the wrinkles in his forehead deepening, and turned his gaze to her. “What reason do you have to come before us today?”

X’odia nodded her gratitude. “Father Cid Orloff, I thank thee for the moment to speak.” She slowly raised her arms up, lowering the veil she wore from her head. The High Council gasped, at last revealed to her dimly glowing eyes. They were among the few who knew of her existence and the Sight that plagued her, the illumination of her gaze signifying the short time since her vision’s occurrence. “As you can see, I’ve been gifted this day.”

Cid Orloff nodded. The other twelve members whispered their concerned murmurs. Some of the elders’ whispers were not whispers at all, merely muted words spoken in the direction of their neighbors. The sounds echoed against the smooth marble and glass along the floor.

X’odia inhaled deeply, released her breath, and tried to press on through their oblivion.

“Lenore Daer’dee,” she said, “former High Councilwoman and Daughter of Eve, now wife of Harold Rorikson and Queen of Sadie, will pass with the Changing Star.” More gasps followed her announcement, but X’odia continued on. “I saw King Harold of Sadie with Lenore as her *auroras* began to surface. He sat still beside her bath while the remnants of her body drifted to the Land of Light. He shared in word with his youngest son, Prince Abaddon of Sadie, and . . . and was seen falling by his son’s blade.”

X’odia paused and allowed the startling statement to have the moment it deserved. She looked down, the vision of the weeping prince piercing his sword into the belly of the king overwhelming her mind again. The image was not as clear then, more like a blurred moment from a dream or a forgotten memory, but it was vivid enough. She held her stomach, her

exhaustion doing little to combat the disturbing scenes.

“I saw the Cloaked Prince, Prince Dietrich of Sadie,” she went on. “In a second vision, a ripple to the first. He too was killed by Prince Abaddon, somewhere in the deserts of his land, but it was not by the same blade.”

The room fell silent, each in their youths and their years fearing what words the Watcher would speak next. She held that moment, a chill overwhelming her as all breaths remained still in the High Council’s chests. She looked back, noticing for the first time as her father Alkane stood silently in the shadows. He was always nearby the Council, always watching, his dark skin nearly hidden in the shadows as he bore witness to the fate of his people. X’odia wished she could reach out to him, ask him for strength and guidance as she faced the Council’s pressing stares, but his cold eyes gave her no reassurance. His shoulders just heaved, up and down and up again, the Shield of Eve heaving with them as it rested against his back.

“The prophecy of our demise will begin,” X’odia started again. She swallowed, saliva feeling like a boulder as it slid heavily down her throat. She pulled her gaze away from her father’s and met the fearful ones of her leaders.

“Prince Abaddon will slay Prince Dietrich with the Dagger of Eve.”

*Hush and keep your tears
Keep your tears from falling
Look upon the dawn, see the sun
See the sun
Rise and break your chains
You are free my daughter
Rise and break your chains
You are free my son*

Sadiyan slave song

CHAPTER 14

DIE TRICH



Foolish boy. That's all you are. A pity you can hear me.
Dietrich grabbed at his head, his legs curling as his mind spun. He opened his eyes for a second, the darkness of the night making it difficult for him to make anything out, but he thought he could see a set of icy eyes looking back at him. Quickly he tried to clear his hazy sight, identify the body holding the slit gaze, but the sudden twist of hunger in his belly began to consume his thoughts. He sat up, his hopeful stomach instantly forgotten as a sharp pain in the back of his skull forced him to vomit.

The icy eyes were there again, mocking in their watch as Dietrich wiped his mouth. For a moment he remembered his trek, remembered the mountain man and his dragons and his herbs, yet his mind only seemed to remember for a few seconds. He forgot an instant later, the icy eyes terrifying him as

he lay back down to rest. He wrapped his arms around himself and told himself he saw nothing, shutting his lids in a panic as his weary body forced more attempts at sleep.

Nothing but a fool...



“Again with this?”

The prince blinked a few times as he fought against the brightness of morning. Zoran stood above him, his head shaking with disapproval as he said something to his dragons. Dietrich nearly *called* a weapon as he saw them through his grogginess, then remembered the events that had recently transpired. He sat up slowly, a foul taste in his mouth and an ache in his head.

“You’re a prince, are you not?”

Dietrich turned to look at Zoran. His hand was stretched out before him, his fingers gesturing toward the smelling pile of vomit laden with flies.

“Is this any way for a prince to behave?”

Dietrich slowly rose from where he’d slept. “No.” He didn’t need to be told to clean up his mess more than once. He reached for the rag he’d used to gather his vomit from the day before and began wiping. “Though it wouldn’t be the first time.”

He attempted a grin at the old man, but his attempt was only met with a scowl. That, and the cold gaze of the dragons further back.

With those looks one might think I’d shat all over his things. Dietrich bent down, his nose wrinkling as he wiped up his mess. He peaked back over at the trio, their expressions riddled with contempt at the smell they had likely endured all night. *I suppose it certainly doesn’t smell much better than if I had.*

No, it does not.

Dietrich's neck shot up as he heard the woman's voice, but the Keeper was already making his way off, the two dragons following behind him. Had it not been for the grueling headache he felt or the herbs still lingering in him, he might have been more concerned with the voice. In that moment, though, Dietrich decided maddening thoughts were likely side effects of the herbs. All that really mattered then was that he scrub up his mess and gain Seera's approval.

If he could get that, he could get to the masquerade in Xenith.



The next few days proved better than the first. Dietrich did what he could to help Zoran aid in the recovery of Savine's wounded wings. The Keeper would make him hunt, make him spend the day bringing back as much game as he could, only to then feed it to his dragons and send Dietrich back for more.

It was tiresome, the mountainous terrain straining on his lungs, but Dietrich enjoyed the opportunities to explore the cliffs and the canyons. Streams of water trickled through, some small, some flowing, all of them a contrast to the expanse of sand that existed only a few lengths beyond. The birds were different too, their bodies rich with colorful feathers, their songs melodic rather than ugly and cackling. His horse Zar seemed to enjoy the environment too, his trots lighter as they strode through the trees. The soil beneath his hooves was no doubt more pleasant than the hot sand within the desert.

Most of Dietrich's ventures weren't carried out alone. The steady swoosh of Seera's wings were never far from wherever he sauntered. She was always there, her presence somehow known

even when he couldn't see her. There was something about her and Savine, something the Sadiyan prince felt drawn too, yet he couldn't explain what the feeling was. He had always been good with animals, good with the horses he rode and the strays he fed. This was different though. He wondered if it was just the mountain air playing tricks on his mind, or lingering effects of the herbs he'd consumed that first night.

Not tricks, Dietrich heard a voice say. It was not so much a voice but an impulse, his own mind convincing him to accept the insanity. He looked up to the sky to see Seera, her wings gliding effortless overhead. Zar hardly cantered any differently, apparently having already grown accustomed to the scaly fiend's presence. Dietrich shook his head and guided them along, trying to convince himself his sanity was still in check.

Maybe it was that damned elixir Brelain gave me, he thought, fingering where the seven-tailed serpent had left his newest scar. *Maybe it's made me crazy*. He smiled as he thought of the woman, his mood instantly lighter as he allowed himself to reminisce. He all but forgot the strange feelings in his head as his thoughts drifted to simple musings.



"Have you ever had deer?" Zoran asked one evening. Dietrich politely put down the map he'd been drawing, shaking his head as he folded the unfinished parchment.

"No," he answered. He had only caught small game like rabbits, or the occasional fish from the stream. He wasn't sure what had evoked Zoran's query until Seera landed beside them, a deer in her jaws. Her icy eyes looked almost playful as she trekked over to Savine.

“We shall skin it soon,” Zoran said, beckoning Dietrich over. “First, help me with Savine’s wings.”

The prince hurriedly did as he was told, making his way over to where Zoran and the two dragons sat. The Keeper pulled off the blanket wrapped over his dragon and dabbed ointment onto her wounds. He placed the jar between where he and Dietrich sat, his grey gaze gesturing toward Savine, then to it, then back to her.

“You hit her a few times,” he said. “There’s more wounds than just the one I’m mending.”

Dietrich nodded and reached into the jar, surprised by the pleasantness of the ointment’s scent. He had thought everything that helped healing smelled bad, though he supposed all he’d ever smelled were the elixirs Abaddon made. Perhaps the things toward the western parts of the world simply smelled better.

Savine opened her eyes for a moment when Dietrich patted on the ointment, her throat releasing a deep, purr-like bellow. He wondered if it stung, if it was painful in any way, his approach taking after the mountain man’s as he rather forcefully rubbed the ointment in. Dietrich gave Savine a sympathetic smile, regretful as his calloused palms ran over where his bolts had struck. Her lids closed shut again, her purrs ceasing, but something in her scales seemed to convey a semblance of forgiveness. Dietrich could feel it, could sense the odd connection he’d felt before, heightened now as his fingers rested against her. He inhaled deeply. The strange sensation of Savine’s voice was somewhere in his mind before the sound of Zoran’s own snapped him back to focus.

“Tell us of yourself,” he insisted.

Dietrich’s brows rose at the man’s use of *us*. He chuckled and gave him a grin before stumbling to find an answer.

“I don’t speak much of myself to people,” he admitted, glancing over at Seera. The larger of the two dragons stared at him coldly, the lightness of her eyes seeming brighter against

the darkness of her charcoal scales. The iciness in her gaze lost some of its sting as the blaze of a fire burned beside them. “I suppose I don’t know what to say.”

“How did you become the Shadow?” Zoran waved his hand Dietrich’s way. “How did you become the Cloaked Prince—the Assassin Prince?”

Dietrich followed the wordless command to release Savine as Zoran placed the blanket back over her.

He felt oddly empty after his hand pulled away from her scales.

“Well,” he said, unsure how to start. Zoran hardly seemed to be listening, occupied instead by the carving knife he pulled from his ankle sheath and the body of the deer he now walked toward. Dietrich would have remained silent if not for the expectant grey gaze that pressed him to follow.

“My father, Harold Rorikson,” he started, “led a slave revolt nearly thirty years ago and freed Sadie from Prianthia’s enslavement. When I was a boy, nearly fifteen years of age, my father took his first trek to the West, said he wanted to learn from the diplomats and the scholars of such righteous and enlightened people. He desired to make Sadie strong, keep the minds of its people sharp and the blades of our swords sharper. He believed the people of the West might help him do that.

“Many of my father’s advisors told him not to go, insisting the western peoples are a troublesome lot, and the East would be better off without them. Though nations like Xenith helped us gain our freedom, many stated they had also turned a blind eye to us when they reaped the profits of our shackled feet and beaten backs. The War of Fire tore the West apart, and they tore Prianthia and Sadie to pieces with them. Such a thing might’ve been true, though perhaps it might not have. Either way, my father was set on seeking more aid and allegiance from the West. He disregarded the warnings.

“Nights after his first departure, the Redeemers’ assassins

came. We didn't know such an insurgence existed at the time, and we didn't know the advisors' warnings had been sentences for my family's deaths. Culter, my father's closest watchman, managed to keep the assassins from killing my mother, and I kept the assassins from killing me and my brother, Abaddon. I ordered the assassin Culter had captured to be left alive and . . . I tortured him, until he confessed to us everything about the Redeemers and their cause.

"He said they wanted a purified East—a unified Prianthia and Sadie—without the influence of the West to tear us apart. They had hoped they could persuade my father not to taint a new Sadie with the West's ways, but when my father had refused to listen, they had decided to try taking the throne.

"Many of the Redeemers were our own people, and the threat of them existed in every corner of every street. Our enemy was no longer made clear by the darkness of their eyes or the harshness of their tongues. We had no way of knowing who among us were loyal, and who among us were traitors.

"When my father returned from his venture and discovered what had happened, he asked me to start wearing this." Dietrich gestured at his cloak and the cover he normally wore over his face, surprised by how easily he had forgotten to dawn its cover. "Nearly everyone in Sadie wears these, uses them to shield themselves from the desert's sun. As I was only fourteen, my father decided that if I began to wear one, perhaps the world would forget my face, and I could blend with the people as the people, and aid him in killing our new enemies.

"It wasn't long before the streets themselves became my new home. But the insurgence only began to grow. For every life I ended, two more followers seemed to arise, the message their leader Navar spoke seeming to resonate with those who'd forgotten what my father had done. They didn't care that they only lived freely because of his hand, that their lives were good because of him. All they heard was the ramblings of a mad-

man, and the Fallen One took over their minds and cast my father as the enemy.”

Dietrich stopped suddenly, not sure how else to go on. He supposed that was all there was to his tale, to his dark beginnings, the rest a shadowed dream of deaths and tortures. He thought of Daensla then, thought of her raven hair and soft touch. He wished he'd been strong enough to leave her before she'd discovered who he was.

Perhaps the Redeemers would never have found her if he'd let his love for her fade.

“You have lost much in this life.”

The prince looked up at Zoran, surprised by the knowing tone in the Keeper's voice. He didn't bother looking at Dietrich, still too occupied with his task, but the eyes of his dragon Seera looked to him in his stead. Dietrich pondered the odd way the man seemed to always have glimpses of what he was thinking, reminded then of how strange his first day was when the Keeper had questioned him. Dietrich swallowed, turning his eyes away from the dragon's watch.

“Yes,” he said quietly, still thinking of Daensla. The view of her *auroras* drifting, of the dried line of blood streaked across her neck, still frequented his mind. “I have.”



Days passed. Morning after morning continued as each morning had before. The air was noticeably colder than it had been when Dietrich had first arrived in the mountains. Itching to move, to do something other than the monotonous actions he'd begun performing each day, he grabbed the axe he'd watched Zoran use to cut wood and began chopping up the

pile of logs beside a tree stump.

Axe up, eyes down, cut. Toss the pieces into the pile, grab another, repeat. Axe up, eyes down, cut. Toss the pieces into the pile, grab another, repeat . . .

Dietrich kept his focus steady and tried to ignore the sweat that dripped into his eyes. He could've sworn he'd only been doing the act for a few minutes, twenty or thirty at most, but the sun was higher in the sky when he glanced up. He took a few deep breaths and returned to his chore.

The nights had been cold, the elevation holding the crisp air into the day, and the Dragon Keeper seemed to need this kindling at the start of each new morning. When the Day Star faded away, he would use the wood to warm Savine. The injured dragon had hardly moved since Dietrich and Zoran had rubbed the ointment into her wings.

With few words exchanged between the two men since then, Dietrich's patience was finally beginning to waver. His short timeline was growing shorter still, and he had yet to gain the elder dragon's judgment.

Axe up, eyes down, cut. Toss the pieces into the pile, grab another, repeat. Axe up, eyes down, cut. Toss the pieces into the pile, grab another, repeat . . .

"You needn't bother yourself with that," Zoran said, walking out from his home. Dietrich had yet to see what the inside of the house looked like, still secluded to the shack under Seera's watchful gaze. The smell of his vomit had finally faded, but he still found himself longing for something better than the glorified shed. Though with half his life secluded to the rooftops of Sovereignty's homes, he supposed a covered room wasn't half bad.

"I insist, really," Dietrich said, cutting another log. "You've been kind enough to take me in after what I did to Savine. It's the least I can offer in return."

Zoran stood steady and sipped his tea. "Tell me, boy, have

you ever heard anything from the fiends you've killed?"

Dietrich narrowed his eyes.

"Your alias, Yeltaire Veen," Zoran continued, "you're supposed to hunt fiends, yes? You use their poisons and such to aid your brother in creating his elixirs. Have you ever heard the fiends, spoken with them, as you have with Seera and Savine?"

The prince pounded another log in half, cursing at the unevenness of his cut. He rubbed more beads of sweat away and shook his head.

"No," he panted. "I usually kill the fiends I hunt quickly, give them peaceful deaths. I don't enjoy watching creatures suffer."

"I see," Zoran said, looking over at Seera. "Dragons are from the Age of Old. They are smarter than most beasts. I suppose it would be easier to hear them over most fiends."

Dietrich nodded, though only out of courtesy. He'd decided rather quickly that Zoran's words were nothing more than odd ramblings. He had no doubt there was some strange connection between the mountain man and his dragons, the constant way they seemed to share in unspoken exchanges proving that. But the prince took such occurrences as nothing more than instinctive tendencies. Even Zar had come back for him when the serpent had attacked. Surely some relationship was there between Zoran and Seera and Savine, but nothing too far beyond what the prince and his horse shared.

"You have a great many scars," the Dragon Keeper noted, Dietrich's back exposed as his shirt lay off to the side. He shrugged in response and grabbed another log from the pile.

"I'm careless a great lot." He smiled in jest as he cast the axe down. He tossed the broken halves aside, at last pausing from his task as he wiped the sweat from his brow. "Will this be enough? Or shall I cut more?"

Zoran glanced where he pointed, took a sip of his steamy drink, and shrugged.

"Tis enough for now."

Dietrich nodded, resting the heavy tool down as he grabbed his shirt and placed it above his head. From across the way, he could see Seera glaring.

“Doesn’t seem I’ve gotten on her good side yet.” Dietrich lifted his chin toward the dragon and glanced at Zoran, hoping his statement would elicit some response.

The man simply blew at his cup, attempted to take another sip, then blew on it again.

“Does the fire help Savine heal?” Dietrich asked, trying his luck with a direct query. Zoran peered up from his mug and shook his head.

“Not all dragons are the same. Seera and Savine, they are very susceptible to the cold. It makes them weak. Even these mountain climates are a bit tough for them in the winter, but they make do. It’s the only place I feel I can dwell in safety, in peace, so they choose to reside with me. Savine only needs the extra warmth because she’s frail. Her scales need the heat more now because her body fights so much to heal her.” Zoran stopped and looked over at Seera for a moment before glancing back at Dietrich. “She doesn’t hate you, not like she did at first. It’s more that she mistrusts any that share our abilities.”

Dietrich rested his arms against his sides as he attempted to regain his breath. The mountain air still didn’t seem to agree with his straining lungs.

“Our abilities?” he asked.

Zoran turned back toward his tea, blowing at it again and nodding.

What abilities? Dietrich thought angrily, looking back at Seera. The dragon hadn’t moved from her post beside the canyon wall.

Still you don’t know? a woman asked. Dietrich’s breath caught, his eyes darting back toward the Dragon Keeper to see if he’d heard too. The man said not a word, only continuing to look at nothing and everything as he stood content within the

crisp morning air. Dietrich returned his gaze to Seera, the cold expression of her charcoal-scaled face seeming to have softened.

“She knows you hear her,” Zoran said, admiring the changing colors of the sunrise. “She senses the Elder Blood in you.”

Dietrich’s blood boiled. “I know nothing of what you speak. I don’t understand why I supposedly hear their voices in my head—how *you* know I hear their voices. I don’t understand why fiends would protect a man, or why a man would protect fiends, and I don’t know what the *Elder Blood* is.” He sighed, exhaling heavily as he licked his dry lips. “I mean no disrespect to you, or to your dragons, but I need some answers, and I need them soon.”

The mountain man took a heavy breath, holding it high in his chest before slowly releasing it.

“All right Dietrich, let us speak of such things.

“You are, as am I, a descendent of the Ageless. They were and are the original High Council of Eve, all but forgotten by the people of today. They possessed the ability to control fiends, summon beasts from the Age of Old, live for eternity without illness or disease. As a son of the Ageless, I have inherited such abilities, or a variance of them I should say. I can speak to fiends, understand them, feel what they feel and see as they see, but I cannot force my will upon them. Seera and Savine, they are enhanced, intelligent, and they have forbidden themselves from eating the flesh of men, instead feasting as any other animal might. They are disciplined, in control, and human in a way, and they seek our companionship. *Our* companionship, mind you, not just mine, as you too share this gift.”

The prince stood silent, his body unmoving as he took in the old man’s words. A far-off tale, a fantastical legend—that was all Dietrich was capable of interpreting. Everything Zoran had said sounded like the stories in the Holy Book, stories of Ageless beings and strange magics.

Dietrich did his best to hide his reservations.

“I am the son of one of these people?” he asked incredulously. “These Ageless?”

“It would seem so,” Zoran said. “Your mother is from Eve, not Sadie. I hadn’t thought the queen would be one of them, but I suppose it makes more sense than Harold.”

“My mother does age,” Dietrich argued, patience straining. “And she grows sicker as each day passes. Forgive me my misgivings, Keeper, but I hardly believe she could be one of the people you describe.”

“The Ageless lose their immortality when they bear children,” Zoran defended calmly. “And they pass on fewer of their abilities when they bear the child of a mortal. Or so it would seem. Both my parents were part of the original High Council, thus the many years I’ve lived upon this land. You seem not to have inherited such defiance to time, though. You look every year your age.”

The prince laughed hopelessly, believing less and less of what the man spoke the more he said. How had he let himself be convinced this was the better route? His stallion’s pace would have been too slow, his hooves far less capable than the wings of the dragons, but at least Dietrich would have been progressing forward. At least he would have had a chance of reaching the masquerade in time. Now all he had was the ramblings of an old man, crazed by his solitude and driven insane by the silence of his chosen companions.

“My mother would have told me,” he insisted, as much to himself as to the Keeper. He caught the gaze of Seera then, her eyes somewhat sympathetic, but he ignored them. “Are you saying that my mother can talk to fiends?”

Zoran, infuriatingly, just nodded.

“And you can too,” Dietrich continued, “to some degree, because you’re a son of these Ageless? These Elder Bloods?”

“Yes.” Zoran looked down at his cup, saddened it seemed that it was now empty, and he added, “As are you.”

Dietrich sat down atop the stump he'd labored on, burying his face in his hands with defeat. Flashes of his family flickered in his mind, his mother weak and feeble as she lay dying helplessly in her bed. He thought of Abaddon's fears: his father driven mad with despair, the Prianthians declaring war against Sadie, the Redeemers striking at them in their sleep. If those things happened, the people of his kingdom would beg for a leader, beg for someone to save them, succumbed once more to the hands that enslaved them or the assassins that fought to overthrow their reign. And there Dietrich would cower, alone among the shadows, so fearful of being the king who lost his nation that he would rather watch it fall from his throne of darkness.

Cold scales, from one of the dragons, suddenly stroked against his booted foot. Dietrich pulled his hands from his face and glanced down, realizing it was Seera.

Stand tall, Prince, the woman's voice he'd heard before whispered. Dietrich looked up, Seera's slit eyes gazing at him with what seemed like empathy. She nudged her head against his belly, her body cool through his shirt as she began propping him up. His hands clung to her neck as she aided him to rise. Silently she pulled back, looking at him and through him, knowing everything he thought and everything he felt.

Dietrich sensed it then, the calm, slow beat of her heart and the steady pulse of her blood. He felt the way her scales took in the sun, felt the cadence of her breath and the depth of her thoughts. Entranced, he stretched his arm out to her again, desperate to clench the feeling of her very being in his hand. As much as logic combated what he'd been told, his instincts could no longer deny the serenity he felt. Reason and sense were abandoned as the knowing of what he and the dragon were resonated within him.

You need not be atoned for my companionship, Seera assured. *You are worthy.*

I found some interesting books today. They washed up on shore near my home. I expected them to be ruined on account of them being wet and all, but they'd been carefully bound.

From the journal of a Riverdian townsman

CHAPTER 15

X'ODIA



The ocean seemed different. The waves pressed against the sand, their never-ending tides pleading onlookers to stay back. They had not always been that way. The waters had once beckoned curious feet out toward the warmth of their shores. They did nothing of the sort now. The salt in the air stung X'odia's eyes, and the wind howled past with aggression. Even the birds' calls, once so peaceful and serene, sounded like nothing but grotesque warnings.

Perhaps her quest to Abra'am was not meant to be.

You're simply nervous, X'odia told herself, clutching the books she held to her chest. It has always been your wish to see the Dark Shores. Have you not dreamed of it since you were a girl? Do not be such a coward; consider it a blessing the High Council has ordered you there.

Despite her self-assurance, X'odia's skin tingled.

Up ahead, the crewmen of the *Seagull* were preparing her sails. A delicate name for a ship, certainly, but Eveans were known as docile people, and the name seemed fitting. The sailors themselves, dark in skin and cut with muscle, seemed nothing of the sort, but the smiles they wore and the banter

they spoke revealed them soft. X'odia took a sharp breath as one approached, hesitant to speak with someone outside the High Council. She knew it was a foolish fear, the men having all been selected for their relations to the High Council, but knowing that did little to combat her fear. She bit her lip and hugged the books in her arms tighter, wondering what the approaching man would think when he saw her swirling gaze.

"Lady X'odia," he said, bowing his head. He gave her a smile that consumed his entire face and placed his hand on his chest. "My name is Ravel Orloff. Allow me to welcome you on behalf of the Seagull's crew."

X'odia released the forceful bite on her lip and returned the smile. "Orloff, you say? As in Cid Orloff?"

She hardly needed the answer; the young man shared the same dark skin and braided hair as the councilman.

"Yes, my lady," he answered. "I am the High Councilman's grandson."

You certainly don't assign an unnecessary amount of titles, though, she thought, remembering how long she had stood weak-kneed during Cid's greeting. The old man had never seemed to take notice of her annoyance when she stood before the Council.

Aloud, X'odia simply answered, "I see."

Ravel gave her another grin, even fuller than the one before, and extended his hand toward the *Seagull*. If he was transfixed at all by seeing her swirling eyes, he did nothing to show it.

"Shall I accompany you to the ship?"

X'odia opened her mouth to say yes, eager to be on her way, but the gentle swaying of the ship ahead forced her silent. The last time she went in the water . . .

"In-in a moment," she stuttered. She smiled, more to shield her nerves than to show kindness, then tried to find the words to explain her Sighting.

"If I could, I would like to speak to the captain before

boarding. My most recent venture near the sea made me a bit—”

“Sick?”

X’odia stared for a moment, wondering if he had somehow known of her vision’s occurrence, then realized the mistake.

“Seasick!” Her cheeks flushed with embarrassment for what must have seemed so obvious to the sailor. “Um, yes, I grew seasick.”

Ravel laughed and patted her gently on the shoulder.

“Do not fret, Lady X’odia. They say once the sea has gripped you, you are no longer plagued by its sways.” He turned and pointed toward the *Seagull*. “I shall go fetch Captain Bronal.”

X’odia thanked him and let out a breath. Her mane of curls clung to the sweat along her neck. She wanted to curse the cloak strapped across her shoulders, blame it for its immense heat, but one of the councilwomen had insisted she take it to Abra’am. *The north of the world is a dark place*, she had said, *and a cold one at that. Why else are the people there so bitter and misguided?*

Certainly not solely from the cold, X’odia thought, lowering her cloak’s hood. She felt immediate relief as the wind caught her skin, the sweat dripping down her neck now a lovely chill.

As she waited, X’odia looked over the books in her hands. The High Council had forced her to take the first, *The Prophecies*, explaining she might need it as a reference if more visions plagued her. She hadn’t been able to argue. Her mind might have easily held the images of all the Guardians she had seen, but new visions would relay people and events she knew little about. That, or they would reveal visions she knew a great deal about, like the one that had her standing there now. It would do her good to have *The Prophecies* handy.

The *History of Eve* lay beneath *The Prophecies*, its cover faded and its spine creased from years of wear. It was a children’s book, a foolish thing for someone grown to cherish,

but X'odia clung to it with more fondness than *The Prophecies* above it. Her mother had read her a similar book as a child, before she had left her and her father for Abra'am. When X'odia flipped through its pages, she could practically hear her mother's voice. The original book only had the one copy, and *The History of Eve* was the closest thing X'odia had to it. Childish or not, she wanted to have the book in her hands when she landed on Abra'am's shores.

A small binding of *The Holy Words* was at the bottom of her stack, the wisdom of the Light written across its humble pages. Solitude had pressed her to read it again and again, the book more disheveled than *The History of Eve*. Though she knew the Creator would accompany her to the darker side of the world, it still comforted her to hold the text. Surely her painful visions had been granted so that she might someday aid the people of Abra'am, keep the violent prophecies from coming true. She was the Watcher. She was the daughter of Alkane Daer, Keeper of the Shield. In her blood ran the power of the Shield's stone. The day to ease the world's pain, to begin her journey, started now.

I have spent too many nights reading, X'odia thought, scoffing at the grandeur of her musings. *What grown woman thinks herself the hero of tales?*

A lonely one, she decided mockingly. She clutched her things tighter and wished she hadn't lowered her hood.

"Lady X'odia," Ravel said, returning with a man behind him, "this is Captain Bronal."

The captain, broad shouldered and stout with muscle, simply nodded. He had no hair on his head, just a simple, glistening dome, and what he lacked in attractiveness he made up for with an air of command. X'odia, though comforted by Ravel's kindness, was relieved a harsher looking man was guiding her to Abra'am.

"Greetings, Captain," she said. "I thank you for accepting

this quest. I'm eternally grateful."

The captain nodded again, though his neck was so short it was hard to see. "Eve is grateful," he said tersely. The gruff strain of his voice hardly matched his formality.

After he didn't say more, X'odia pulled a map from one of her books.

"I have a map," she stated dully. She held back annoyance at herself as Ravel reached out to take her other things. Thanking him, she opened up the folded parchment and tapped her finger on it.

"Here," she said, "Riverdee. It's known in Abra'am for being a nation of peace, and I'm told it welcomes the sails of any kingdom to its docks. Though it's Sadie I seek, they don't embrace such foreign spontaneity."

She stopped suddenly, uncertain how much the captain knew of her quest. The High Council had told Bronal and his crew who she was, the necessity of such a thing made obvious by the unusualness of her gaze. What other information they had bestowed, though, of her mission and her destination, she knew naught.

"Riverdee does, however, share a border with the Dividing Wall," she continued. "Getting into Sadie's capital, Sovereignty, from there, without being seen as a threat, should be easy."

"As you command is as we've been told," Bronal replied. "Our sails are set for Riverdee. We will not dock with you, though, as the High Council has ordered we return to Eve without stepping foot on Abra'am's shores."

X'odia nodded.

"We shall be ready to depart shortly," Bronal continued. "You may rest below deck in the cabin if you so please. The men have made the space tidy for you."

"Thank you; your men are too kind." She looked down as Ravel held out his hand and motioned to the map. X'odia folded it and passed it along. She was unaccustomed to being

pampered, especially after practically raising herself when her mother had left. The Light knew her father could only spare her so much time.

“You say the sails will be set for Riverdee soon, yes?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Good. Once they’re ready, your men may rest below deck if they please. The waves will abide by me.”

She walked past both men and took a deep breath, the last full breath she would get of Eve, and headed toward the *Seagull*. Terrified, and excited, she pushed her shoulders back and stood a little taller.

You can do this, she told herself, now ignoring the men beside her.

You will do this.

The blue *auroras* in her mind raged as they begged her to pull at the sea. She obliged, reaching out with her mind, and readied herself for her voyage to Abra’am.

When people speak of calling weapons and shields, they often say that one must be a master of said weapons and shields in order to call them. It is like muscle memory, they say, which is true, but one does not need to be a virtuoso performer to claim they know how to play an instrument.

Do not lose courage then. Mastery will make calling easier, but it is possible even with only some experience.

Excerpt from *The Art of Calling* by Gustav Halstentine

CHAPTER 16

DIETRICH



If you call yourself a fiend hunter, how were you so easily defeated by the serpent?

Dietrich opened his eyes at the voice, his hand lifting at the sunlight. The air was crisp from morning, more than he was accustomed to in the desert, and he felt the sudden urge to pull his blanket over his head. It was rough and still held the scent of vomit, despite never being the thing he'd vomited on, but the smell was bearable and the thick weavings of its thread helped block out the cold. After years waking up on the flat clay roofs of Sadie's capital, it was easy to forget he now dwelled in the Dividing Wall's mountains.

He swallowed and grabbed for the pitcher of water next to his makeshift bed. Zoran must have left it for him before continuing his daily ritual of tending to Savine. Wiping the grogginess from his eyes, Dietrich took a sip of the water, yawned,

then grabbed his shoes and the freshly washed shirt he'd left out for himself the night before.

"Forgive me, dragon," he said, pulling the shirt over the element resistant vest he'd slept in. He could sense Seera beside him, somewhere, but she wasn't anywhere he could see. He figured if he'd been able to hear her projected voice, though, then she'd be able to hear his spoken one.

I have a name, halfwit, she answered. *Have you forgotten it already?*

Dietrich chuckled and readjusted the buckles of his *touched* knives' sheaths along his calves and thighs. He wasn't used to having Seera's voice in his head, not in the slightest, but years of having Abaddon as his brother at least made him accustomed to banter.

"Yes, I'm afraid I have forgotten your name. You see I was born with this affliction, a terrible thing really, where once I bond with a fiend, I completely forget its name. Please, mighty beast, enlighten me as to whom I speak."

He waited for the snide response. Seera said nothing.

"Ah, have I finally silenced you? I didn't think such a thing was possible."

Is your brother such an ass too, or is it just you?

Laughing, Dietrich grabbed his cloak and fastened it around his shoulders. He'd not needed it when he'd first arrived, but the days were growing colder, and he'd found it best he continue the habit of wearing it to prepare for the West's colder temperatures.

"Abaddon is a far bigger ass, I assure you."

He walked out of the shed that'd become his home the last few weeks and looked around, expecting to find Seera perched on top of the shed's roof. She wasn't there. He held his hand to his face and looked to the skies, shielding his eyes from the sun and looking for her scaled figure in flight, but he didn't see her there either. Perplexed, and not wanting to ask her of her

whereabouts, he made to find Zoran.

No, prince, she chided, you can sense me. Find me that way.

He grunted, annoyed at the inability to keep her from his thoughts. He did as she instructed, though, closing his eyes and searching for the invisible tether that connected them to each other. It was much like searching for the *auroras*, for trying to find the various colored lights for the desired element. Only this time, instead of grasping at an internal light, he was grasping at a feeling.

After several seconds of concentration, he found it.

That's Savine, Seera said. Dietrich opened his eyes and puffed air out his cheeks, his foot having lifted to take a confident step forward before settling back. He couldn't tell for certain, but Seera sounded somewhat amused.

"Alright. How do I tell—"

Stop speaking aloud. You'll look like a fool if people see you constantly talking to yourself. I'll rephrase: You already look like a fool and in front of me, a mighty beast from the Age of Old. That's far more embarrassing a thing than looking foolish to some human.

Dietrich opened his mouth to retort, then quickly shut it. Grumbling, he scratched at the stubble on his face from a shave-less morning and took a breath.

All right, he thought slowly. *Am I . . . am I doing this right?*

Thinking? Yes, although if you don't know how to do that after twenty-eight years of existence then there are far more things I'll have to teach you than I realized.

"Light above," Dietrich cursed. He heard—or felt, rather—a sort of laugh coming from Seera. He latched onto that, hurriedly making his way in its direction. The feeling shifted to something else a moment later, something more along the lines of annoyance, then shifted again to what he thought might be pleased.

Very good, she said.

His pride swelled at the compliment, much the same way it

had the few times his father had given him praise. It'd happened rarely, but when it had, Harold's approval had made him practically giddy.

I'm not your father, boy. For starters, I'm a female.

How in the Light's name do I keep you from doing that? From hearing everything I think?

Seera once again did what he decided was indeed laughing, then made a clucking sound.

There is of course a way to keep me from your thoughts. But for now we are working to solidify the feeling of each other. I won't teach you to block me out when you only just started letting me in.

Dietrich nodded, realized Seera likely couldn't see him, then ducked beneath a few low-hanging branches. He'd been so set on following her presence that he'd not initially taken in where he was going with his usual attentiveness. Straightening from his ducked position, he stopped and looked around for a moment, analyzing the sway of the trees surrounding him. He'd hunted a number of times in the forests surrounding Zoran's home, often being tasked with getting them their daily meals, but he didn't remember ever having gone this way. The trees were closer together here, and with dark, thick trunks, the texture of which was oddly soft to the touch. It was from dew, he realized, something he never really experienced in Sovereignty, Sadie, save perhaps the coldest times of the year, and only if he ventured to the coast. That was rare, though, as the cliffs near the ocean were known to harbor fiends that hid in the crevices and caves along the shoreline. Since Abaddon had rarely required anything from the fiends that dwelled there for his elixirs, Dietrich had rarely gone.

It's beautiful here, he thought, more to himself than Seera. She still responded with a low, agreeing purr.

Wait, that wasn't a feeling, he realized, noting as the sound immediately ceased. He smiled to himself, turning in the direction he now knew Seera had made real sound from. Or an

out loud sound . . . a sound outside his mind? He still didn't know how to wrap his head around hearing things internally from another being.

It's confusing, I know, Seera comforted, landing in a meadow nearby. Her wings were nearly silent as she descended to the ground, the charcoal depth to her scales oddly blending with the shadows the forest cast. Dietrich smiled triumphantly as he approached her.

What was it you asked me earlier? he asked, reaching out a hand to her. She lowered her quilled neck and leaned into it, a sort of greeting he'd often had with Zar.

I'm not your horse, she snorted, snapping her head back. *And I'm assuming you're referring to the query I presented that awoke you.*

Dietrich pulled his hand back to his side and rested it against the hilt of a *touched* blade.

That's the one.

Her ice-colored eyes took him in for a time, the intensity of her slit pupils almost making him back away. There was no longer the fear in him, though, not in the way there'd been when he'd first seen her. She was fearsome, no doubt, her sheer grace of movement and intelligence not fitting of something so powerful. Yet there was something that went beyond that, something strange and ethereal that connected him to her. He'd pushed it away before, had balked at its outlandishness, but now that he had it he didn't want to let it go.

Seera lowered her head back down and nudged him—rather forcefully—in the stomach. He stumbled back, barely catching his balance before instinctively gripping his knife's hilt tighter.

I asked you how you could call yourself a fiend hunter if you were so easily defeated by a serpent.

She lunged at him, jaws snapping. He had to throw his full weight to the ground and roll to get away.

What? he asked, surprised when he heard his mind's voice

projecting the same panting in his body. *How do you know about that?*

He tensed as Seera feigned another lunge. She slowed then, circling him, and he tentatively pulled the *touched* knife from its sheath. He'd be more afraid, more confused, if he didn't feel the parental spirit behind her movements.

You're very dense, she said, showing her claws in response to his knife. They were nearly as long, and likely sharper, the color almost glistening. *I can see inside your mind whether you will me to or not. And at the end of your slumber you were having a nightmare about the serpent you fought. The one that pierced a tail into your shoulder.*

Dietrich leaped as Seera lashed her own tail at him, then fell roughly to the ground as she brought it back and smacked it against his side. The air knocked out of him and his knife nearly fell, his fingers only knowing to keep hold from years of training.

I'd never fought a seven-tailed serpent before, he managed, quickly trying to get back to his feet before she struck again. He wasn't fast enough. She pounced on top of him and roared, her face inches from his.

But you've fought, yes? she mocked. *You trained for years alongside your father, a man who survived enslavement? A man who led his people through a rebellion?*

"Yes."

And you learned from tutors as a boy? Learned the ways in which to fight fiends—to defend yourself against them?

"Yes!"

Then fight back! Use your knowledge. Use what—

Dietrich didn't hear what came next. He fought against the weight of her on top of him and forced his knife up toward her eye.

She immediately reeled.

And don't forget to speak through your mind, she said, a

smile sounding through her reproach. *Our bond is stronger than your voice.*

He was on his feet now, still holding his knife, but nodded at the command.

Do you mind me asking what this is? Why you're suddenly attacking me in the middle of a meadow?

You heard what Zoran told you, she said, her stance suddenly easing. He didn't trust it at first, thinking it some kind of trap, but the tether between them told him it wasn't. He lowered his blade slowly, then slid it back in its sheath.

Zoran told me many things, he said, careful to keep his words respectful. *Which thing is it you reference?*

She pulled her legs in and laid against the grass, her posture suddenly like that of a cat. Dietrich took her relaxed position as an invitation. He lowered himself to the ground, already aching from their abrupt training, and crossed his legs beneath him.

There are those out there who can possess us, she said. *Other fiends like myself, I mean. I have gained a better amount of what you call sentience through my tie with Zoran, and that makes it more difficult for me to be possessed, but it can still happen. If at some point my mind is not my own, you need to be ready to defend yourself.*

Dietrich began to nod, then quickly stopped. He supposed that—if she really could sense his every thought—nodding would be like saying the same thing twice.

Yes, it certainly would be, she said. *And I'd ask that you stop comparing me to animals. Just because you have a limited mind doesn't mean you should try to force limits on me. I'm a dragon. Dra-gon. Not horse. Not cat. A dragon.*

Dietrich bit his lip. Then tried his best not to think of anything at all.

Ah, you're gaining manners. Good. I hadn't thought with all that whoring around you do that you had much of those.

You've seen that too, have you? he asked. He felt a bit of heat flood his cheeks. Although his mind had occasionally wandered back to his time with Brelain, he hadn't thought he'd been so explicit in his thoughts around the dragon. Had he remembered things in his sleep? Had he dreamed of the healer—

Her and your former lover Daensla, yes, Seera cut in. And might I add that you aren't very bright for someone who's been hunted most of your life? Why didn't you question the healer more? Why didn't you ask her how she knew so much about you? I know there are holes in your memory from having been wounded—foolishly, I might add, as you're supposed to be some master fiend hunter—but you shouldn't just ignore rightful suspicion the moment a bed-hungry girl crosses your path.

Dietrich stared directly at Seera, trying with as much strength as he could to think of absolutely nothing. That was difficult. In raiding through his thoughts, Seera had begun seeing the images of him with Brelain, of him indeed casting aside his uncertainty of the girl for her smile and tempting beckons. The heat he felt in his cheeks deepened. It was like having his mother walk in on him in the middle of—

While mother is closer than father, that's not what I am to you, Seera said. What I think you mean is it's like having a dragon point out both your stupidity and your inability to keep physical urges suppressed.

I didn't sleep with Fiona, he offered jestingly.

She stared at him. He stared back. If she had eyebrows, he imagined at least one of them would be arched.

Let's return to the conversation about the serpent, shall we? she asked.

Eager to be rid of the most discomfort he'd faced in years, he projected his agreement.

All right. What should I learn?

You should know the basics of your elements, she said. *You*

should know when calling a weapon is better than using one a blacksmith has made.

I know that, he said. I learned it when I was—

Why did you strike at me with your blacksmith knife? she interrupted. *Why did you choose to use that against me instead of a called one?*

Blacksmith knife? He suppressed a grin. *You mean a touched knife?*

She let out a throaty sound. And, if dragons could roll their eyes, he supposed that was what she did. It was reminiscent of a slit casing a reptile's eye as they went beneath the water; not a complete closing of her lid, but a protective cover over it. It made him almost laugh to see it.

I don't know what you humans call them these days, but whatever a manmade weapon is referred to as.

We refer to them as touched weapons, he said teasingly, no longer holding in his grin. *I believe I just said that.*

She must have sensed the way he noticed her reaction before, because this time she made neither noise nor movement.

The point of the question still remains: Why did you use your touched knife against me rather than a called one?

Dietrich didn't answer right away. It was a serious tone with which she asked the question, and he wanted to show her he took her words to heart. Well, that he took some of her words to heart. Mainly the ones that weren't jest or jab.

I panicked, he admitted. *If you'd tilted your head slightly, I wouldn't have hit your eye, and my touched knife likely wouldn't have even pierced your scales. Had I called a knife, though, that would've actually harmed you. That's the whole reason the black auroras were given to us—to use them to create weapons and shields in our defense.*

You're lack of knowledge is astounding, Seera answered. *But . . . that is not your fault. And in truth, it is best you believe such fanciful tales.*

Dietrich couldn't help himself; he held his hands up in question.

You're eluding to having truths behind called weapons and shields, and you aren't going to tell me? My, my, you are quite teasing. Can you at least tell me why I can call a weapon into existence—a sword, a crossbow, a dagger—but I can't call, say, a fork?

Seera gave him a flat stare.

A fork?

Yes. The utensil humans use to eat.

I know what a fork is.

Then why ask?

Because I was giving you a chance to retract that question rather than commit to how ludicrous it is. But again, I suppose the root of why you're asking is not so absurd. Mastering a blacksmith—a touched weapon—allows you to then gain the muscles memory to form a called one with the black auroras. So in your mind, you're wondering how something you've gained muscle memory with from everyday use cannot also be called into existence.

Yes, exactly.

I wasn't asking. Nonetheless, that logic would imply that you could call any possible object into existence if you have enough training with it. Which you can't. And the reason has to do with the limitations of the black auroras and the intent. You may have the intent to use a fork as a weapon, but the limitation does not allow you to create such a thing. Weapons are things that have existed long before your time, and only a select few were given the ability to be called.

I see, he answered. He placed his chin in his hand, thinking through her explanation. It made good enough sense, he supposed, or at least it aligned well enough with what he already assumed was true. The Holy Book Abaddon was always reading from mentioned the very same kinds of weapons mankind still used now. It made a strange sort of sense then that if those weapons had been vaulted, in a manner of speaking, then it

would be from that same vault humans could draw from now.

A question came to him then, but before he could ask it, Seera was already answering.

I will not tell you if there are other objects that can be summoned besides the typical weapons you call now.

In a way you are answering, he said, pointing his finger. *If the answer was no, then why not just say no?*

Perhaps I want you to think a little for yourself. Perhaps I want to give you the gift of imagination.

How honorable.

Seera stood then, and Dietrich immediately stood with her. He half-expected her to lunge at him again, his mind racing for the black *auroras* this time rather than his *touched* knife, but Seera merely stretched out her wings. He kept his stance up, though. Just in case.

There are many more things I wish to teach you, she said. Dietrich had the immediate thought that she hadn't actually taught him anything, only chastised him and talked circles around his mortal knowledge, but he quickly halted it. She eyed him, noting the beginning of what he'd been thinking, but when he successfully kept his mind on whatever she wished to say next, she began speaking.

I understand that your current predicament requires a hasty departure? she asked.

Dietrich kept his mind clear.

That was an actual question, Prince.

Oh. Yes, I do require haste.

She opened her wings again, the glossy charcoal color practically absorbing the sunlight that snuck through the trees around them, then lowered her neck to the ground.

I suppose you ought to learn how to ride, then.

PEACE AND TURMOIL

*I saw sweeping darkness
I saw pillars black
Then I saw the soldiers
Whack, whack, whack*

*I saw auroras drifting
I saw buildings fall
Then I saw the widows
Bawl, bawl, bawl*

A poem from *The Breaking of Mesidia*

CHAPTER 17

ROLAND



“For someone who so despises the Dagger, you sure reach for it a great deal.”

Roland grimaced, retracting his hand from the empty hilt at his side and returning it to his lap. It'd been moons since he'd left Stonewall, Mesidia, but still he found himself reaching for the Dagger of Eve. He hated the thing, and he'd been relieved to temporarily give it back to his father and fulfill this quest he and his Elite had been assigned. Despite that hatred, it was still the Dagger his hand itched to hold.

“Habit,” he admitted quietly. He looked out the window of his and Merlin's hideout and noted the dark skies thickening with clouds. For days they'd waited for such weather, both men knowing the small drizzle and light greys that frequented Mesidia's southern reaches wouldn't be enough for their task. They needed a storm, murky and unrelenting, not so unlike the one he examined now. Albeit a burden to his desires, reaching for the Dagger had become a comforting tendency in

times of such turmoil. It made him uneasy not to feel it there.

His Elite hacked and spit to his side. "You needn't worry. The Dagger is safe. If tradition didn't require him to bestow Guardianship while he still lived, your father would be guarding it now anyway."

Roland pulled the edges of his cloak further over his shoulders. The creaking wood of the shack did little to shield the cold from his bones.

"My father was a finer Guardian than I shall ever be. It's not the Dagger's safety I fear."

Merlin harrumphed mockingly. "What then?" He twirled his blade. It was *called*, as was every weapon the Elite used, the soldiers never weighing themselves down with the heavy metal of *touched* swords. So engrained was his blade, though, present in his grasp since their venture had begun, that it was difficult to believe he could release its existence with the swiftest of thoughts. Roland had learned to brush off the feelings of deprecation he felt in Merlin's presence.

"I fear our task," he confessed. "I fear being caught."

"You fear the duchess? Skinny wench is hardly more than a stern tongue."

Roland tapped his fingers, annoyed. "You misinterpret my admittance." He tore his gaze from the window, royal eyes meeting those he commanded, and wished just once the Elite would speak to him with the respect he deserved.

"Yvaine has brought many under her beliefs," he clarified. "No matter how many hungry mouths my father feeds, no matter how many people he protects or wars he ceases, the people cannot stand united under him. They hear her words, her slanders and maligns, and they believe them. All because her husband is of the Victorian bloodline." Roland stopped, a flicker of lightning flashing through the cracks of their shelter. Thunder would follow soon.

"If she catches us," he continued, "if she discovers our

ploy, there will be little we can say in our defense. Many will be eager to swing their swords and end my father's name."

Merlin listened, likely as much to Roland's words as the thunder's echo.

"Better to risk that than allow Yvaine to kill," he answered simply. "If the duke were telling the truth, we need to know. If it was deceit he aimed for, we should know that as well." He grabbed a water skin from his satchel and took a swig before tossing it to the prince. "Drink. The storm will be upon us soon. We must ride when the hooves of our mares cannot be heard."

Roland nodded and swallowed what was left of the cold liquid reluctantly. He knew his body would thank him later, the ride to the old ruins a quick but tiresome one, yet all he wanted was something to warm his bones.

Mead, ale, wine. Light, anything but this. He grinned, memories of when he'd snuck Gwenivere her first drink flickering through his mind. *She practically spat it out she hated it so much.* He hurriedly pulled up his hood to shadow his amusement.

"Are you a man who believes in prayer?" he asked, tightening the straps of his *touched* blades. Merlin stared at him with cold eyes before finally stilling his sword.

Another web of lightning flashed around them.

"I believe the Creator sends me where prayers go unanswered," he said. "Not a beam of light ever seems to shine where I amble."

The thunder erupted.

"We must go," Roland said, not waiting for the Elite to say the words for him. He gathered what little they had brought into the shelter. His hands were numb, forcing him to put his gloves back on. With a howl the wind burst the door open, the storm itself seeming to insist they begin their trialing gallop. Quickly Roland pulled his cloak tighter around his face, the piercing cold forcing tears from his eyes. The mares, tied up nearby, thrashed their heads and whinnied as the storm raged.

Roland patted his girl reassuringly as he took to the saddle, not bothering to hear Merlin's order before wrapping unfeeling hands around the reins and kicking her onwards.

The ruins lay within sight, though Roland could see little as the malevolent rains pounded against him. Flashes of lightning were all he had to determine his reins still guided with precision, blurs of the stones growing larger as he and the Elite grew nearer.

Few and sparse, the ruins were remnants of a castle shared before the feuding bloodlines began. As the two approached, Merlin waved Roland down, gesturing for them to halt. He did so gratefully, his muscles aching and his chest burning as he peeled his rigid grip from the reins.

He wondered if Yvaine and her mysterious dark-haired companions, the ones Pierre had been told of by Duke Bernard, would be inside.

Without a word, Merlin motioned for Roland to follow him to the outskirts of the fortress. An old tunnel was there, a means of escape in the event of an attack. Vines and leaves nearly covered its entrance. Merlin tore open its latch, surveyed it, then tied his mare to some stone columns nearby. Roland did the same, the brief calm allowing him a chance to wipe his eyes and stretch. When he was ready, he nodded to his Elite and followed his descent down the tunnel's steps.

The temptation to *call* on his fire was almost irresistible as the path fell into complete blackness. It smelled of mold, the stones along the walls slimy as they brushed against them, but the cold air was a pleasant replacement to the raging winds outside. Their footsteps grew louder the further they went, the sound echoing dully as the storm's cries faded above ground.

"Halt!" Merlin whispered. Roland did as commanded. The small glow of an element emerged in Merlin's hand. Roland squinted at the light, adjusting his eyes to the bright flame as it crackled lightly. Merlin's other hand, visible now with the

blaze, held firmly to his sword.

“This leads to a wardrobe within the royal quarters,” he said, slowly meandering forward. “What’s left of them at least.”

Roland nodded, though for little point. The Elite was already a few paces ahead.

The tunnel eventually evened its descent, the stones along the floor traded for soil and the small scurries of rats. Most avoided Roland’s strides, few more than little scampers, but the occasional one would attempt to crawl up his legs. He shook them off with annoyance, already missing the whirling air outside.

“How do you know all of this?” he asked Merlin, kicking a rat away. The smell of their droppings quickly replaced the smell of mold. “You always seem to know a great lot about Mesidia’s history.”

The Elite shrugged. “My father was a historian. He wrote books about the breaking of Mesidia’s royalty. He journeyed to ruins like these often, he and his team of scholars, and he brought me along with him when I was a boy.” He paused suddenly, turning around with reddened eyes. Roland immediately brought down the hand he held to his nose, embarrassed as the rugged Elite stood steadfast before him.

The Light burn him, I know he smells the droppings too, he thought, quickly trying to seclude his breaths to his mouth. As soon as Merlin turned his back, the prince once again succumbed to the relief of his plugged nose.

“Unsheathe your blade, Prince, and hold steady to my cloak. I must relinquish this flame. There are voices above us.”

Roland obeyed and cast aside all pride as he dutifully clasped Merlin’s cloak. As silently as he could, he stripped his sword from its place along his hip, grateful he didn’t need to *call* one of his own. It would’ve weighed less, certainly, the imaginary always perfectly balanced as it breathed life within its maker’s hand, but his mind was in no state to maintain

such creations. His other senses were already too drained from their quest.

With little patience, the Elite silently stepped forward. Roland went forth with each small tug. The voices Merlin mentioned grew louder the closer they stepped, their ascent through a new staircase now seeming dreadfully exposed. Roland was sure the people who spoke would hear their boots as they made their way up. His boots, in truth, as the Elite's steps were nearly nonexistent.

"Yes," someone said. The prince froze, as did Merlin, both men hearing the voice above them now with perfect clarity. They stood still, neither moving an inch as the person continued.

"Natalia is traveling with them."

Roland's heart pounded, his breath held high in his chest as he at last recognized the voice.

It was the duke's.

They were supposed to catch Yvaine in her treachery, not him. Why would he lead them to his own deceit?

"Fool," a woman answered. Merlin grabbed Roland's arm firmly, the duo cautiously climbing the last few steps of the stairs. A small light peeked through what appeared to be the wardrobe Merlin had mentioned, the slim line of its doors only wide enough for one man to look through at a time. Merlin pointed to him, then back at the light, nodding with reassurance and nudging Roland toward it.

"You understand why we wanted her here with us?" the woman asked. Roland scanned the room quickly, the keenness of his ears reaffirmed as he indeed saw the stoutly duke. The man sat on his knees, bloody and beaten, his hands bound together by shackles. Glowing, elemental shackles.

The metal that trapped and withheld elements.

Roland felt a shiver run down his spine. Never in his life had he seen the strong man brought to such disgrace. He all but forgot the woman beside the duke until she spoke again.

“She may not know it yet, but she’s strong. She’ll aid the Xens when we attack.”

Roland examined the woman closely, trying to etch her appearance into his mind. The sudden movement of someone behind her, a tall, bulky man, stole his attention. The newcomer’s features were nearly identical to the woman’s own.

Pale skin, Roland noted. And dark hair.

The duchess Yvaine’s allies.

“What-what do you mean?” Bernard stuttered. His bloodied face was plagued with horror, his eyes wide and his lips quivering. “What’re you to do there? They possess the Amulet, nothing more. The Amulet can only reverse the effects of the other Artifacts. It’s useless!”

“To your wife perhaps,” the woman answered, running her fingers contemptuously through his hair. “But bearing your child has stripped Yvaine of her immortality.” She glanced back gleefully to the other man—her twin, more than likely—a twisted smile emerging on her face.

“I did as you asked,” Bernard said, his voice rising. “Pierre has sent troops to Riverdee—his best men! Stonewall is weak without them!”

No, Roland thought, fighting to stay calm. No, no, no, it was a trap. The men sent to Riverdee, the threat of an attack—it was all to weaken our defenses.

His pulse pounded wildly against his skull.

“You shouldn’t have sent your daughter away,” the woman scorned. Her amusement vanished as she lifted a hand to Bernard’s cheek. He cried out in pain, flames emerging where the woman touched. Roland’s muscles twitched as he made to stand, desperate to act, but Merlin’s hand was there to pull him back. The prince looked to him insistently, grimacing at Bernard’s screams. The Elite just shook his head.

It was an agonized eternity before the shouts ceased.

We have to help him, Roland thought. We can’t let him die.

If there's a threat heading toward Stonewall, he's the only one who can tell us what's going on.

He turned for a brief second to Merlin, wishing there was some way to convey his thoughts. The woman's voice returned before he could.

"You shouldn't have sent your daughter away," she repeated. She pulled out a blade from her side, the metal singing as it cut through the air. "We have no need for you now. You'll serve us better in death."

With swift impulse, Roland burst through the wardrobe and lunged to save the duke. It was foolhardy, rash and reckless and dangerous, but it didn't matter. Stonewall was going to be attacked—his *home* was going to be attacked—and he knew next to nothing of who or when or why. Only Bernard could provide them insight.

As he tightened his grip on his sword, the tall brute standing beside the woman lifted his arm and released a gust of air. The element struck Roland, his body unable to move as he crashed against the wall. His shoulder slipped out of place as he hit the stones. Merlin was beside him in an instant, casting up a fortress of lightning as he helped the prince to his feet.

"Run!" he ordered, pushing Roland back toward the wardrobe. The large, dark-haired man walked through the crackling wall of lightning. His air element overpowered Merlin's own as he made his way forward. The two dueled, swords ringing loudly together, both men lunging and dodging the other's attempts. Roland barely looked up in time to see the woman standing above Bernard's body, his head rolling across the floor.

"No!" Roland shouted. He ignored the pain in his shoulder and reached for his red *auroras*, casting out a blaze of fire. The woman hardly moved from his element, the air she *called* gathering into a whirlwind before sending the fire back toward him. Roland ducked. The heat burned through parts of

his clothes, the scent of scorched fabric strong. The element resistant armor beneath his cloak absorbed most of the flames.

He instantly released his fire. It still came toward him, the woman seemingly adding her own. Frantic, Roland pulled at air. He could feel his body draining as he forced up a small shield to deter the flames, but he didn't have any other choice. If he let the flames keep soaking into his armor, eventually the metal would be overwhelmed. If that happened, most of the fire would be released anyway.

Miraculously, the woman stopped, Merlin having stolen her attention away. Roland blinked away his dizziness, trying to regain his bearings. When his vision began to refocus, the woman was there.

Bernard's blood was streaked across her face.

Instinctively Roland lifted his sword to strike. He wouldn't win in a fight with elements, his first attempt confirming that. He leaned in, putting as much weight behind his thrust as he could manage, but something held his feet in place. Barely able to keep himself steady, he looked down, cursing.

Ice. The woman had cast ice around his feet and ankles.

Panicked, he *called* his fire back. The ice held steady, as if his element was a mere candle flame trying to melt a glacier. The woman smiled, her expression crazed as he struggled to break free.

Then her amusement vanished. Her eyes, wide and manic, began to glow.

The ice at Roland's feet melted.

He wasted no time escaping the trap. His legs and feet were numb from the frost, but they worked enough to get him free. He made to take the woman in her weakened state, take advantage of whatever had consumed her, but a sudden glimpse of his Elite behind her stole his glance.

Merlin was kneeling in front of the giant man, blood spilling from his stomach.

The dark-haired man lifted his blade and struck.
“Merlin!”

Enraged, Roland thrust his sword at the woman. His blow was again deflected by the woman’s elements. It was air this time, not ice, but it was weaker. It didn’t knock the sword from his grasp.

She was still stronger than him, though, despite whatever was plaguing her. Defeated, Roland did what Merlin had commanded.

He ran.

Guilt tore at him. He didn’t want to flee, didn’t want to abandon the duke’s headless body or Merlin’s cut open one, but he knew he would do their deaths little justice if he wound up dead too. Weak, and fighting not to stumble, he *called* his fire and sprinted down the darkened stairs behind the wardrobe.

He twisted around corners he hardly remembered, running back to the tunnel’s exit. Moldy, wet steps reappeared beneath the raging storm. The mares were still there, their snorts and whinnies growing louder as Roland rushed to their sides. He unsheathed a knife at his hip and cut their ties, careful to hold tightly to the reins as he hoisted himself into the saddle. He shouted through clenched teeth at the pain of his wounded shoulder. Grimacing, he straightened himself and kicked his mount onward.

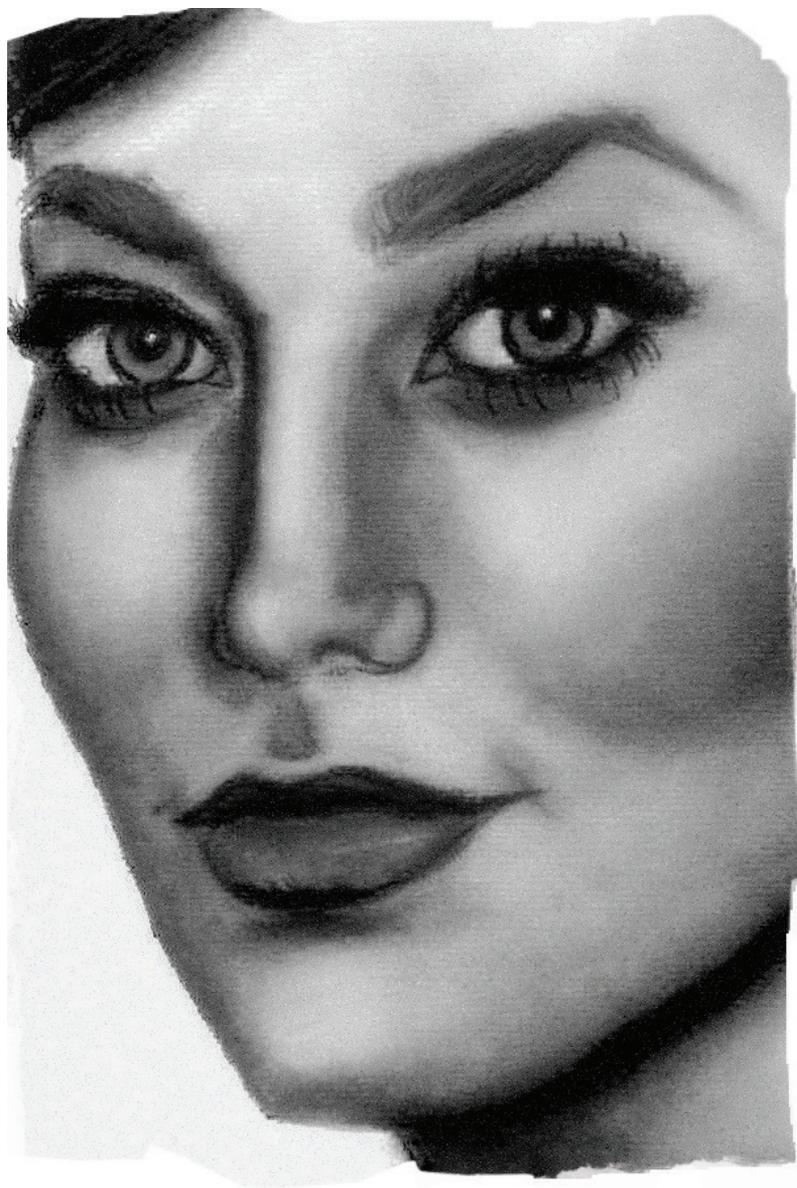
He took a remorseful look back. He hoped he’d see Merlin behind him. He hoped the man would come running, telling him he’d defeated the two Lightless beings. Instead, he saw the dark tunnel, rain, and webs of lightning.

Merlin wasn’t coming back. Duke Bernard was dead.
And his father’s soldiers had been sent away as a trap.

∞ PART TWO ∞

AN IMAGE OF PEACE
AND TURMOIL

I succeeded in my mission. I wish I hadn't.



Gwenivere Verigrad

My closest friend. We don't have a lot in common, but she is like a sister to me, and I love her dearly. I was saddened when Roland was given the Dagger, as I know he loves her, and I'd always fancied the idea of she and I being related.

From the sketchbook of Elizabeth al'Murtagh

CHAPTER 18

GWENIVERE



Gwenivere knew she was sheltered. Her father rarely allowed her outdoors unless it was to learn survival practices or hunting tactics, and even those were heavily monitored by his knights.

Today she was rebuking that.

She was in her capital, and she had every intention of seeing it. Garron didn't enjoy the idea of her traipsing about the city, but he was her knight, not her father's. If she ordered him to do something, and Gerard hadn't outright refused it, then he wasn't in a position to disobey.

"Don't fret so much," she'd told him. "I promise Father will be so consumed with the guests he won't even notice I'm gone. And if he does, I left a note with Sir Charles. Runners will come fetch us if I'm needed."

He hadn't seemed convinced.

She'd been determined, though, and prepared, proudly proving it to him by displaying her *touched* blades, element-resistant bodice, and hooded cloak, all of which were adorned over commoner's clothes she'd borrowed from Becca. Her boots, stiff and dirty, had switches in them to produce blades in the soles if she needed to kick someone.

Garron hadn't been pleased, but he had been impressed with her preparation. He'd gone and changed into his own rugged clothing and let down his hair to look less polished, then begrudgingly agreed.

"Look at all those knives," Gwenivere said, pointing at a nearby juggler. He stood on a platform in the middle of a plaza, his face painted with an artificial smile. "Light, it's a wonder he never lost a finger learning such a trick, wouldn't you say? Oh, is that another knife?"

The man did indeed pull out another knife, adding it confidently to his current set. The crowd gasped and clapped, a few onlookers tossing him coins and cheering. Gwenivere stood on her tiptoes to get a better look.

"Do you find him entertaining?" Garron asked.

"I do. His talent is both impressive and unusual."

"I'll teach you then."

Gwenivere furrowed her brow, amused as she surveyed her knight's rigid physique.

"You? Forgive me my disbelief, but I hardly take you to be a juggler." She glanced at the flamboyant performer one last time and tried to picture her knight clad in his colorful tunic and pants. She smiled at the thought and turned away.

The next area greeted her with a sign labeled VENDOR'S ALLEY. Despite its name, it was more a street than an alley, and hardly an inch of it lay bare as dealers and buyers lined up along booths and tables. The cold of the day didn't seem to bother anyone, bustling bodies creating warmth as blacksmiths' forges burned. The hammers of armorers and the banter of bargaining

merchants competed noisily, and fiddlers, with cases set out, played cheerful tunes. It was madness but it was beautifully clad, flowers and art coloring what bits of the street weren't filled with metal and wood and people.

Gwenivere gaped at it all like a child. She noted people buying and adorning masks and turned to Garron, saying, "Perhaps I'll find a mask here for the masquerade." She looked back to see if he'd heard but found his forehead wrinkled and his lips scrunched.

"I don't care for these crowds; they're dangerous."

Gwenivere scoffed, leaning in close. "The Amulet is hiding well beneath my dress, and few can distinguish me without seeing my hair." She tugged at her cloak's hood for emphasis. "Besides, none of these people could match you in skill or in valor, or myself for that matter. You needn't fret so."

He opened his mouth to protest, but Gwenivere ignored the ominous possibilities he began listing off. She caught bits and pieces of them—poisoned knives, poisoned darts, poisoned something or other—and found his discomfort escalated the further into the street she walked.

Blocking him out, she approached a table of glasswork and fingered at the various shapes on it. Fiends and animals were laid out on one end, each bright and exquisitely detailed, while simpler things, like feathers and leaves and prayer symbols, were laid out further along.

"These are beautiful," she said. She looked up to find the seller, a small, elderly woman, who beamed at her with bag-ridden eyes.

Wanting to keep the woman's spirits high, Gwenivere turned to point the glasswork out to Garron. He was now looking away, though, admiring the work of a sword crafter.

Bloody traitor, she thought with a smirk. She looked back to the glass and let her fingers wander. The fiend ones would likely impress Aden, but they were so delicate she decided to

leave them be. Her father might fancy the regal ones, like the lions or the birds, but buying him something would reveal she'd left the palace. She'd not been lying to Garron about the note she'd left with Charles, but she'd rather not have the topic arise at all if she could avoid it.

About to walk on to the mask maker's stand, Gwenivere stopped, swallowing and lifting the piece her fingers had drifted toward.

A rose, she realized, admiring its petals. *Like my mother.*

She forced away the thought. Setting the piece down, she thanked the elderly woman, crossed her arms beneath her chest, and made her way to Garron.

"What happened to all that talk of being murdered?" she asked. "Not so concerned an arrow will poison my heart when a fine *touched* sword is in your view?"

He looked at her for a moment before placing the blade he'd been admiring back on its stand.

"They were not that fine," he replied. His beard shifted with a grin, though only slightly.

"So you really used to juggle?" Gwenivere asked, pulling him onward. "I don't believe it."

He said nothing. When they neared a food vendor, he unlaced Gwenivere's hand, bought an armful of random fruits, and handed over the allotted coins. He shifted the fruit from one arm to the next, rolling up his sleeves, then stood shoulder-width apart, tossing the fruit in the air.

Gwenivere stood wide-eyed. Passersby poked their heads in their direction, seemingly intrigued, before shrugging indifferently and walking away.

"My, my, what other things do I not know about you?" She snatched three of the fruits from him and attempted the pattern she'd seen him do.

All three pieces ended up on the ground.

"I sing," he answered, picking the fruit up and handing

it back to her. He grunted as she dropped them again, her second try worse than her first. “Or at least I think so. There you go, there you go. Here, now try with a fourth.” He threw another piece at her, hitting her in the stomach.

“Curse your burly arms!” She plucked the fruit from the street and tried again. “You say you sing, though?”

“I do. Though my wife always said I croaked like a crow.”

Gwenivere started. “You were married?”

Garron opened his mouth, as if to say something, but the vendor behind them cut him off.

“Could you move? You’re blocking the way!” The man’s voice was laced with annoyance, and he pointed at them aggressively. Gwenivere stepped forward, about to curse him, but Garron’s arm was dragging her away before she could.

“A meal,” he said, gesturing toward a tavern. “It’s been a long day, with a great deal of walking. My feet could use the rest, and my stomach the food. I’m sure yours could use the same.”

Gwenivere fumed but agreed, following him out of Vendor’s Alley. She tossed the fruit in a wastebasket and wiped her now-sticky hands on the kerchief he handed her. He took it back after she’d rid herself of the fluids, using it to wipe his own hands. When they reached the tavern he’d suggested, he opened the door for her and followed her to a table.

“So you were married?” she asked, sitting down. “I never knew.”

He nodded and gave the approaching server their order, already knowing Gwenivere wanted elk. When the man hurried off, Gwenivere relaxed into her seat and made to remove her cloak, but realized she’d need to keep it on if she wanted to continue hiding her hair. She glanced around at the tavern’s other patrons and hoped the raised hood wasn’t reason to grant unwanted stares.

He still has his up, she thought, noting a hooded man

across from them, *and he adorns a mask as the others did in the street. Ah, and now he's caught me staring.* She tilted her head in greeting, then smiled slightly as the man grinned courteously in return.

After a while of silence, the server returned with their food. Garron thanked him and reached for Gwenivere's plate and drink, grabbing a fork and smelling the meat before placing it in his mouth. He didn't chew at first, only tasted, then sipped her water. When he deemed each was safe, he scooted them back and gave her a nod.

"Thank you," she muttered, watching as he washed it all down with his own drink. "And I'm sorry for prying. I was just taken aback. We don't have to talk about—"

"She died," Garron interrupted. He took a bite from his plate, his eyes lazily looking about the room. "She was killed, during the War of Fire. I enlisted in your father's ranks shortly after."

Gwenivere bit into her food, tasting nothing. "I'm sorry. You must've been quite young when it happened. Only . . . sixteen or seventeen springs?"

He nodded but kept quiet. She looked at him, waiting for him to say more, but his thoughts were visibly elsewhere.

"What was her name? If you don't mind my asking."

Garron sighed, swallowed the contents of his cup, and motioned to the server for more. It took a moment for Gwenivere to realize he wasn't drinking water.

"Her name was Marie," he answered. "It was a simple name, nothing grand. My name was Luthier Hill."

Gwenivere gaped, then quickly covered her mouth with her napkin. "Luthier you say? I rather like it. I never knew Garron wasn't your birth name." She grabbed his hand and patted it gently. "Marie and Luthier—a very lovely sound. I'm sure she was perfection."

Garron took another drink. "She was."

He didn't say anything more. Gwenivere took her hand

back and gave him his silence, only exchanging polite pleasantries with the server as he occasionally checked in. She kept track of the tankards Garron cleared, grateful when, after four, he refused another.

He always just seemed my honorable knight, she thought, eyeing his ever-stern expression. How terrible of me, never considering the man before the armor.

When they'd finished their meal, he set coins on the table and rose. Gwenivere followed, attempting an encouraging smile as he opened the tavern's door for her.

"Miss?" someone called. Gwenivere turned, the cloaked man she'd noticed before holding out a small pouch to her.

"You dropped this," he said, his voice thickly accented. Gwenivere eyed the pouch distrustfully, deciding it best to slip on her gloves before accepting it.

"Thank you," she said. She narrowed her eyes at the man as she took the pouch, hoping to remember his face, but it was hard to see it through his cloak and mask. All she could make out were green eyes and dark, golden skin.

"It was my pleasure, milady," he answered. "Good day."

He was out the door Garron held open before Gwenivere could say anything more. The knight immediately slipped inside when he realized it wasn't Gwenivere who'd walked through, the encounter happening so fast he'd barely had a chance to witness it. His movements turned frantic when he saw Gwenivere holding the pouch, but she smiled at him and held up her now-gloved hands, assuring him she'd taken precautions.

"What did he give you?" he asked, hovering protectively. "Give it here, I'll examine it for you."

"Light, you're so paranoid! You're as bad as my father." She undid the pouch's tie and peeked inside, careful to keep it out of his sight. When she realized what it was, she hurriedly cinched it back shut, feigned a calm grin, and insisted they go back out.

“It’s just some coins,” she said, tying the pouch to her side. “I must’ve dropped them earlier.”

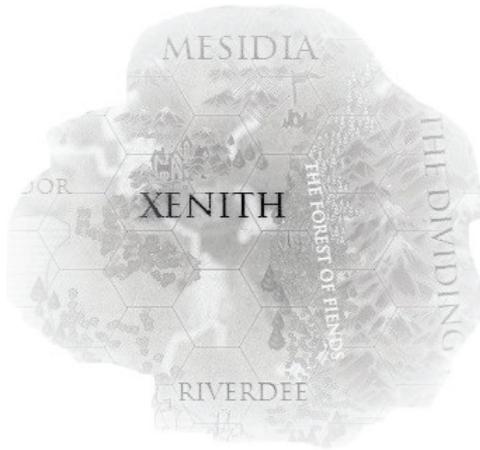
Garron narrowed his eyes but didn’t press her. She was grateful. She was rather certain that, if he’d asked her anything more, she’d have broken down and admitted her lie.

There's nothing the paintings don't see, Gerard. While we gaze upon one moment of their existence, they gaze upon thousands of ours. What an interesting irony, don't you think?

From a letter between Rose and Gerard Verigrad

CHAPTER 19

GWENIVERE



Profligacy at its finest and multitudes of wasted coin—that was how Gwenivere viewed her palace quarters, the *Queen's Quarters*, they were called, which had lavish decorations lining everything from the ceilings to the floors. The room was large, absurdly so for just one person, and she often argued that it should be divided up and used to house poorer staff members. Her father thought it a generous proposition but insisted the palace's splendor was a tiresome but indispensable act to show the height and achievement of their nation.

Gwenivere wished terribly that her father would've succumbed to her persistent tongue. She knew that somewhere, within the room's vast darkness, the green-eyed man was waiting.

As the sun had given way to darker skies, she'd expected to see him again, every step through her city a step gone by without his appearance. Further and further her feet had car-

ried her, back down the crowded plazas and swarming squares, across the bridge to the palace and up the stairs of its floors until finally, with shoulders to her door, she stood unmoving.

She'd taken her gloves off, feeling inside the pouch he'd given her. The object inside was the glass rose, the one she'd admired from Vendor's Alley, along with a note reading *Do not fear me, I await when the night comes.*

Silencing her nervous breath, she reminded herself of Garron's presence just opposite her wall. If she thought this something too dangerous to consider alone, she could warn him. He was only inches away on the other side of her door.

She stood motionless, running over again and again what to do. The rose proved the stranger had been watching her for some time, yet he hadn't harmed her, and he hadn't tried getting her attention as she'd ambled through Voradeen's streets. It wasn't until she'd stood aback from Garron that he'd made his presence known, and even then he'd only attempted to subdue any panic his intended meeting might bring.

None of that mattered, though. He'd followed her, and he needed to suffer the consequences of his actions.

But if she told Garron, and her father found out . . .

She took a deep breath, exhaled, and opened her door.

"Garron, I must confess something to you."

The knight turned to face her, brows furrowed at her abrupt return.

"In the plaza, in Vendor's Alley, I was looking at a glass-maker's stand while you looked at swords. I found a rose," she held up the glass, "and bought it, because it reminded me of my mother. Being here, back in the palace, is bringing back all these memories of her, and I'm finding I miss her a great deal more than I have for some time."

She looked up to see if Garron believed her, surprised when his hand lifted and patted her heavily on the shoulder.

"Rose was a fine queen," he said, returning his hand to his

side. "And a loving mother. It is understandable to reflect on her absence. Would you like me to call one of your servants to your room? Becca perhaps? Or maybe Lady Elizabeth? I'm certain they would be happy to accompany you."

Gwenivere felt a wave of guilt. She forced a smile to cover it, wiping at the false tears threatening to fall.

"No, thank you, but I do have another request."

He stood tall, nodding dutifully.

"There's a blanket," she started. "A thick, red one my mother and I used to curl up in when I was a girl. It's in Aden's room now, but he hardly fancies the thing. Could you perhaps get it for me? It would only take a moment."

She bit her lip, watching her knight's expression shift as he contemplated the task. Time fulfilling her request meant time away from his post, any and all terrible dangers possibly befalling her in that time. He scrunched his nose, clearly displeased at the thought, but eventually nodded.

"I'll return with it in a moment. I'll have knights standing guard at either end of the hall while I'm gone."

"Thank you, Garron. I appreciate it."

He gave a parting nod before heading off.

Gwenivere wiped her eyes again, inhaling deeply as she caught sight of the new painting along the hallway's wall behind where Garron had stood. It depicted a naked woman in a garden, alone and unclothed with nothing but leaves and flowers to cover her. She looked as if she knew Gwenivere's deceit, her painted eyes chastising.

Even in her nudity she has less to hide than I, Gwenivere thought. She groaned quietly as she turned away, walking back into her chambers and shutting the door.

Knowing Garron would be back soon, she *called* fire and lit the sconces on her walls. Beside one of her windows, with mask and cloak still adorned, the green-eyed stranger stood.

"You have but a small time to reveal your intentions,"

Gwenivere told him, hoping her voice sounded more steadfast than she felt. The man closed the window he stood by, holding his hand out and gesturing toward the room's door.

"You mean until your knight returns?" His speech was clear, though obviously foreign, the unusual lilt almost musical. Its charm hardly fit the circumstance of their encounter.

"That man could slice you in half with a broken blade," Gwenivere said. "As could I. Speak ill of either of us and I shall see to it you find out."

The stranger grinned, much to her annoyance. He withdrew from his place beside the window and slowly walked across the room, his steps silent.

"You seem rather eager to inflict pain on me," he said, picking up the *Tales of Eve* from atop her study. "Do you always make threats so hastily?"

"I am a person of civility. If I seem eager, it's only because I wish to do what is just."

The man glanced up from the book, cocking his head toward her hands. Gwenivere followed where he looked, her body tingling with embarrassment when she realized she'd started *calling* fire again. She scowled and forced the element away.

"Did my father give you this book?" he asked, holding up the *Tales of Eve*. "He must have; my mother said this was the only copy."

Gwenivere squinted, staggered by the simplicity of his query. She examined him again, what little she could see beneath his hood and mask, and realized who he was.

"Dietrich," she said slowly. "Dietrich Haroldson."

The man nodded, grinning as his father had in her memories.

"I see. And what exactly do you want from me, Dietrich Haroldson? Are you here to assassinate me? I've been told that's what you do."

The prince looked up from the book again, at last seeming to note the insistence in her tone. He closed the book and

gently placed it atop her study, facing her but saying nothing.

“Why are you here?” she pressed. She winced as she realized the words came out with audible weakness. She fought the urge to lick her lips and made to speak again, but stopped when she saw Dietrich’s head tilt. He was no longer looking at her, but to the ground, listening.

“Your item, milady.”

Gwenivere jumped, spinning around to face Garron as he pressed open her door. It creaked loudly and she rushed toward it, seeing Garron’s eyes widen as he took in the lightened sconces throughout the room.

She looked from him back to Dietrich.

He was gone.

“Gwenivere?”

With a heavy breath, the princess took the blanket from her knight. She didn’t notice until then that she still held the rose, its stem now disfigured from the fire she’d unintentionally *called*.

The Xen palace is by far the most magnificent structure I've seen. The architecture is exquisite, the artwork is stunning, and the backdrop of the lakes, waterfalls, and forests is breathtaking.

Fiona Collinson

CHAPTER 20

DIETRICH



You, Prince, are a ball-less bastard.

Dietrich pounded his fist against a tree and released a small grunt of frustration.

Thank you, Seera.

He still hadn't grown accustomed to her constant searching in his head, but he tried his best to ignore it now. He ran over the meeting with the princess again and again, trying to understand how he could've possibly revealed none of his intentions to her. He cursed the moment he'd wasted, shaking out his hand.

You said your name at least, Seera offered. She curled up closer to their campfire, more concerned with warming her scales than discouraging his blame. *Actually, you didn't. You got her to say it. Very useful indeed.*

Dietrich shot her a glare, though for little purpose. She

already seemed disinterested in his failure.

He blew air from his cheeks and sat down beside her, pulling the hood of his cloak up in an attempt to cast away the night's chill.

It's freezing here, he thought, inching closer to the flames. He'd only been in Xenith a short time, the flight atop Seera's wings having left him plenty of time before the masquerade, yet he'd still not grown accustomed to the cooler climate. He repositioned some of the logs, hoping to expand the blaze, but his efforts yielded little results. He gave up after a few tries, sighing in defeat and tossing in several more branches.

*Our king is patient
Our king is kind
Our king is witty
And very sound of mind
His guests are spoiled
His guests are crass
His guests are violent
With sticks up their ass*

Xen tavern song

CHAPTER 2 I

GERARD



The halls of the Xen palace bustled with noise. Maidservants frantically ran errands for their noblewomen, diplomats argued over historical controversies, and ambassadors discussed ways to ease tensions. Anyone who was someone had finally arrived, and it would seem by the booming echoes throughout the main chamber that they were all gathered outside the Assembly Hall.

Many a treaty had been signed in that room, and many a man and woman had argued from dusk till dawn, hair proper and done upon arrival, and unkempt and untidy upon dismissal. Gerard remembered the story of one gathering lasting so long that the late King Carlisle of Xenith had left with bruises on his hands, not from fighting the men he shared the chamber with, but from pounding his fists in outrage against the table. A painting of the scene was displayed on the wall

inside the room, with Carlisle sitting silently while the nobles around him bickered and argued.

Gerard loved the story. He felt it exemplified the very spirit of Xenith's people.

"My lord?" a voice called. "Would you like me to report?"

Gerard turned away from the painting, giving Sir Nicolas a nod of acknowledgment. "Yes. How are things?"

The knight glanced at the king with a smirk, almost too pretty a smirk to belong to a man, and laughed. "With myself? Or with our guests?"

Gerard bit his tongue, knowing such retorts were simply in the young knight's nature. He was a fine guardsman, and when Gerard had fallen from his stallion during their trek from the castle, Nicolas had been the only man who'd come to him after and demanded he be told the truth. He was bold, with enough forwardness for ten men, yet his insistencies were only out of devotion.

"With the guests," Gerard answered.

Nicolas laced his hands behind his back, standing straighter. "Most are fine, milord. They discuss, they laugh, they . . . examine, but there are of course a few who seem far from calm. There are feuding rivals among one another out there. I imagine they can only wait so long before elements begin to illuminate the halls."

Gerard nodded and took a deep breath in, knowing full well the amount of fury he'd have to ease. He glanced back up at the painting, Carlisle the only person in it whose knuckles were white, with everyone else's red from throwing strikes.

"Send them in," he said, walking to his throne. It was an imposing and salient seat, bigger and mightier than any of the rest throughout the semicircular chamber. He loathed the seat in part because it was so pretentious, but also because Gwenivere often stuck her nose up at it. She despised anything that displayed obvious wealth, and when she despised

something, it was infectious.

He leaned against the throne's back, hating how cushioned its seat was, and took a tense breath. His chest burned. His breathing was noticeably loud in the empty chamber, despite his efforts to keep it quiet. It felt shallow, too, like his lungs were constricting and limiting his air. He swallowed and told himself to relax, realizing suddenly that Sir Nicolas was still standing before him.

"Why do you not obey me, boy?" Gerard asked. "Were my orders unclear?"

"No, milord," Nicolas started, looking to the floor. "It's just—you aren't in good health. Are you certain this is wise?"

Gerard rested his arms against his throne, the tension of his breaths agreeing with the knight's qualm.

It wasn't wise, but what choice did he have? He was the King of Peace. He couldn't allow the leaders of other nations to intervene on his behalf. How would it look, insisting he was impartial, to then allow someone else's king or queen to take his place? What message would that send?

Perhaps he could ask Gwenivere to lead the event. She was certainly intelligent and capable. The Light knew she'd studied each kingdom and its quarrels as much as any of his scholars.

But no. She wasn't ready yet. She couldn't do it.

It had to be him.

"Send them in," he ordered, pointing toward the doors. The knight nodded, not doing a good job of hiding his grimace. When his back was turned, Gerard held his chest with one hand, let out a strained breath, and clutched the arm of his throne with the other.

Peace Gathering
Place: Assembly Hall, Kanai
Date: 10th of Tori Passions, Fall, 30th Year

Alward — Empress Fei Chen, River Border

Tre K'iac — Baroness Vanessa Yelsan, bands along prison routes

Concord — King Carl Sclax, reparations for wartime crimes

The Fox Vales — Queen Raven N'pua, taxes on shipped goods

Mesido — Ambassador Doran Cliffborn, civil unrest

Nokt — Prince Quentin Salaris, trade route repairs

Prandisa —

From the notes of Gerard Verigrad

CHAPTER 22

GWENIVERE



Not a moment of sleep had graced Gwenivere through the night. She'd wrapped herself in the warmth of the blanket she'd asked Garron to bring her, then cracked her door ajar and sat in a chair at its side, fearful of Dietrich Haroldson's return. The Golden Knight never retired to his chambers, politely dismissing the other men who came to take his place. Not a word had been spoken between them, not a glance shared or a gesture exchanged, but there'd been a silent understanding that he was needed nearby.

"Your scrolls, milord."

It was Sir Charles who spoke. Gwenivere started, half-asleep, and remembered it was the day of the Peace Gathering. She wasn't in her bedchamber any longer—she was in the Assembly Hall, beside her father, who was sitting in his obnoxiously large throne. Her own wasn't much better, though at

least it had fewer unnecessary intricacies in its frame. It was considerably smaller than her father's, which she was grateful for, as she hated the idea of people thinking she thought herself better than them.

There was one additional throne, an empty one, where Aden would have sat. Her brother wasn't present though, as Gerard had deemed him too young for the political event. Gwenivere wished he hadn't. It would've been nice if her brother and his knight Maximus were there since she was often surrounded by older men. She longed to have more young people nearby—young people who weren't Sir Nicolas, who currently stood near her father's throne. She didn't care for him, finding him far too arrogant for her liking. If she weren't so tired, she might cast him a glare.

Maybe Garron can glare at him for me, she thought, sneaking a look at her knight. She was surprised to see he was already looking at her, eyes narrowed. He was either dreadfully tired himself, or he was worried about her lack of sleep.

Not liking his scrutiny, she turned from him and glanced over her father's arm, trying to see the scrolls Sir Charles had brought. Gerard caught her stare, setting the feathered pen in his hand down and smiling.

"I can see you're overwhelmed, dear, but don't be afraid. I never read through all of them. That's what Sir Charles is for."

Gwenivere sat still for a moment, confused. She furrowed her brow, about to shake her head, then realized her father's jest.

The scrolls. That's what he thought her daunted by.

She returned his smile, saying nothing. It was best her father thought what he did rather than knowing she'd disguised herself as a commoner, trekked about the capital, and let a stranger into her bedchamber. *Willingly* let a stranger into her bedchamber. Like those fool girls she hated in stories.

I wonder if Dietrich's here, she thought, tensing as she looked around the Assembly Hall. Any fatigue she'd felt before was gone

now, replaced by prickling fear. She took in a breath, trying to steady the trembles in her hands, and sat back in her throne.

When all the incoming nobles had settled, Gerard stood up. He nodded to them all in greeting, politely waving down any who were about to stand with him. Once everyone had quieted, he sat back down and spoke. "Thank you all for being here today. Welcome to Voradeen, Xenith."

Translations for foreign tongues followed.

"For those whom I have never met, I am filled with gratitude that you've graced my home with your presence. Although this particular gathering is one of politics, I look forward to speaking with each and every one of you in a much more . . . endearing fashion, at the masquerade."

His speech was laced with a hidden humor, and many nobles snickered. Even those of different languages chuckled, delayed by their translators' words. Gwenivere smiled as well, supposing that was the right thing to do, before Garron leaned down and whispered in her ear.

"Peace Gatherings are often filled with tension," he explained. "On the contrary, masquerades are filled with wine. Your father is implying that everyone will be much more at ease when they have a glass in their hand."

Gwenivere nodded, then flushed with embarrassment that she had. She shrugged and waved her hand at him, pretending she'd already known.

Garron either grunted or laughed—it was too short a noise to determine which. He returned to his upright position beside her, hands behind his back.

"To those whom I have met before," Gerard continued, "it is an honor to have you here again. As each of your invitations indicated, this is a time to honor and celebrate Abra'am's thirty years of peace. It's also a time for us to come together to ensure our wonderful calm continues." He paused, allowing his words to settle. Scribes and translators hurriedly

whispered to catch his place.

“We shall begin our commencement with introduction. As a nation is called, the representative shall state their names and titles, as well as the topic they or their leaders wish to discuss. Each nation shall be called in order by the letters of Common tongue. This classification is in no way an insinuation of my feelings toward any one region or peoples.”

Gerard accepted a full container of ink from Sir Charles and unfolded a map of Abra’am’s nations. Dipping his quill in the liquid, he skimmed the map and lifted his head to the hall.

“Who represents the nation of Alivad?”

Near the back of the hall, hardly seen, a small woman rose.

“I, Empress Fei,” the woman answered gallantly. Gwenivere perked up, intrigued by the tiny noble with the powerful voice. She grinned, wondering if the blade-like sticks in the empress’s hair were for decoration alone.

“Thank you, Empress,” Gerard stated. “What matters do you wish to discuss today?”

“The River Border,” Fei replied. She sat back down, not waiting for the Xen king to grant her permission. Then, with snarled lips, she glared toward a few men below her. From the bitter expressions on their faces it would seem they were from the nation she shared the River Border with.

Rude and improper. Gwenivere rather liked her.

As the king ran through the list of names, each went along in a similar fashion: he’d ask who was representing where, a representative, his or her translator, or a combination of both would rise, and boiling feuds or economic crises would follow.

Gwenivere recalled meeting many of the guests throughout the halls of the palace in the time since they’d arrived. Names had been exchanged in those encounters, all of which she’d carefully stored in the back of her mind. Every person she’d met had been attached some small characteristic, a great deal of them coming back to her as they were called.

*Vanessa of the Arctic is a head taller than most women. And men.
Carl of Concord is old with an alarmingly young wife. And
was Xenith's main enemy during the War of Fire.*

Bevani of the Five Isles has intricate braids.

Dorian of Mesidia is, well, Dorian of Mesidia.

Quentin of Nahl. Ah yes, Quentin of Nahl . . .

Gwenivere scowled as the impish man stood. He was exactly as she'd remembered him: pale, confident without reason, and sneaky-eyed. He glanced down at the bosoms of women below him, inhaling with satisfaction before looking to Gerard. Gwenivere snuck a glance at her father, her grimace replaced with a grin as she saw him mouth something behind his scroll. She didn't catch the words but she knew by his twitching jaw they were nothing of praise.

"Who represents the nation of Prianthia?" he called, his shoulders relaxing when Quentin at last sat. Across the hall, in the very utmost corner, a group of people stood. There were five in total, three women and two men, each sharing the same black hair and harsh, demanding stares. They were almost Sadiyan in appearance, with the exception of their eyes, which even from a distance Gwenivere could see weren't green. The women were tall, slender yet curved, and the men beside them were hardly men at all, both like bears in their heights.

"My name is Alanna," one of the women said. "I am the daughter-heir of Prianthia." She looked over at her companions, pointing to each as she said their names. "My sisters: Anastasia and Alexandria. My brothers: Nicolai and Rokinoff. Rokinoff is the leader of our armies." She paused, lacing her hands in front of her. "We are here on behalf of our parents, Rimsky and Anya, leaders of the East."

Gwenivere scoffed. Leaders of the East? Thirty years of freedom for Sadie evidently meant nothing to them.

"Thank you for being here today," Gerard answered. "I must admit, I expected your parents, but nonetheless, it is an

honor you have endured such a tough passage to be here.”

“Yes, they wish they could attend. However, as we speak, they mourn the death of our brother Pasha.”

Gerard nodded, genuine grievance crossing his face. Many in the room had similar expressions, sighing in sympathy or whispering commiserations. Few did nothing at all.

“My condolences to all of you,” Gerard said endearingly. “And to your parents. May your brother rest peacefully in the after—”

“No!”

It was the smaller of the two brothers. Gwenivere shot him a glare—Nicolai, she recalled—and felt Garron’s hand pushing down on her shoulder as she unwillingly began to rise.

“His killer is still loose,” Nicolai continued. He looked around, meeting the eyes of those around him. “And Prianthians do not rest until justice has been brought.”

The hall stirred. Gerard said nothing at first, his expression still but his gaze strong. Gwenivere looked between him and the Prianthians, five against one, and swallowed. The chamber slowly fell back to rest.

“We will do our best,” Gerard said, “to assist you in finding your brother’s killer. This I assure you. Now, if there’s nothing else you wish to discuss, you may return to your seats.”

Nicolai slammed the table in front of him. Those around him gasped, inching their chairs away.

Garron’s grip on Gwenivere tightened.

“No more waiting to hear the pointless problems of the West. ‘Silk is hard to come by,’ ‘Our libraries, our books, are too old.’ Curse you westerners and your soft hands. My brother is dead! We will discuss this now.”

The Prianthian ended his outburst with a glower. Leaders and nobles sat anxiously, each staring with wide or narrowed eyes to Gerard. Gwenivere burned to shield him, knuckles whitening with clenched fists, but she knew shame would be

the only thing to come if she defended him.

“As I’ve stated,” Gerard began, voice steady, “I mourn for your family. I can only imagine how unbearable the pain must be for all of you, but even more so for your parents. To lose a brother is difficult. To lose a child is unfathomable.

“I know how much you wish to capture the one who has caused you this heartache, but understand that discussing a solution now versus only a little while later will not change the plan of action in the end. A few more minutes will come soon enough.”

Gwenivere stared at Nicolai. The young man’s shoulders still heaved, his breaths heavy.

Be calm, Gwenivere thought. *Be—*

“You misunderstand my brother’s eagerness.”

The words came from Alanna, the one who’d introduced them. Her voice was velvety but firm, and she glanced at the king with pressing reserve. Gwenivere cursed under her breath, watching Nicolai’s chest and shoulders return upright.

“You must understand,” Alanna continued, “it is difficult to remain quiet, listening to all of your guests’ problems, when the man who slit our brother’s throat may be here in this very room.”

Disarray followed her statement. Men dabbed at the sweat trickling down their heads while women, opening fans, frantically cooled themselves from the heat of the words.

Then weapons began to form. Gwenivere leaned forward, ready to unsheathe the hidden *touched* dagger beneath her skirts while the knights around the room quickly reached for their swords. Everyone stood on guard. Garron’s hand no longer rested against her shoulder, cast instead to the hilt of his blade.

“This is madness!” a man shouted, pointing a finger at the Prianthians. “If you know who this assassin is, call him out. Zren is not one to let killers sit among kings.”

“Hear, hear!” another voice called. Alanna lifted her hands

in defense, lips parting to speak, but her words were interrupted.

"Rest assured!" Carl of Concord shouted, clutching to his young wife. "You all saw how well this room was guarded. King Gerard would never let a traitor through those doors."

"I suppose Concord would know about traitors, wouldn't it?"

Carl rose to his feet, squinting and pointing at the insulter. "You Tiadorians wouldn't know a thing about grace if the Creator were sitting at your dinner table."

"Do not bring the Divine One into your quarrels!" a priestlike diplomat yelled. He shook his head vigorously, the dark garments around his face swooshing into a blur. "Such statements are blasphemy. Blasphemy! The people of Concord never respected the Church of the Divine. It is high time you learn to repent for your sinful ways!"

"None of you seemed to have minded our swords, or our 'blasphemous' ways, when we protected you from being taken by the Theatians!"

Gwenivere's focus shifted from one infuriated royal to the next. She looked over at her father, waiting to see what ingenious actions he would take or soothing words he would speak. His stature was no longer tall, though, but slumped, his shoulders and back lifting sporadically as he coughed into his sleeve. The embroidered tunic he wore began to dampen, blood turning the elegant cloth redder and redder with every heave of his chest.

Gwenivere thought she heard a woman scream, and a punch thrown, but all she could see was her father as he collapsed from his throne.

She ran to aid him. Garron and Nicolas reached him first. Both men grabbed him and lifted him from the ground, pulling him upright. Charles opened the door to another chamber and led them away. Before Gwenivere had a chance to follow, a man grabbed her roughly by the arm and spun her around. She instinctively raised her fist to strike, stopping when she

realized it was her brother's knight Maximus.

"What?" she yelled, yanking her arm free and making for the door her father had been taken through. "Maximus, I don't have time for this, I—"

The knight fell to the ground, clutching her leg.

"Milady!"

The word was practically buried beneath the noise and violence around them. Gwenivere turned back to face him, gasping as she took him in.

There was blood pooling from gashes in his stomach. He held a hand to them, the other still holding limply to her leg. She knelt beside him, examining his wounds. They were deep, and uneven and jagged. They ran across his entire torso, stretching from his ribs to his hips. She pulled out the *touched* knife strapped to her leg and ripped strips of cloth from her skirts, trying to work around his bulky frame to seal the wounds.

Her efforts were useless. The pieces of cloth were barely big enough to cover a single slash. The fabric was soaked through instantly, and any bit she moved Maximus only seemed to make his blood spill out faster.

She kept trying anyway.

"Hold on, all right?" she said firmly. She lifted her hands for a moment, trying to wipe away the tears blurring her sight, but only succeeded in streaking blood across her face.

If everyone would just be quiet, she thought angrily. If everyone would just stop fighting!

"How did this happen?" she asked, watching as Maximus began to spasm. "Who did this to you?"

The knight shook his head. His chest heaved and blood spurted from his lips.

"Fiends," he spat, grabbing her wrist. Gwenivere swallowed, looking behind her at the squabbling knights and nobles. No fiends resided in the hall. The only things around

them were rivaling men and women.

“Fiends?” she asked, turning back to Maximus. She could see the life fading from his eyes, his muscles growing limp.

She pulled him against her. If she held him long enough, someone would come. Garron maybe, or a medic. Or Light, even Charles. Someone. Anyone.

Maximus can't die, she thought, shushing him as he coughed up more blood. *Maximus can't die. He's Maximus. He's Aden's knight. He's Aden's best friend. He's . . .*

“Aden,” she whispered.

Maximus hadn't been stationed in the Assembly Hall. He'd been assigned guard over Aden, told to walk him through the palace gardens. And if this was the state Maximus was in now, and he was here, then where was her brother?

Where was Aden?

Opening eyes she hadn't realized she'd closed, Gwenivere grabbed Maximus's face and forced it toward her.

“Where is he?” she asked. “Maximus, where's Aden?”

A hand clenched at her shoulder, but Gwenivere ignored it. Maximus was paling, and she needed to know where her brother was. Remorseful, she lifted her hand to the side, prayed for forgiveness, and lightly slapped him.

“Where is he, Maximus? Where is he?”

“Safe,” he managed. “He's in your father's quarters. But the city . . .”

He spasmed again. It was more violent this time, more jolting. Gwenivere held back a sob and leaned in, whispering consolations. She didn't know what else to do.

“Rest, my friend,” she whispered, kissing his temple. “Rest.”

If something was attacking her city, she couldn't stay here with him. She turned to the frenzy of nobles throughout the hall, half of them racing to escape the gathering, the other half swinging swords and casting elements.

Ignoring them, Gwenivere looked up to the ceiling. The domed roof of the Assembly Hall was lined with glass, but the light of the sun that normally shone through was smothered by the wings of fiends.

How did no one notice?

Gwenivere looked back to the people around her, searching for someone to guide her. There was no one. The Golden Knight's sword wasn't there to strike for her, and the King of Peace had no words of aid. It was only she, surrounded by unknowing fools, to lead them against the sudden attack.

"Silence!" she yelled, rising from Maximus's side.

The nobles didn't respond

"Silence!"

When they again didn't acknowledge her, she shut her eyes. In her mind, the bright lights of *auroras* flashed. She latched onto the first ones she saw—cackling specks of lightning—and held on, forcing her eyes back open. Taking a deep breath, she held her hand up in front of her, steadied herself, and released.

Lightning struck. The blades nobles and knights lifted toward one another halted.

"Save your swords," Gwenivere demanded, pointing toward the ceiling. "We're under attack."

The element was beginning to drain her, so she *vanished* it. In its place she *called* her sword, feeling the perfect balance of it coming to life.

I'll avenge Maximus, she thought. I'll protect my city.

When her sword was fully formed, she adjusted her grip, rolled her shoulders, and strode purposefully forward.

She didn't bother looking to see if anyone followed.

My grandson, be kind to the Watcher. She's lived much of her life in solitude.

From a letter between Cid and Ravel Orloff

CHAPTER 23

X'ODIA



Dark eyes rested coldly in heavy lids. The hairs on X'odia's neck stood as the eyes, aglow from the torches nearby, made their way to her.

She knew what to anticipate, could feel an understanding of her predicament without knowing how or when she'd gotten there. But she knew, knew that what she anxiously awaited, what she dreaded, would occur soon. The man just needed to give his command and it would happen.

The pain she felt inside, the overwhelming sense of betrayal, was quickly brought to life as a fist rose to strike her.



"X'odia!" Ravel shouted. "X'odia!"

The Watcher put her hand to her cheek, sure she'd find

swelling where the blow had landed. She scanned the area around her, noting damp objects and the smell of salt. In a mirror across from her, her eyes were glowing.

“You’ve had a vision,” Ravel whispered. X’odia nodded, the motion making her sick. She rested herself back on her pillow, annoyed to find it damp with sweat and ocean dew.

Abra’am, she thought, rubbing her eyes. *I’m on a voyage to Abra’am.*

“I-I would let you rest, but,” Ravel paused, his voice frantic. “X’odia, something is not right in Riverdee.”

She sat up slowly, looking to the sailor. “What’s happened?”

“I’m not sure.” He hesitated, biting his fingernails. “The people of Riverdee—it seems they’re being attacked.”

“What?” She made to stand, but her weakened muscles forced her back. Ravel reached out to help her, guiding her to a beam for support.

“We have to help them,” she insisted. She waited for her strength to return, then grabbed her cloak and fastened it over her shoulders.

Ravel stood wincing, fumbling with his hands. “I’m sorry, but you don’t understand. Captain Bronal is going to turn us around.”

X’odia stared, then hurriedly brushed past him. He protested as she went, shouting for her to stop, but she didn’t listen. They couldn’t turn around—couldn’t. It was imperative she reach *Abra’am* keep the *Dagger of Eve* from being *called* on.

The sunlight blinded her as she cleared the stairs and reached the deck. She squinted, allowing her eyes a moment to adjust. She staggered when they did.

Riverdee wasn’t under attack. It was being slaughtered, and by an army of fiends.

The sensation of vomiting came, but X’odia clung to the *Seagull’s* railings and pressed it down. She forced herself to look out again, noting the blood that turned the shoreline red. Tentacles pulled at people near the sea, and winged fiends

flew overhead as land-faring beasts charged. Corpses lined the coast, ragged and torn apart.

“X’odia.” It was Captain Bronal who spoke, his hardened eyes lost as beads of sweat trickled down his neck. “I’m sorry, but we can’t risk docking. We have to turn back.”

“We can’t turn back,” she said helplessly. She released the railing and shook her head, her hand lifting to her chest.

Any sympathy in Bronal’s face vanished. He stepped forward, lips curling, and pointed to her forcefully. “If you want to fight, then fight, but my men are fathers and husbands. Their lives need not end today.”

X’odia grimaced. She glanced back at the crewmen, each looking to her and the captain for orders. Those within earshot held expressions of reservation.

I have to do this, she told herself, willing herself a little straighter. *I have to help the people of Abra’am.*

“I have one command, and one command only,” she yelled, facing the sailors. “Take me ashore. From there, you may do as you wish. If you choose to fight, know the Creator will not punish you for your valor. And if you choose to stay behind, know Eve is grateful for your efforts, and that you are loved just the same.”

Bronal put his hand roughly against her shoulder, but she ignored it. The men nodded, some looking ashamed at their fright, others stern, but all obediently returned to their stations to prepare the ship. X’odia shook off Bronal’s hand and walked to the edge of the deck, waving away Ravel when he came toward her. When she was sure he was gone and none of the men were looking, she grabbed hold of the railing and steadied herself.

Creator, give me strength, she prayed, making herself look again to Riverdee’s coast. She could hear the screams now, and the sounds of people dying. Her legs trembled beneath her.

I need every bit I can get.

*Stonewall, Mesidia has been deemed impenetrable. Someday
we'll prove that wrong.*

Victorian rebel

CHAPTER 24

ROLAND



Roland forced his mare onwards. The pain in his shoulder throbbed, continuing to swell as he barely kept hold of his reins. But he had to keep going, had to warn his father of what he'd discovered from Merlin's and Bernard's killers. He couldn't let his parents share their fate.

As he cleared the top of a hill overlooking Stonewall, body sore and muscles weary, he felt his heart twist. Columns of smoke and mocking black clouds rose from within the city's walls. The air was so filled with ash he could taste it.

"Oh no . . ."

He remembered the duke's head rolling on the floor, and Merlin's slashed stomach, and he threw up over the side of his mare. He couldn't let his parents die like they had. They had to be alive, fighting somewhere on the outskirts of the city.

When he finished emptying his stomach, he wiped his mouth and sat up. Groaning at the pain in his shoulder, he wrapped the reins around his hands, took a deep breath, and yelled at his mare to keep running.



Teradacts are one of the most well-known species of fiends, but they're generally reclusive. If encountered, do not use elements on them, as it will only make them stronger. Instead, use touched or called weapons, and aim for their wings.

An excerpt from *Fire and Fiends*

CHAPTER 25

GWENIVERE



Gwenivere’s *called* sword rested perfectly in her hand. There was no fear in her heart, no hesitation in her stride. There was no room for it. Garron had told her that battle either created rage in someone, or terror, but the latter could never be an option for her. She was an heir to Xenith. She was a Guardian of Eve. Holding her head high, she made her way out of the Assembly Hall with relentless, unyielding fury, ready to fight the fiends that’d killed her brother’s knight.

“Gwenivere!”

The shout came from Elizabeth al’Murtagh. Gwenivere didn’t hear her friend’s voice, didn’t realize there was someone calling out to her until the girl was there beside her. She froze at Gwenivere’s side, mouth hanging open as she took in the view of the city from the palace windows.

“Light protect us,” she whispered.

There were hundreds of fiends, thousands, all attacking the people of Voradeen. They lined every street and swarmed every building, pinning down anyone crossing their paths. Just beneath where Elizabeth and Gwenivere stood were bands of knights, fighting through the chaos in an effort to push their way into the city. They were confined to the palace grounds, though, unable to help those further out.

Gwenivere turned to her friend, noting the hopelessness that resided in her gaze. Over her shoulder, Elizabeth's pallor was reflected in those that'd followed them out of the Assembly Hall, each petrified and distressed as they took in the sight outside the windows.

I have to do something, Gwenivere realized. There might be the occasional citizen who was skilled with weapons and elements, but few could do more than the most basic of tasks. They certainly couldn't do enough to defend themselves against this onslaught. And this was her kingdom—her city. No one was going to rise up and defend it for her. Not while her best knights were with her father.

"You three," she said, pointing to the trio of Prianthian sisters, "and you, Dorian; I need someone to protect Aden. He's in my father's quarters on the other side of the palace. Elizabeth." Gwenivere turned, taking her friend's arm and squeezing it tightly. The Mesidian girl looked at her with wide eyes, her throat bobbing. "Elizabeth, I need you to lead them there. You know this palace better than anyone else here. Will you do this for me?"

Elizabeth looked back at the massacre.

She hurriedly looked away and nodded.

"Good." Gwenivere turned back to the other nobles, trying to decide how best to group them for battle. So many of them had just been throwing punches at one another. Would they even listen if she ordered them to fight?

You know them, she told herself. *You read about them. You*

studied their faces over and over and over. Hedford is the commandant of Theatia. Vanessa is the baroness of the Arctic. Peter and William—

The glass behind her shattered.

Shouts erupted. People ran. Gwenivere collapsed to the ground and threw her hands over her head, small shards of glass cutting through her clothes. The grip on her *called* sword faltered.

Hastily she looked back toward the window. Recovering from their dive, opening flesh-like wings and scanning the room, four teradacts stood.

Their skulls peeked out beneath stone-like flesh, every twist of their necks grinding like metaled armor. Only their wings resembled skin, black pulsing veins weaving from their bases into dark, feathered tips. They weren't susceptible to elements; casting them would only grant them strength.

That left blades, *called* and *touched* alike. As they turned toward Gwenivere, yellow eyes ravenous beneath shadowed sockets, she tried to reinforce the grip on her sword.

Elizabeth was still there beside her, tripping over her dress in an effort to get away. Gwenivere set her jaw, pressing through the painful pieces of glass in her skin as she pulled Elizabeth to her feet. Knowing her friend was there, that she was in danger and that somewhere in the palace her brother was in danger, made the rage inside her stir.

"Go." She shoved Elizabeth away, *calling* again on the black *auroras* to steady her sword. The dark lights held and reformed the pieces that flickered out. The fiends headed toward her, talons scraping the floor.

A second passed before they were there. Gwenivere hardly had time to lift her sword as wings folded around her, her blade slicing through flesh. Blood dripped onto her from their wounds, mixing with her own. One beast let out an ear-piercing shriek, then another, more blood spilling as she slashed and dodged.

PEACE AND TURMOIL

Parry, she thought, evading their claws. *Parry!*

Another shriek.

Roll. Roll! Duck. Swing.

A feral yell.

Without losing her footing, she wove out from under their shadows. Two of the teradacts collided together, one ripping open the other's throat.

That leaves three, she thought. With a vicious growl, she *called* another blade, readied her stance, and waited for the next attack.

Species of Wyvern are among the easiest to distinguish. Much like auroras, the color of their scales coordinates with elements they can call.

An excerpt from *Fire and Fiends*

CHAPTER 26

DIETRICH



To seek one's prey in the still of night, to hunt among the shadows as the victim sauntered about, blissfully unaware of the blade that would soon end its life. That was the killing Dietrich understood, the steps that'd become so common he could retrace them without effort. It was as though he'd made footprints along the shore, so easy to take, so easy to follow, and even when the tide washed them away, his feet would again sink into the soft moldings. It was gentle, malleable, and there seemed to be an elegant dance to it, a morbid waltz only he knew the count to.

This, however, this scene of chaos and disorder, this frenzied party of allies and enemies, was not in tune with the steps he knew. His feet felt clumsy beneath him as he walked into the disarray.

Seera! he called, reaching out to the dragon. He doubted

she could feel his thoughts from such a distance, yet within this bubble of bustling bodies, it was she he wished to ally himself with. *Seera!*

He stood still for a moment, trying to feel her presence. He couldn't. A wall in his mind seemed to block his voice from hers. Cursing, he glanced at his surroundings.

He was accustomed to finding crevices to press into, railings to climb and awnings to cushion his falls, but this was so different. So frantic. How did one even survey a setting of this sort?

Look around, he scolded, taking in the fearful trembles of those beside him. *None of these people know.*

"Help!" someone screamed. Dietrich spun toward the voice and caught sight of a group of servant girls, each huddled together helplessly before a red-scaled wyvern. Muscles flexing, the creature pounced, forcing the servants to pull away from one another in an effort to flee. Four managed to escape, but one fell, body pinned to the ground by the wyvern's weight. She kicked and cried out, trying to shield herself, but her thrashing ceased when the wyvern's teeth found her neck.

Dietrich's stomach knotted. The attack had happened so fast, so suddenly, it was hard to believe the girl's life was really gone.

Enraged, he *called* his crossbow, bolts of metal firing into the wyvern's back. The creature writhed in pain and released its talons from the girl's chest, opening its wings to fly. Dietrich kept his aim strong. He felt himself in each bolt, felt the moment each point sunk through the wyvern's scales. It attempted to *call* fire to shield itself, but the flames were wild and frantic, and only managed to set ablaze the ground it stood on.

With one bolt after the next, Dietrich pinned the wyvern's wings to the hallway's wall. The blaze it *called* turned to smoke, clouding the air, and Dietrich stepped forward, lifted his crossbow again, and fired.

He felt the *called* bolt sink into the wyvern's heart. Then he felt its heart stop beating altogether.

PEACE AND TURMOIL

*Joy to me
For the currents of the sea
Joy to me
For the waves*

*Woe to me
For the serpents of the sea
Woe to me
For our graves*

Riverdian sea chanty

CHAPTER 27

X'ODIA



“Why’ve we stopped?” X’odia shouted. The waves had grown heavier the closer they’d gotten to the coast of Riverdee, the *Seagull’s* crew now soaked through.

“It’s not us!” Bronal called, bracing himself for another rush of water. When the wave passed, he shook his face, wiping the droplets from his eyes. “Something has the ship caught!”

X’odia fought to hear his voice over the ocean’s roar. She turned back around, squinting to see out over the deck. There was nothing to explain their unwarranted standstill.

“Watch out!” Ravel yelled. He grabbed Bronal, shoving him to the ground. Inches from where the captain had stood, a red tentacle crashed, crewmen nearly plummeting overboard from its impact. X’odia clenched tightly to the railing by her side, two more tentacles slithering onto the deck and suctioning to the *Seagull’s* wood.

She screamed, thrusting a gust of air under the creature’s

limbs. She expected the force to unleash its grip, but the suckers along the tentacles held firm. Grimacing, she refocused her strength. She *called* her element again and sent it against the creature's limbs, feeling its resistance, but, little by little, she could see one of the tentacles start to rise.

With one hand held tightly against the deck's edge, she shot her other hand forward, *called* a third rush of air, and cast it out.

The limb unlatched from its place.

The force of the release knocked the *Seagull* back to its side. When X'odia's balance was steady, she let go and extended both hands forward. She shot a sharp blade of ice toward the writhing tentacle, slicing it apart and sending it back into the sea. She let out a triumphant laugh, beaming proudly as she caught an approving cheer from Ravel.

"One down, two to go!" Bronal called, ordering a few men toward the remaining limbs. X'odia raced to join them, stopping suddenly as her foot slipped through a hole. She lifted herself free, grimacing at the pain in her leg. A series of holes trekked out from where she knelt, remnants of where the fiend's tentacle had clung. She met Bronal's eyes, waving him down and pointing.

"These go all the way down the ship. We'll sink!"

His mouth fell open, but he acted swiftly. "You, and you!" he yelled, grabbing a few crewmen. "Get below deck. We need to drain the floodwater. The fiend—"

Another wave crashed against them. X'odia no longer had anything to brace herself with. The water launched her helplessly against the ship's beams, crushing her back. She fought for breath until the water receded, her body collapsing against the deck's floor. Hastily she glanced up, the salt and the sun stinging her eyes. She let out a small cry before prying them open again and catching sight of another wave about to make its fall.

With a shout, she pulled at every clear *aurora* she could find. A current of air escaped from her, battling back against the oncoming water and pushing it back to the sea.

Pausing to regain her strength, she glanced around and took in the status of the crew. Most had taken heed of her mistake and fought to slice apart the remaining tentacles with *touched* knives rather than air.

One more strike and they'll plummet overboard, she thought, running to aid them. *I have to kill it.*

The ship, though—the ship came first. The longer the creature held them, the faster the water would flood through the punctures.

X'odia planted herself as sternly as she could against the slippery planks, blocking out the chaos surrounding her. She closed her eyes, searching again for the clear *auroras*. The sensation of holding them, embracing them, filled her every muscle, and she worked them until they held the shape of a sphere. Opening her eyes, she extended them out, forcing them around the edges of the ship. When she was certain they'd hold steady, she wiped her brow and stood a little taller.

They wouldn't sink now. Nothing beyond her barricade would touch them.

Nothing but the still clinging serpent.

"Move!" she yelled, praying the sailors could hear her. The curtain of air she'd formed was already draining her. "Move!"

Any crewman left fighting ended his efforts. Those who caught her pleas backed away, and those who didn't were pulled to safety. X'odia waited until they were out of her path, then stepped forward, facing the fiend.

Still holding air, she gathered sparks of lightning. They erupted from her like a blade, piercing into the fiend and jolting through its body. The sensation was unbearable, insufferable, as much a pain to it as it was to X'odia. She held it, though, waiting.

It only took a few seconds for the fiend to die. Letting go of her lightning, she fell to her knees and made an opening in her barricade of air. The fiend fell through it, limbs limply falling back to the sea. When it was gone, X'odia let out a laden breath, coughed up the seawater in her lungs, and closed the barricade back shut.

The sailors around her cheered. They patted one another triumphantly and embraced, ecstatic in their victory. X'odia ignored them. She clung to her chest, the sorrow of killing enveloping her. One of the men sat down beside her, resting his arm comfortingly against her own, but pulled it away and rose when she didn't acknowledge him.

"Don't celebrate just yet," Bronal called, returning from below deck. "The ship won't make it back to Eve. We'll have to join the fight ashore."

X'odia, from her collapsed position, held back tears. With her eyes locked on the red-stained coast and her body weakening from her elements, she reached out for blue auroras, calmed the sea around them, and pressed their ship toward the battered coast.



The shore was worse up close.

From a distance, the water had looked an even, crimson red. Now, close enough for the crew of the *Seagull* to disembark, the color wasn't as spread out. It lingered in ominous pools, indicating where people had been dragged into the ocean by fiends. X'odia fought the urge to vomit, keeping her gaze up.

"I need everyone off," she choked. She cleared her throat,

her voice weak. "Everyone!"

The protective shield of air she'd cast had been sustained for too long. Her body was beginning to shake, her knees wobbling. The grip she had on her elements wasn't going to hold much longer.

"X'odia," Bronal said, leaning toward her. His men stared back at him, some openmouthed, others hurling over the Seagull's edges. None had the determined look of men ready to fight.

"My crewmen weren't intended to dock with you," Bronal said. "If they disembark and join this battle, they'll likely die."

X'odia grimaced, squeezing her hands to her head.

"If they stay on this ship, then death is certain. At least out there they have a chance."

As her words ended, the ship swayed. The captain quickly turned to his crew, ignoring the horror written on their faces as he pointed to the docks.

"Off—now!" he ordered. From the midst of crewman, Ravel came forward, nodding to his captain and walking to where the docks met the *Seagull*. Others followed, though none looked purposeful.

X'odia groaned. She couldn't release her elements until every last man was off the ship. If she stopped now, the currents she'd been fighting might crash their ship into the rocks further down the shore. They'd have no chance of survival then. But it was so tiring, so draining, to hold so many breaking pieces. Her barricade was decaying into an airy mist. The opening she'd made for the sailors to disembark was turning into a gaping hole. Her gut, tight and twisting, turned over beneath her chest.

"Captain—hurry!" Ravel called. "Everyone's off!"

X'odia opened her eyes, forcing down the rising bile. Instantly her body started to recover, her blood pumping with newfound strength. Bronal was there, helping her forward.

Without her elements to steady the ship, the waves took control and struck against the *Seagull*. Both she and the captain struggled to stay afoot.

Just a little more, she told herself. Just a little more!

Bronal reached the edge of the ship, one hand stretching out to his crew, the other to her. With a heaving pull, they both collapsed onto the docks.

Before X'odia had a chance to react, Ravel was there, pulling her back up.

"We have to move inland," he said. "There are fiends beneath these docks."

X'odia's legs were barely recovered enough to run again, but she nodded. Ravel was right; they had to move inland, and quickly. There'd be more fiends inland, but they wouldn't be able to hide beneath the sea. It was far better than awaiting an ambush.

"All right," she said. "Let's go."

The waves and calls of the sea faded as they ran. They were replaced by the sounds of battle, of swords clashing against fiends and arrows piercing into flesh. Once X'odia had breached Riverdee's city, she took cover from the chaos, finding refuge against the scattered remains of a fiend. Its fur was coarse, and its body still warm. She shuddered as its blood seeped through her clothes, but she swallowed and took a staggered breath, reaching for her *auroras*.

There was a slight stab of fear when she realized none of the other crewmen had taken cover near her. She wanted to seek them out, to hide and stay huddled beside them until the battle faded, but there was too much smoke from fire and lightning to see out clearly beyond a few paces.

I'm the one who insisted we help, she told herself. I can't let that choice be for nothing.

Determined, she glanced over the back of the corpse she hid behind. Through the smoke she caught sight of an ar-

mored man, a dark-blue cloak fluttering from his back. Behind him, with predatory grace, a fiend stalked.

X'odia grabbed the white-blue *auroras* in her mind and shaped them into sharp shards of ice. With a deep breath she stood, focused her aim, and launched the shards at the fiend.

They pierced into its stomach, sending it howling. The blue-cloaked soldier spun around, alarm evident in his stance. He growled, lunging forward, and finished the fiend off with an elegant swipe of his sword.

X'odia remained where she was. She wasn't eager to move out into the open, despite the horrid smell of the dead beast she nestled against. The decision to move was forced on her, though, a fiend overhead flying toward her.

As she made to evade it, she met the eyes of the blue-cloaked soldier. A brief flash of recognition flickered in her mind, but she didn't know from where, or how, and she didn't have time to dwell. She sprinted for a nearby stairwell and hurried up its steps, ascending to a balcony. She looked around for a moment before collapsing behind a series of barrels, a plum liquid leaking out of them. It was wine, she realized, a drink she'd read of in her stories of Abra'am. She'd have to take caution with any fire elements, lest she cast herself ablaze.

"Help!" someone yelled. "Help!"

Across from where X'odia hid, clustered together atop another balcony, a trio of women crouched. Two winged fiends had perched themselves at their sides, a burly man walking between them. X'odia halted the instinctive element she'd begun readying, holding it steady as she watched the scene unfold.

The man stroked the beasts' wings. When he was through, he pulled his hand back to his side and approached the huddled women. They trembled and cried as he walked toward them, the eldest of the three pulling a blade out from a sheath at her calf. The man lifted his hand slightly, the dagger flying from her grasp.

X'odia strengthened the *call* on her elements, waiting with fury as the man grabbed the woman closest to him.

He didn't harm her, he didn't pull her away from her family or force himself against her. She struggled under his touch; that was the most he had to settle, lifting up her chin as he examined her. When he'd finished looking her over, he tossed her aside and did the same to the other two women. Unimpressed, he walked away, nodding to the fiends.

They leaped forward hungrily.

"No!" X'odia shouted. She at last released her element, the man's eyes finding it and tracing it back to her.

Then he smiled.

The women took their chance to get away. X'odia stood frozen, petrified as the man lifted his hands and beckoned something forward.

From the roof of another balcony, several more fiends emerged.

X'odia willed her legs to move. They did, just as the fiends began to make their way toward her. She sprinted back down the stairwell, hurrying to escape.

When she was safely off the steps, she *called* her orange-red *auroras* and cast out a blaze of fire. The wine barrels she'd kneeled against burst into flames, several of the fiends burning with them.

Before X'odia could take another step, the blue-cloaked soldier she'd helped before barred her path. She breathed a sigh of relief, grateful for an ally, but the feeling faded as she took in his face.

I do recognize him, she realized. His eyes, a dark shade of grey-blue, had met hers in her vision, just before he'd ordered her beaten.

Lungs restricting, she took a step back.

The soldier reached out, trying to grab her arm as one of the remaining fiends dived toward them. Thrusting his sword,

he lunged toward the beast, striking it in the chest. He pushed his blade in further before quickly pulling it back out, pivoting gracefully and slicing his sword through the neck of another approaching fiend. Its severed head fell to the ground.

Two more fiends came. The soldier lifted his sword and shield, ready.

X'odia wanted to do something in his defense, despite what the Sight had shown her. Not every scene it depicted proved true, and there was a chance that future awaited her down a different path.

He's too entangled with the beasts for me to help him, she thought, watching as his body circled around the fiends. It was like a dance, his feet elegantly gliding across the stones beneath him as the fiends' thumped and stumbled. His blade plunged into one's chest, his shield lifting and falling as it sliced the head off another.

Panting, with the beasts dead at his feet, the soldier stood tall. In his armor was the reflection of something glowing. X'odia staggered as she saw it, legs suddenly weak. The man stared at her with furrowed brows, his exhausted breaths audible as he made his way toward her.

X'odia tried to rise, tried to will herself back up, but she couldn't move. It was another vision, she realized, like the ones she'd had in Eve and on the *Seagull*. The reflection in the armor was of her eyes, which glowed now as the Sight began to take her.

She made to explain herself, to tell the soldier of what was happening, but when she looked up, her voice died in her throat.

The man from the balcony was there.

No! she thought, pleading to the Light to cease her vision. *Please, I have to warn him!*

There was nothing she could do. The man opened his palm, and the blue-cloaked soldier flew back. He hit the wall of a building nearby, falling to the ground.

PEACE AND TURMOIL

Unable to move, X'odia did nothing. The man from the balcony knelt down, smiling and leaning in toward her.

“Daughter of Alkane,” he said, running his fingers across her cheek, “I have waited a long time to find you.”

His hand was snatched away by another soldier, the Sight at last taking its hold on X'odia as she fell unconscious.

When using the horn, be sure to purse your lips together to create a buzz. Empty out the spit too, or the tone won't be clear.

Instructions for Elite horn players

CHAPTER 28

ROLAND



The sounds of screams and the smell of smoke rushed to Roland. His legs and back ached, and his voice was hoarse from yelling his mare onward. It was cruel, the way he forced her, the animal likely close to death, but her state didn't matter. He had to reach his parents, and he had to reach them with haste. He cursed the Dagger's sheath that lay empty at his side.

I should never have left, he thought, grimacing as he felt the air above the Dagger's straps. His mind raced to the twins, to the evil woman, her glowing eyes and ominous voice still burning in his thoughts. Yvaine wanted the Dagger—that was what they'd said. Roland hated Yvaine, hated how she maliciously maligned his family and their claim, but he'd never thought her capable of such a morbid alliance. He shuddered, remembering Bernard's head as it had rolled on the ground.

He prayed his parents' fates wouldn't be the same.

“Faster!” he shouted, kicking at his mare’s side. She whinnied, thrashing her head in protest, but still her hooves carried on. Roland’s grip was numbing on her reins, his gloves rubbed through to expose raw, bleeding palms. He had to keep going, though. He couldn’t stop to rest, couldn’t stop to ease his aching shoulder. Stonewall was in his sight, just through the surrounding forest, and if he could just make it there—

The aching in his shoulder morphed into blinding pain. He hardly had time to react before the talons of a beast, sharp and unrelenting, thrust him from his mare.

As he crashed to the soil, massive jaws snapped at his flesh. He barely got his arms up in time as teeth punctured through his gauntlets. He tried to *call* his fire, his wind, his water, his anything, but the fatigue of his ride and the saliva dripping on his face kept his focus deterred. Hurriedly he pulled out one of the small *touched* daggers hidden beneath his gauntlets, stabbing it aimlessly up at the beast. He knew the moment he hit bone, the beast howling viciously as its jaws slackened. He pulled the blade out and stabbed again.

This time, the creature was silent.

Roland panted heavily, examining the creature as it lay lifeless before him. It was a fiend, its strange features marking it as such, no animal existent with such morphed parts. He winced as he felt the impact of its attack, the muscles beneath his shoulder aching. His torn flesh stung.

He looked around hastily for his mare, hoping the horse hadn’t fled, but his eyes only caught the strange movements of more fiends coming. He took cover behind a tree, glancing around its trunk and watching their approaching trek.

There were scores of them, hundreds, each and every one trudging forward with hungry intent. It was rare for so many to hunt together, rarer still with different species. Roland ran from his tree’s cover to another, anxious and fearful as he stalked the beasts’ march.

Something was controlling them, he realized, something beyond the outskirts of Stonewall's borders. There was no other explanation, no reason for so many elusive creatures to seek out the city. He didn't want to admit it, didn't want to believe such a thing could be true, but in the pit of his stomach, he knew.

He pulled his cloak up and followed.

The creatures sensed him—he could see it in their twitching fur and slithering scales. He clenched his sword's hilt, fearful at any moment they would stray, but the pull of their hidden master never surrendered. Holding his breath, Roland peered over his spot of hiding, attempting to track whatever it was that moved them. He reeled back instantly, sweat dampening his back as a fiend sniffed near his side.

He could smell the blood on its fur and hear its intake of breath. He kept perfectly still, praying silently for his *auro-ras* to aid him. He found them—weak and flickering—then pulled at what little of them he could see. Slowly, cautiously, he began to *call* them to life. He watched as the green and brown lights in his mind twitched the roots at his feet.

He'd have to time his attack perfectly, lest he attract the attention of more fiends.

He held his breath. Steadied his element. Waited.

The beast's head rounded the corner.

A note, blasted from a horn's bell, cut through the wind. The rumbling of hooves followed, shaking the ground. Roland exhaled, knowing the blaring tone and heavy steps to be the call of the Elite. The roots beneath him settled as he released his element. The fiend beside him fled from its hunt. Elite, lethal and stoic atop their mounts, emerged gallantly into the infested forest.

The soldiers who bore no shields and wore no armor cast elements into the air, flashes of lightning and towers of flames searing through the fiends. Knives and arrows, *called* from the dark, murky lights of their minds, flew gracefully, rip-

ping through flesh with perfect precision. Beast after beast fell, shrieks and howls announcing their pain, even more falling silently as death greeted them. Roland, from his place of hiding, rose to his feet, unsheathing his sword and joining their attacks.

Liquid dripped, blood and sweat alike. Scales and hides burned in the air, the wind consumed with the smell of scorching flesh. The forest floor opened and closed to swallow prey whole, crushing their bodies as the soil retained its place. Amid it all, Roland fought, the blue of Elite cloaks blurring around him as they danced their dance. Death befell wherever they went, piles of bodies left in their wake.

Seconds passed, eternity passed, more fiends continuing to come. Roland stepped away from the battle to catch his breath, leaning his wearied body against the bark of a tree. He was too weak now to use any elements, too weak to conjure any weapons, the sword in his hand growing heavier and heavier each time he swung. He should continue fighting, he knew, continue fending off the fiends' attacks, but the support of the tree's limbs behind him felt so comforting. He slid down its trunk, his sight blackening.

With strained breaths, Roland fought to stay present. He could see swords clashing, but he couldn't hear them; he could see the Elite call for reinforcements, but no noise escaped their horns. Something in the first fiend he'd fought—something in its bite—was rendering his senses slackened, even his fingers forgetting the feel of his sword's hilt. He tried to stand and join his men again in battle, but the numbness in his bones pinned him to the ground.

Stand up, he told himself, willing his muscles to move. Even his thoughts felt weary. *Stand up, dammit; stand up!*

His body refused.

Confined, Roland glanced around, the Elite's cloaks a fluttering haze. Their deep blue blended with the browns and greens of the woods, every color rimmed with the black of his

gaze. Soon it was all one colorless shade.

But then a different color, a different shade: gold. Roland furrowed his brow, battling to see. He weakly placed his sword in the ground and fought again to stand. This time his body listened, hoisting him upright with wobbling knees. He panted, too tired to wipe the sweat that dripped into his mouth, and looked again for that shade of silky, glimmering gold.

It was hair, he realized—exposed and flowing from a woman's head. Roland stumbled forward, rushing closer, cursing his weakened legs as he fell against another tree.

Natalia? he thought. He turned again, struggling, and squinted.

Not Natalia. Not the duchess-heir. It was Yvaine Barie, the duchess herself, standing steadfast with a wicked grin.

Wherever her eyes looked, the fiends followed.

“*Yvaine*,” Roland snarled, fighting through the venom in his blood. The duchess hadn't seen him—not yet, at least—and the sliver he had of his senses might not remain for long. He didn't know how she was doing this, how it was even possible for her to manipulate the beasts, but if he struck her, if he killed her, maybe they'd have a chance.

A bow, Roland decided, closing his eyes. *I need my bow . . .*

He'd *called* it before, time and time again, the feeling of it almost innate. Swords, spears, daggers—no other weapon had ever felt as natural to him as his bow. He was just so weak, so tired. Every one of his *auroras* hid behind his feeble state.

I have to do this, he told himself, conjuring every black *aurora* in his mind. *I have to do this!*

The black *auroras* slowly, tortuously, began to pulse. He pulled at them in desperation, willed them into being. Adrenaline rushed through him as the wood began to form in his hand. He dropped his sword, not caring to sheath it properly, and gripped the draining weapon, holding it steady until the thread of black lights finished their creation. He swayed then, dizzy

from the feat, but kept his weight low and his stance steady. With only seconds before the bow would fade, he turned from his place of rest, took aim at the duchess, and released.

The arrow's point struck. Roland collapsed instantly after its impact, his bow disappearing as his knees hit the ground.

Every fiend reeled in disarray. Roland seized his chance in the frenzy and made his way toward Yvaine, the effects of the fiend's poison slowly starting to fade.

I'll kill her, he thought, vividly remembering Merlin's slashed stomach. *Light above, I'll kill her for what she's done!*

The duchess still stood, her hand rising to her shoulder where his *vanished* arrow had struck. She saw him then, saw him rushing toward her. She rose to her feet and lifted her arms. The roots beneath Roland bent to her will. Their limbs wrapped around his legs and ankles. He fell to the ground, thrashing violently against their hold, but his body was still weak and the roots pinned him easily to the ground. Yvaine grinned, suddenly there before him, and rested bloody fingers against his jaw.

"Tis a shame such a thing had to be," she sang, scratching his cheek. Roland reeled under her touch, grimacing as he continued to attempt his retreat. The roots wouldn't budge.

"If only Pierre had allowed my daughter to be queen," she continued, slipping her hand from his face, "this would finally be mine."

She reached for the sheath of the Dagger, her smile vanishing as she met nothing but air. She rose back to her feet, her face twisting into a scowl. Roland laughed, hopeless and beaten, pleased even in his certain death that the duchess hadn't gained what she'd wanted.

"Where is it?" she yelled, reaching to her wound. Blood spurted from it, drenching her pale skin as it seeped down her sleeve. "Where is it?"

The roots around Roland tightened. He hardly realized he

was screaming as the horns of the Elite blew again. Yvaine's head snapped back, the conquering call echoing through the forest. Roland smiled between shouts, knowing the sound signaled their victory.

The duchess *called* a knife and held it to his throat.

"Where is it?" she demanded, pressing the cold metal against his skin. "Where's the Dagger?"

A swift arrow pierced into her back. Her blade sliced Roland's jaw. The roots let go of their hold, setting him free.

The heavy trots of horses surrounded them and another arrow fell where Yvaine was about to step. Roland barely breathed as he saw his father, unharmed and unscathed, chasing his mare after where Yvaine ran. The king caught up to her in seconds, his reins pulled taught as he leaped from the saddle. She fell to the ground with a whimper.

"For the attempts on Stonewall," Pierre said, grabbing her golden hair and yanking her head back, "and for the attempts on my throne." He extended his hand out toward one of his Elite, the soldier quickly handing him the slim cuffs of element shackles. Yvaine screamed, cried out in anguish, begging and pleading Pierre to spare her from the chains. His expression never changed, though, his resolution merciless. The shackles buckled shut in triumph around her wrists.

"No!" Yvaine shouted, thrashing in Pierre's hold. Blood poured from her wounds as the bindings began to glow.

Roland remembered the duke, bound in similar chains before he'd died. His had glowed too, a sign he'd attempted to *call* his *auroras*, but the elements had lain trapped within the shackles' metal.

A fitting thing then, for the duchess to suffer as her husband had.

Pierre left her screaming for a moment, staring at her with hatred before finally striking her across the temple. Her protests ceased, her crazed, wild eyes shutting as she slipped from con-

sciousness. Elite came forward as Pierre wordlessly beckoned. They lifted her limp body, the glow of her shackles fading.

“Tend to her wounds and lock her in the dungeons,” Pierre ordered, his voice deep. “I’ll meet you in Stonewall’s castle.” His men obeyed, taking the bleeding woman and tying her to a mare. The king looked down at where Roland knelt, waiting until the Elite had retreated before at last walking toward him.

Roland ground his teeth and tried to sit taller. He’d been bested by the duchess, unable to come home in time to warn his father of her attack. All the Elite had borne witness to his failure. What son was he of the Laighless name, falling to that of the Barie? What good had he done in keeping the people of his capital safe?

He breathed heavily. Everything hurt. He wanted to stand, to face his father on his feet rather than his knees, but his muscles were too weak. He waited then, covered in sweat and blood and dirt, no better than the fiends that lay dead around him. He held his chin high, the only respectable thing he could do, and met his father’s gaze. The slash from Yvaine’s knife dripped with mockery.

“Duke Bernard is dead,” he said grimly. “And Merlin as well.” He paused, his heart heavy as he recalled the dark-haired man’s blade, wet and red with Merlin’s blood. “I’m sorry, Father. I failed us.”

Pierre curled his lips and swallowed, walking closer to Roland and kneeling beside him.

“My son,” he whispered, voice choking. “You have failed no one.”

He brought his hands to Roland’s cheeks, holding them tightly, then forced him into an embrace.

This new knight you've assigned me refuses to tell me his name. I've decided to call him the Golden Knight, as he rides into battle without his helm, and his blond hair stands out. I think he hates the grandeur of it.

From a letter between Rose and Gerard Verigrad

CHAPTER 29

GARRON



“The plaza is safe, milord,” Nicolas said, kneeling to his king. The Golden Knight knelt beside him, noting how the young man grimaced as he placed his palm to the ground. It was his first battle; his knightly duties thus far had been nothing more than training and guarding. His armor had likely never felt so heavy.

King Gerard nodded his response, though it seemed Nicolas’s words had been for naught. The king took in the scene around them, the muscles in his neck tensing as his men carried away the bodies of the fallen.

Garron knew peacetime had softened Gerard’s gaze. Years had passed since they’d had to survey such a sight. The bodies during the War of Fire were rarely anything but foot soldiers and banner men. The corpses before them now, ripped apart by fiends, were merely common city folk.

“And what of my daughter?” the king asked quietly, beckoning them to rise. Garron sensed Nicolas’s gaze, the young knight likely wondering if it was he who should give the answer. Garron stepped forward in his stead.

“She’s not here, milord,” he said grimly. He swallowed, nostril’s flaring, and cast his eyes to the ground. Everything during the Peace Gathering had happened so quickly; the princess had only been a few feet from him as he’d led Gerard away from the chamber. It had seemed only seconds had passed when Maximus had run to him covered in what had to be someone else’s blood, and told him that Voradeen was under attack and Gwenivere was missing. Garron had been desperate to go after her, find her amid the chaos and bring her to safety, but he’d been needed in his king’s ranks. Men like Nicolas were too young to know the ways of battle, too spoiled by a lifetime of peace to know what war was like. This was not a war the Golden Knight was accustomed to, but it was a war all the same, and he knew how to rally men’s blades into the bellies of their enemies.

He glanced at the square, trying not to imagine Gwenivere’s face in the bodies being carried away.

“We must find her,” the king said, his voice hushed. He lowered his hand from his chest, dark-blue eyes cold as the sun hid behind the clouds. Garron glanced up, the hairs on his neck standing as he realized how far the Day Star had traveled.

Dusk was already upon them.

“Milord,” Garron said. “We’ve detained a great deal of the city. Sir Charles can lead the rest of the men in my place; he knows the capital better than I. Release me of my services here. I will find her.”

The King of Peace said nothing.

“I shall go too, milord,” Nicolas added hurriedly. Gerard raised his brow as he glanced back, the young knight’s fatigue hardly hidden as heavy breaths escaped him. He looked back

toward Garron, awaiting his judgment.

"It's a battle of fiends, milord," Garron said. "No place is safe."

The king nodded, patting Garron's shoulder.

"Keep him alive, and bring Gwenivere back. I will not mourn my daughter."

The Golden Knight bowed, then turned to Nicolas beside him. He cared little for the young knight, cared little for the perfect way his teeth were settled or how flawlessly his lips pulled around them. His smug grin was almost always present, more it seemed when it need not be. He was loyal though, and filled with valor, foolish enough to be brave when he ought to be afraid.

And he's not smiling now, he thought, noting the way Nicolas stood tall. Garron pressed past him and unsheathed his sword, knowing the young man would trek wherever he told him to follow.

I remember fighting a dragon on one of the palace's balconies, then being woken up by my squire. I didn't have any serious injuries, nor any lasting headaches. I don't know how I could've fallen unconscious, but the knights I fought beside on the balcony reported the same thing happening to them.

Account from a Xen knight

CHAPTER 30

DIETRICH



The balcony! You must reach the balcony!

Dietrich started as Seera's voice at last came to life. The fiends around him were endless, one onslaught after another. With every wave a new pile of bodies formed.

I'm coming! he thought, pulling his sword from a were'ghul's stomach. The beast was a mix of wolf and corpse, and it let out a too-human howl before collapsing to the floor. Dietrich knew he shouldn't care about its death after all the people it'd come after, but with it and every beast he took, a sense of guilt overwhelmed him. They didn't seem much different than Seera and Savine, perhaps only more wild, like children not yet raised. What thoughts would he find in them if he reached out and grazed their minds?

You would find them lost, Prince, Seera soothed. *Now hurry to the balcony. The archers are readying their arrows at me.*

Dietrich didn't bother asking which balcony; their bond

answered for him. His feet carried him through the palace's massive halls, blood and bodies littering the ground. Some still breathed as he passed them, but he couldn't stop, couldn't stall to give them Brelain's elixirs. Flashes from Seera's vision kept playing through his mind as arrows flew toward her wings.

The glass leading to the balcony was shattered, four teradact bodies lying shredded among the shards. Dietrich started at the sight, impressed by whoever had taken the beasts down. The fabric of a woman's skirts caught to his heels, but he pulled it off, annoyed, and made his way to the balcony.

Seera circled above. Knights nocked their arrows. She deflected them with a simple *call* of air, then opened her jaws to release a warning roar. Some of the knights stilled, and others quivered, but again they began readying their shots.

Don't kill them, but take them out, Seera ordered, flying closer to the balcony's edge. *I can distract them for you, but I can't land until you take care of them.*

Dietrich smiled, ready. This battle, a battle against unsuspecting humans, was more to his strengths. Darkness would be better than the current pinks of dusk, but the light and open expanse would give him a challenge. He pulled a pin from his belt, the tip lined with sleeping poison, and stuck it in the first knight's neck.

No one saw him as he did the same to another.

The men didn't fall at first; the poison needed at least a minute before it would take effect. Dietrich had a short window to stick the rest of the men, lest the first two knights slip from consciousness and alert the others. He was careful to grab the pins from the correct side, never letting them prick his own fingers. He wouldn't feel it—none of them would—the points too small for them to detect. In a relaxed state, with nothing overt distracting them, they might feel them, but with a dragon circling above, absorbing all their elements and deflecting all their arrows . . .

Dietrich stood, waiting, and watched them all slink to the ground.

Seera paid him no thanks other than a landing and a closing of her wings. He quickly ran toward her, hoisting himself onto her back and grabbing hold of the quill-like spikes along her neck. The charcoal color of her scales had shifted slightly, a reddish hue pulsing beneath them. It was fire, likely, from the elements she'd absorbed. He could feel the warmth of it in her bones.

They're after the Amulet, she said, launching them toward the city. Other fiends flew through the sky, more teradacts like the ones that lay dead in the palace, but all were too occupied fighting humans to pay them mind.

Why? he asked. *Why the Amulet?*

Seera dodged a wave of arrows that came toward her, Dietrich nearly vomiting as she spiraled and dropped.

I don't know, but they are. I felt the pull of it before. Someone's controlling them.

There was something else there, something left unspoken, but Dietrich didn't press her. He could feel the clouding commands that tried to consume her.

We have to warn the princess, then, he said, releasing the breath he held as Seera headed toward the descending sun. At least now if any knights below tried to aim at her, they'd be blinded by the light.

I can still sense the pull of the Amulet, she said. *I can use that to find her. If you think you can actually manage to speak this time, I can get us to her.*

Dietrich scoffed, as much at the surprising jab as at the continued spray of arrows.

Speaking won't be the problem, he said, pulling up the cover of his cloak. The air tore at his skin and face, more than he could stand to bear. His eyes burned with withheld tears. *She's already wary of me, after how I made my introduction.*

Another wave of arrows came at them. Dietrich clutched Seera tightly as she wove between their paths.

Yes, such an introduction was likely inappropriate. You couldn't have simply pretended to be her suitor?

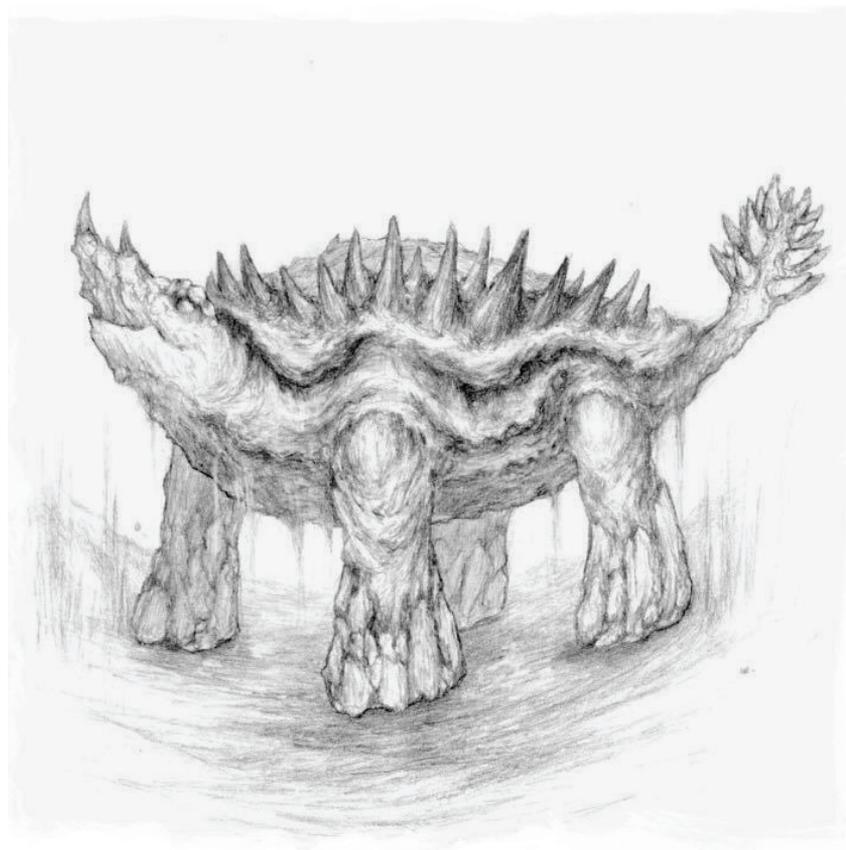
Dietrich said nothing for a moment, only hoping Seera's spiraling flight would cease. When it did, he still stayed silent, the only thought in his mind that of withholding the contents in his stomach.

No, he finally managed. She's notorious for hating suitors. At least, according to my brother's sources.

Perhaps your brother should be here. He sounds more informed.

Dietrich grunted, imagining his younger brother in his place. *The little bastard should be*, he agreed.

A smile seemed to play in Seera's thoughts, at least the semblance of one, but she kept quiet. The wind sang with the sounds of battle, and their words ceased, the pull of Gwenivere's Amulet forcing them onward.



PEACE AND TURMOIL

Tortavel often live in lakes, and don't surface for years. If encountering one, be mindful of its backside. It tends to use its tail for defense.

An excerpt from *Fire and Fiends*

CHAPTER 3 I

GWENIVERE



*B*reathe through your nose. You look weak to your enemies when they can see you panting like a dog.

Memories of Garron's voice echoed in Gwenivere's head. The strong, *called* metal of her sword clashed against the armored shell of a tortavel. The reptilian fiend spun around, its spiked tail lashing out toward her. Gwenivere ducked and planted her feet. She held her ground as the heavy tail crashed against her shield. Her defense withstood the blow, just barely, the impact shooting pain through her arm. She stood up and backed away. Her eyes narrowed as she regained her strength.

You never hack with your sword, she heard Garron scold. You never use it as a shield, or try to penetrate something that's too strong. The sword is graceful; the sword is elegant, refined. It should enter the flesh of the enemy with ease.

The princess listened to the memories of her knight's commands. The tortavel's body she faced was covered with a hard shell, spikes protruding from nearly every inch of it. She'd circled it time and time again, advancing toward it when she found an opening between its attacks, but she always came away with a battered shield and a throbbing arm.

Roaring, the beast thrashed its tail toward her again. The boulder-like tip clipped the top of her shield, forcing her legs to buckle. She fell, her shoulder banging roughly into the street as her head barely missed the ground. She winced at the pain, then scrambled to stand before the tail returned.

When she peeled her lids open, the spiked creature was charging toward her.

Its stomach, she realized, at last noticing the small patch of skin under its shell. She grinned, *vanishing* her shield and *calling* a crossbow in its place. She took in a deep breath, keeping her hands steady as she fired toward the fiend's eyes. Her aim held true, the tortavel's head thrashing as a bolt made its find.

Calling her elements, she cast out a sheet of ice in a slim, straight path between the fiend's legs. She *vanished* her crossbow and unsheathed the dagger at her side, waiting until she and the tortavel nearly met before falling to her back and onto the slick ice. The speed of her impact propelled her down the slippery path, her body only feet from being smashed under the fiend's weight. She lifted her dagger and pierced it into the tortavel's exposed skin. She sliced through the soft flesh and cut down the length of its stomach, shutting her eyes as blood spilled onto her. When her path of ice faded into rough stones, she pulled out her weapon, scrambling to get up and flee.

Frantically she wiped away the warm blood that now coated her body. She sheathed her dagger and *called* back her sword, lifting it with weak arms.

The fiend stood motionless.

Gwenivere waited, sword raised, watching as the beast's

insides spilled onto the plaza street. After several agonizing seconds, it fell loudly to the ground.

Uncertain if it was truly dead, Gwenivere licked her lips and slowly inched closer. Breaths still rose and fell from the tortavel's chest, labored and heavy, but its remaining eye was slowly closing. With no other beasts in sight, Gwenivere stood, triumphant and bloody, and watched the tortavel die.

It wasn't as satisfying as she'd thought it'd be.

The plaza is clear, she thought, trying to cast away her guilt. She shouldn't feel anything for the fiend, especially not when it had caused so much destruction, but the nagging guilt was there. She snarled and spit on its corpse, *vanishing* her blade.

How many fiends had that been then since she'd first made her way from the Peace Gathering? How many monsters had she defeated since the teradacts had burst through the palace windows? There'd been four of them, then waves of beasts along the way, then the tortavel she stood over now. What were they all doing, swarming her capital with such fervor? Why would such elusive beasts attack her city?

She wanted to know, but the idea of resting, of kneeling down on the cobbled streets, was growing more enticing with each second that passed.

Cover, she decided, walking toward a building. The beams of it had cracks from missed attempts of the tortavel's tail, but it looked sturdy enough. She walked toward it, limping in what remained of her tattered dress, and shut her eyes. She didn't need to see to step forward.

Screams sounded from a few streets away, the ground beneath her suddenly shaking. Her lids burst open as she held her arms out, fighting to stay standing through the abrupt trembles. The building she'd been walking toward released a threatening groan, and the cracks along its beams spread. She stumbled back, tripping over nothing as she tried to escape the now-crumbling plaza. All around her, shops and homes and

schools quivered from the earth's might.

With nowhere to go, Gwenivere stopped, realizing she was trapped within the damaged plaza.

Air, air, air! She reached for the element, begged for it, but her body was too weak and the lights too hidden. She lifted her hands above her head, just as Aden had during their challenge in the forest, and prayed a gust of wind would burst from her fingertips.

Nothing came.

She tried again.

Nothing.

The shadows of the falling buildings began to envelop her.

She is incredibly skilled at calling, with the exception of calling air, which takes her a great deal of concentration and effort. She passed out today when I asked her to levitate a chair for ten minutes.

A report of Gwenivere Verigrad's training from Garron
Hillborne

CHAPTER 32

GARRON



“Gwenivere!”
Garron sprinted for the plaza. He’d just spotted Gwenivere’s slender frame, surrounded by collapsing buildings, and made to reach her. Nicolas’s hand pulled him back.

“We won’t make it in time!”

Garron watched, hopeless, helpless, pleading that the Light would put him in Gwenivere’s place. She couldn’t die, not when she was so close to where he stood. Not while he still lived.

Despondent, Garron reached within his mind, forcing out every clear *aurora* he could muster. The ground shook too much for him to reach her before the buildings fell, and the expanse between them was too great. He could do this for her, though—he could try to let her escape. The buildings just needed to stay standing, to stay upright long enough for her to flee.

I have to save her, he thought. *I have to save her!*

The buildings my great grandmother designed are now destroyed.

Voradeen townsmen

CHAPTER 33

DIETRICH



We won't make it Dietrich! There isn't time!
We'll make it, we'll make it—

We won't!

Dietrich leaned forward on Seera's back, pressing her toward the princess. They'd barely caught a glimpse of her before everyone on the ground had begun to scream and fall.

Dietrich hadn't realized the severity of it from the air until it'd been too late. The buildings around Gwenivere were crumbling.

Even without trying to read her, Dietrich could hear the thoughts that pressed at Seera's mind. What good would it do them, do the rest of the city, if they died trying to save Gwenivere? It was her Amulet the strange pull was after. It wouldn't stop just because the Guardian was buried. If the two of them were buried alongside her, there'd be no one who could lead the threats from the rest of the city.

Dietrich knew it was true. But he refused to accept it.

Seera—now!

The dragon obeyed, closing her wings and diving between the buildings. It was too late. Dietrich knew it was too late, could feel it. They were shrouded by the caving stones, the buildings falling upon them as they made their way toward the princess.

Dietrich reached out. He grabbed at Gwenivere's waist, clinging to her. She gasped from the impact, the breath knocked out of her, but she didn't scream.

They weren't going to make it.

Seera *called* her air and Dietrich *called* his, pressing it against the buildings around them.

It shouldn't have been enough, but somehow, miraculously, they made it through.

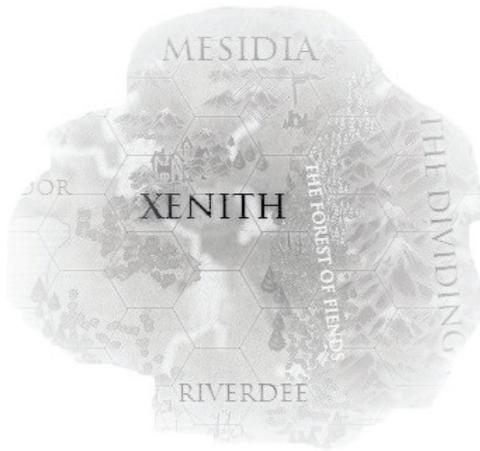


Behemoths are creatures from the Age of Old. Tales of them are likely exaggerated.

An excerpt from *Fire and Fiends*

CHAPTER 34

DIETRICH



“Hold on!” Dietrich yelled, pulling Gwenivere’s body up to his own. She didn’t need telling more than once. Her arms wrapped around his waist as Seera narrowly avoided the collapsing buildings. The wind howled, tears streaming down Dietrich’s cheeks. Behind them, without his and Seera’s air, the plaza’s buildings crashed to the ground.

Gwenivere, within his arms, stifled a sob.

Thank you, Seera, Dietrich thought, squeezing tightly to where he held. *You didn’t have to save her.*

As if knowing his thoughts, Gwenivere’s grip around his neck tightened. Her tears dampened his shirt.

Don’t thank me yet, Prince, Seera said, landing atop a roof. The earth’s shaking had ceased, the steadiness of the rooftop they landed on strange after their time in flight. Carefully Dietrich peeled away Gwenivere’s hands, clutching to her wrists and meeting her gaze.

He hadn't had a chance to really look at her before, but he could see her blood-ridden face now. Everything about her looked of death, crimson smears streaked across her skin and down her clothes. Even her head was caked with it, the color so present it was difficult to know what was blood and what was hair. He wondered then, trying to convey comfort in his touch, if any of the blood belonged to her.

"Are you all right?" he asked. He likely looked menacing himself, his face half covered and his body garbed in black, but Gwenivere simply nodded.

Prince, Seera said, cocking her head toward the sky. Dietrich ignored her, pulling a dagger from his side and tearing off a piece of his cloak. He handed it to Gwenivere, giving her a moment to herself as she wiped her face clean.

Prince!

Dietrich looked up, his blood running cold as he followed Seera's gaze. Near the palace, gleaming against the coming of night, a colossal fiend hovered.

What is it? he asked. The beast was black, its body snake-like as it flew without wings. Air, manipulated by its mind, kept it in the sky, the sheer force of it causing the lake beneath it to ripple with waves.

A Behemoth, from the Age of Old, Seera answered. *It was asleep in the lake beside the palace, but whoever wants the Amulet must have called upon it. The quakes likely started when it awoke.*

Dietrich stared, as much consumed by fear as he was by awe. He'd studied fiends most of his life, had seen and slain more beasts than most men had heard of, but he'd never seen anything like this.

Beside him, Gwenivere began to thank him, her face wiped clean of the blood, but she quieted when she followed his eyes. The hovering creature let out a deafening roar, the sound echoing through the battered city.

It's blind, Seera mused, studying its cry. She turned her

head, remorseful, the colors of her scales easing back to charcoal. *After years of slumber, it's lost its sight.*

"I have to get people to safety," Gwenivere said, hoisting her leg over Seera's side. Realizing she was about to slide off, Dietrich put out his arm, barring her from leaving his side.

"It's after you," he said, pointing toward her Amulet. "After that."

And currently it's trying to sense where she is, Seera said. The longer we stay here, the faster it will find—

"It's after my Amulet?" Gwenivere peered at him incredulously. Her demeanor had shifted, angry now, her gratitude lapsed. She went to move Dietrich's arm, but a warning growl from Seera kept her still. Her throat bobbed as she glared at the dragon, her hand lowering to the knife at her side.

"Listen," Dietrich said, reaching for her knife. Gwenivere gave him vicious scowl, lips snarling, and tightened her grip.

"I know it doesn't make any sense, but Seera"—he cocked his head to the dragon—"she can sense the pull on the fiends, the thing that's driving them all here. And that Behemoth, it's after your Amulet too." He let out a breath, cautiously pulling his hand back. "She thinks if we take you from the city, it'll follow."

Dietrich knew as soon as the words left his lips how absurd they sounded. If he were in Gwenivere's position, he wouldn't believe any of it. It'd only been a short time ago that he'd been in denial about his ability to speak with Seera.

"I know it sounds absurd," he said, sensing her distrust. "But that pull is how Seera and I were able to find you. We didn't just stumble across you by pure happenstance."

He stared at Gwenivere, awaiting her response. She stared back, lips pursed.

What would they do if she refused? Take her by force? Light, they would have to. Their only chance at saving Voradeen was getting her as far away from it as they could. He could see the contemplation written across her face, the suspicion, but he

could see that paired with logic. Even if she didn't believe them, would she have believed an organized attack by fiends was possible if he'd told her just last night? Would she have believed a man could be allied with a dragon? Likely not, but there they were, victims of some ancient elemental forces. She had to see that. She had to.

Seera's muscles were tensing. His muscles were tensing. But Gwenivere's expression, twisted in hopelessness and confusion, finally eased.

"All right," she said, swinging her leg back over Seera's back. Dietrich breathed a sigh of relief. Then the reality of it all sunk in.

I'm going to have to fight that Behemoth, he thought, feeling feint. *Me, a dragon, and a tiny, blood-coated princess.*

Why had he ever agreed to this venture?

"Well?" Gwenivere pressed. Seera gave an amused grumble as Dietrich irritably guided the princess's hands to where she could hold on. In his head, not caring if Seera heard, he let out a stream of curses.

Any irritation he felt vanished as the dragon launched them back into the sky. The streets had mostly settled from the fiends' attacks, the grounds below quiet while people wept. Knights no longer nocked arrows toward Seera, instead guiding people to places of safety.

Dietrich kept his focus on the Behemoth, the wind pressing sharply against his eyes. The creature turned slightly, tilting its head to listen. There was a brief, tense moment as it blindly hovered in the air, motionless and silent. Then it ceased its hovering, angled itself toward Voradeen, and glided forward.

Seera responded immediately. She thrust her wings with vigor, racing to reach the ends of Voradeen's borders and lead the Behemoth away.

It was too late. The Behemoth opened its mouth, exposing long, slender fangs, and roared. Flames burst from its throat.

Within his chest, Dietrich's heart beat violently. Gwenivere said nothing, her knuckles white where she clutched Seera's spikes.

The fire from the Behemoth's breaths caught quickly to the rubble of the streets. The piles of fallen buildings were quick to burn as people sprinted away, screaming. Knights did what they could to douse the fire, but they were tired and weak. They'd been fighting all day, protecting innocent city folk from fiends. They couldn't possibly manage to fend off the beast before them now.

Dietrich held back a cough as the smell of smoke and ash filled the air. He clung to Seera, praying strength for Gwenivere and her burning city.

Who would want for something like this? Who would place the Amulet's worth over all these people's lives?

Mournful, Dietrich shifted his grip to Gwenivere's hand and squeezed. The princess did nothing in return, the speed of their flight too quick to warrant a returning gesture.

Behind them, the heat of the Behemoth's flames increased.

Whatever is controlling this thing—Dietrich thought to Seera, moving his hand back to her spikes—*keep fighting it. I can feel its pull for Gwenivere's Amulet now. Don't let it take you.*

A rumble sounded from Seera's throat. Beneath them, the outskirts of the city finally faded, the trees of the surrounding forest thickening. Hills and cliffs closed together, a river rustling gently in contrast to the roaring Behemoth. It stopped casting its fire, instead shifting its attention to them.

"We got it out of Voradeen," Dietrich said, as much to comfort Gwenivere as it was to comfort himself. Surprisingly, the princess released a hand from Seera, the beginnings of a weapon forming around her arm.

"How do we kill it?" she asked. There was a hunger in her voice that nearly made Dietrich lean away.

Well? he thought to Seera. She was still fighting, blocking

out the pull on her mind, but she was present. *How do we kill it?*
 Silence. The beating of her wings was frantic as another
 breath of fire escaped from the Behemoth's throat.

Seera?

I heard you!

She bolted toward the treetops, the thick reds and yellows
 of leaves enveloping them. Despite being blind, the abrupt
 change in flight seemed to alter the Behemoth's senses. The
 pull on the Amulet flickered.

Its mind only knows the commands it's being given, Seera
 said. She wove through thick trunks of trees, quick and agile.
*If we can get it to attack itself—to cast its flames on itself—maybe
 we can kill it.*

All right, Dietrich thought. In front of him, the weapon
 Gwenivere *called*, a crossbow, solidified.

So what do you propose? he asked, examining the weapon. It
 wasn't quite as bulky as the ones he usually *called*, or as black,
 but it latched to her arm, just above her wrist, so she could still
 hold on to Seera.

Clever.

Perhaps we could just drop her off on top of it? Dietrich
 thought. *She seems rather . . . feisty.*

Seera kept quiet for a moment, her wings closing shut as
 she barely avoided the limbs of surrounding trees. Dietrich's
 heart fell to his stomach as she quickly opened her wings back
 out, barely keeping them off the ground.

Behind them, the Behemoth had caught their scent. The
 sound of breaking branches flew along the wind.

Seera? Dietrich asked. *What are your thoughts? Should we
 throw the Amulet at it and hope it burns through itself?*

"It's gaining on us," Gwenivere said. Her neck craned to see
 behind them, her cheek nearly pressing against Dietrich's own.

A bolt formed inside her crossbow.

Seera burst through the forest, a waterfall cascading down

into the depths of a canyon. Dietrich and Gwenivere both released a scream as the dragon descended headfirst down the mist of the falls. The river forming the falls ran at the canyon bottom, the rapids white and roaring against the rocks. It grew closer, closer, closer, until Dietrich swore Seera was headed straight for its depths.

Gwenivere screamed again. Dietrich pinned his elbows against her torso, his legs squeezing at Seera's side.

Then, just as quickly as their plummet started, it was over.

The canyon echoed with the Behemoth's roar.

"It's fallen!" Gwenivere yelled. She and Dietrich both looked back at where the beast had crashed, blood darkening the river's waters. The princess's laugh filled his ears, her hand chancing a grip against his own as Seera circled around.

Is it dead? Dietrich asked. It was useless to ask; he could sense in Seera's mind that it wasn't. He was disappointed but unsurprised when she answered no.

As their flight turned back toward the Behemoth, Dietrich could finally see its features clearly. The scales he'd mistaken for black were actually a flurry of colors, different, darkened *auro-ras* pulsating through them. Its head looked similar to Seera's: dragon-like, with horns extending back and sharp, menacing eyes. Not eyes, exactly, but sockets, where eyes used to be.

Your idea might actually work, Seera said. The Behemoth, grumbling now from its fall, summoned the air back around it. The mist of the falls and the bloodied waters of the river flew as its body slowly began to rise.

Gwenivere lifted her crossbow arm, readying her aim.

Which idea? he asked, watching Gwenivere's *called* bolts fly through the air and pierce into the Behemoth's scales. They were close to it now, close enough that Dietrich could see the tiny punctures the bolts made before they faded and were replaced by more. Dietrich *called* a dagger and thrust it at the beast, deciding he should do something to aid the princess.

It was like throwing darts at a mountain.

The one about the Amulet, Seera finally answered. *I think the Behemoth will burn through itself if we get the Amulet near enough to it, or even on it.*

So what, we dangle Gwenivere over it? He called another dagger, this one bigger than the first, and threw it down.

The Behemoth's air blew it back. And then it was after them again.

The steady pace Seera had set grew rapid again. Gwenivere's crossbow faded as she lunged back toward the dragon's body, Dietrich's own body pressed down against her. He wished now, as the Behemoth bellowed so closely behind them, that they were going down again instead of up.

No, Seera said, even her thoughts sounding breathless. *You're going to take the Amulet from Gwenivere—and then you're going to jump onto the Behemoth's back.*

Dietrich practically choked.

What?

Seera managed to break the line of forest she'd only come from minutes before, continuing upward over the height of its trees. *We can't make the girl do it; she and I can't communicate. It has to be you.*

Dietrich cursed aloud. The princess likely mistook it for fear of their continual climb, letting out fouler words than his.

I'm going to stop soon, Seera continued, *and then you're going to let go. The air the Behemoth is calling is what keeps it in flight. You shouldn't fall if you can get level with it.*

Shouldn't?

Correct. Seera halted her ascent, her wings opening to their full length.

Now!

Groaning, Dietrich let go with one hand, grabbed at Gwenivere's Amulet, and yanked it over her head. Before she could do anything to stop him, he looked down, cursed again, and let go.

This was his death. This was how the Assassin Prince was going to die. Not from the poisons of his enemies, not from a blade or an arrow. He would die splattered in a river, narrowly missing the pocket of air surrounding the Behemoth he dropped toward.

That, or he'd be swallowed alive by its massive, opened jaws.

Let that blasted princess at least tell them I died valiantly, he thought, letting out a yell. Through the curses and fearful doom in his mind, he managed to pull at his black *auroras*, calling them with panic. They fluttered like a dying flame, barely sparking to life before flowing into a rigid, slender blade. Dietrich clung to them, allowed them to fill his entire mind, his lungs, his stomach, until the black swarm of the Behemoth's body flew feet away, inches, seconds.

Dietrich shut his eyes, damning his brother and Seera and the Xen princess, and let out one last yell. Then he slammed into something hard.

*My heart broke when I heard what'd happened in Voradeen,
but I didn't realize the scope of it until I started seeing blood in
the river near where I live.*

Xen countryman

CHAPTER 35

DIETRICH



Dietrich opened his eyes, expecting to see whatever realm existed between the day of death and the day the *auro-ras* drifted from one's body. He'd died, after all, crashed into the body of some monstrous, ancient being. He'd listened to the dragon—the damned, bloody dragon—who'd told him to leap onto the back of a Behemoth.

A Behemoth.

His sight began to focus. Fluttering, shifting darkness moved in front of him. He ground his teeth, his shoulder throbbing.

Stupid fool, came Seera's voice. It was distant, like it had been when he'd first heard her outside the palace balconies. Could she speak to him even in death?

Are you always so theatrical?

Dietrich looked past the darkness in front of him and up toward his arm, one hand clinging tightly to his *called* blade. Its

point stuck into the darkness. Thick, crimson blood dripped from where it was lodged.

In his other hand, metal imprinting itself into his skin, rested the Amulet of Eve.

It was the air you felt, Seera explained. *It felt like a wall when you hit it, but you're fine. You're alive. Now stop thinking curses at me and get a better grip. The Behemoth is going to strike.*

Dietrich hastily put the chain of the Amulet around his neck and did as he was told. There was another knife, a *touched* one, strapped to his thigh. His thoughts were too jumbled for him to balance *calling* two knives, so he pulled the *touched* one from its place and stabbed it through the Behemoth's scales.

They were surprisingly smooth, and thin, the knife puncturing through cleanly. More blood spilled down onto his face, but he ignored it, not wanting to risk letting go of his make-shift grips to risk wiping it away. He looked around, hoping to find Seera, but the view of the Behemoth's mouth was all he could see.

Dietrich yelled, brazen and unashamed, as billowing flames came toward him.

The heat from the flames was almost enough to make him let go. They didn't land directly on him though, so he held steady. He wondered if the princess, safe now atop Seera's back, mourned him or cursed him. How foolish he must have seemed, jumping off the back of his dragon and onto the Behemoth.

It's not foolish, Seera said, *it's working!*

Dietrich wanted to look up, but the elemental fabrics of his gloves and cloak were barely managing to absorb the might of the Behemoth's flames. If he risked looking, the skin on his face wouldn't be able to do the same.

He'd take the dragon's word for it.

It's torso, it's almost burned completely through! Dietrich, can you feel its air faltering?

He couldn't feel anything but the blaze above him and the

throbbing of his shoulder. He tried, though, tried to see if he could still sense that protective wall of air that propelled him and the Behemoth upward. He *vanished* the *called* blade and extended his hand out, trying to gain a sense of the beast's element.

It was still there. But it was fading.

Hold on, Prince, hold on!

He listened without protest, quickly returning his injured arm back to where the other still held his *touched* knife. The Behemoth breathed its fire, the flames growing hotter and hotter above and around him. The air began to disappear. Dietrich couldn't see what was happening, even if he tried.

Seera could, though. He reached his thoughts out to her and glimpsed flashes of what she saw.

The mighty Behemoth, the ancient beast from the Age of Old, was burning its own body in half.

You are, as am I, a descendent of the Ageless, he heard Zoran say. *They were and are the original High Council of Eve, all but forgotten by the people of today. They possessed the ability to control fiends, summon beasts from the Age of Old . . .*

The ability to control fiends. That's who was doing this then, one of the Ageless. And they'd done it all for Gwenivere's Amulet.

Dietrich, it's done, Seera said. He knew what she meant before she said it. The Behemoth's air had faded to nothingness. Dietrich was back to free falling, the sensation equally terrifying and petrifying as the Behemoth's body made its way toward the ground.

I'm coming, she said. Dietrich kept still, his fingers rigid as they hung from his knife's hilt.

And then his dragon was there, aiding him once more onto her back. The ancient Behemoth, split in two, fell back into the canyon below. This time when it crashed to the ground, there was no sense of gleeful triumph. There was only hatred, both in Dietrich's heart and in Seera's, for whoever had forced the slumbering creature to burn itself to death.

While good quality elemental fabrics and metals can absorb a great deal of elements, it is still important to switch them out. Otherwise they can overfill and become dangerous for the wearer.

Warning note on elemental armor

CHAPTER 36

GWENIVERE



As soon as the prince was safely back onto his dragon, Gwenivere grabbed her Amulet and yanked it from his chest. He didn't protest, instead looking down at the remains of the Behemoth below. Sadness seemed to cross his eyes, and his dragon's, both man and fiend looking downtrodden at the fate of the beast. Gwenivere had understood that feeling when she'd stood above the tortavel corpse, her stance of conquest but her heart sorrowed. It'd made her angry that she'd felt anything but hatred for something that had brought havoc to her city, but she had.

She didn't now.

Behind her, Dietrich suddenly began to fall back. The dragon leveled its flight as Gwenivere spun around and caught him, cursing when she saw how much of his clothing had been burned through. He was injured, somewhere, but she couldn't

tell where. His black clothes were no doubt made of elemental fabric, but . . .

What happens if too much of an element fills into elemental armor? she heard Garron ask. And then she heard her brother's elated reply:

It explodes!

Garron had told her stories of threads and metals becoming so filled that they eventually burst. Perhaps that's what had happened to Dietrich. She grabbed his hood and pulled it down, only to find he wore another layer of elemental fabric underneath. She grunted and instead pulled at his shirt, the dark skin beneath bubbling from burns. The smell of charred flesh hit her as the breeze flew passed.

"He's hurt," she said. She spun back toward the dragon, uncertain how the prince managed to talk to her, and shouted, "Please—he's hurt!"

The dragon seemed to understand, or somehow already knew, her flight lowering to a stream within the forest. She landed gently, her claws slipping into the soft soil as her wings folded. Gwenivere jumped off and quickly grabbed onto Dietrich's shoulders, carefully pulling him off his dragon's back.

"I-I'm going to try and help him," she said. The dragon stared at her, its eyes a cool, white blue. Gwenivere looked to Dietrich, then back at the beast, unsettled at how saddened the beast seemed. It was a fiend; it shouldn't feel anything but hunger and fear for humans. Why did it look at them, then, as if they mattered?

Gwenivere put her fingers to Dietrich neck, praying for a pulse. It was there, a slow *pum, pum-pum, pum-pum*. She laughed, grateful and surprised, and breathed a heavy sigh of relief.

He was alive.

All right, now what? she wondered, peeling off the layer beneath his hood. She realized then that she'd never seen his entire face.

He was younger than she expected, likely not even in his thirtieth year. She supposed if she thought about the profile of him that she'd read in preparation for the masquerade, she'd know that, but the portrait of him then had just been from his boyhood. After everything he'd just done, after having saved her and her city, her people, she'd have thought he'd be older. More at peace with the idea of dying.

Why would someone she didn't know, who had no love for or affiliation with her home, risk his life for it?

"Don't die, all right?" she whispered. Her voice came out more choked than she expected, so she cleared her throat and began peeling back the layers of his clothes.

The extra tie around his head had saved his black hair from burning, but the edges of his face had lines of damaged flesh where the tie hadn't covered. He'd not been a beautiful man as it was, his features harshly masculine, but the scarring would make him especially fearsome. She pitied him, knowing it was shallow, but it didn't seem fair that he'd saved so many and lost the youthfulness of his golden skin. Some women fancied men like that, she supposed, men who simply looked rugged and dangerous. She would tell him so, if he awoke from this.

When he awoke from this.

It got worse the more clothing she peeled off. She was careful to keep his skin from peeling off with it, though she knew there were times the fabric was too meshed to prevent it completely. She let out a wince on his behalf as she carefully removed his clothes, the dragon making a similar noise behind her.

If the fiend was wincing, it had to be bad.

"You're going to make it," she said, as much to herself as to Dietrich. She looked back at the dragon—Seera, he'd called her—and gave her a reassuring nod. "He'll make it."

Fortunately, after she finally removed all of his shirt, she found a vest underneath. It'd been damaged too, though, so she began pulling it off, marveling at all the old scars already

on his stomach and chest.

What've you been through, to have a marred body like this? She ran her fingers over the scars. She pulled back quickly with flushed cheeks, realizing she'd been caressing the bare, muscular torso of a shirtless man. She swallowed and checked the skin just below his belt, grateful when she saw he hadn't been injured there. She wasn't sure she was ready to see that part of him.

All right, I have to get him awake, she thought, trying to keep focused. She couldn't imagine how she'd react if the roles had been reversed, if he'd not only stripped her of her clothes, but touched and examined her naked skin.

I'd be furious, she thought, dragging him over toward the nearby stream. Winter would come soon, and the waters would likely be a bitter cold from the cooling days. Perhaps the feel of it would wake him, soothe the pain of the burns that had most likely caused him to lose consciousness.

Yes, I wouldn't like that, she decided, trying to distract herself from the damage of his wounds. If they were as bad as they looked, he might not wake up at all.

She panted and glanced back at his dragon, hoping the beast couldn't read her thoughts. Then she felt the water against her ankles and winced at its cold.

"Please wake up," she whispered, splashing Dietrich with water. "Please . . ."

If all three layers of skin have been damaged, I recommend using the Blue Wývern Elixir. It's expensive, but it will heal the wound quickly and prevent infection and scarring.

From Abaddon Haroldson's burn pamphlets

CHAPTER 37

DIE TRICH



The prince awoke with a gasp. He instantly pushed Gwenivere away and lifted a dagger to her throat. She held her hands up, watching him as his weapon fell from his hand and his body dropped back to the stream.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” she said, catching him before he could fall. Pain dripped from his wounds, red seeping through his clothes and trickling into the water. Gwenivere helped lower him down and crouched beside him, urgently looking back to his dragon for help. Seera stood still, her nostrils flaring as she watched with icy sadness.

“Dietrich,” Gwenivere whispered. She reached her hand out to his burned skin, her turquoise eyes filling with tears. He breathed heavily, pain pulsing through him, and fought to stay awake.

He would die soon; he could feel it. He would die a hero,

he supposed, having battled to save the grandest city from a Behemoth. People would tell stories of him, of his legacy, the titles that had haunted him abandoned for ones of heroism. He took a breath and looked back at Gwenivere, who wore a forced, hopeful smile as she held him.

Yes, I could die like this, he thought, noting her matted hair and tattered clothes. He lifted his hand and brushed her cheek, wiping the tear that fell from her face.

Your elixir, you fool! Seera yelled, ending his musings. Dietrich reached for his pouch and found a bottle of Brellain's cure still intact. He sat up and cast Gwenivere's hand aside, deciding he wanted to live more than he wanted to imagine a gloried death.

He poured every last drop of the liquid over his hands and body and face, reeling as an overwhelming pain took him. The princess attempted to ease his thrashing as she grasped his arms, holding him down. She observed him, brows furrowed.

Then her expression shifted. Amazement and wonder flashed across her face as the flesh of his burns began to heal.

"What in the Light is that?"

Her tone was hushed but firm. He relaxed his grip, not realizing he'd been holding his hands in fists.

"An elixir," he managed. He carefully propped himself up, inhaling deeply as the currents flowed over his mended skin. Realizing Gwenivere was still awaiting a more thorough explanation, he said, "It's not been tested on enough people to sell to the West yet."

That was the easiest answer he could give. Telling her of Brellain and the desert serpent would take too long, and claiming it was his brother's creation would be an outright lie. Not to mention a political mistake. Regardless of how good the terms were between Xenith and Sadie, he didn't think the heir to the throne would appreciate knowing the country they paid a great deal to for elixirs was keeping such a miracle cure to themselves.

This response was simplest. And for all he knew, it might be true. All that really mattered was that, after chewing on her lip for a moment, Gwenivere nodded.

“Well I don’t know if they have knights in the East,” she said, pulling her arms back to her lap. “But you’re a proper knight, I’d say.” She smiled and stood, extending a hand down toward him. He looked up, obliging her offer.

“We have watchmen,” he said. He thought of his and Abaddon’s watchman Culter, the man who’d taught him so many filthy and wicked tunes, and decided he was, indeed, a proper watchman.

Something’s wrong, Seera cut in.

Dietrich froze, feeling what she felt.

It was the pull from before, the longing for the Amulet on Gwenivere’s chest. He turned from her and unsheathed another blade, the muscles in his shoulder aching. He rubbed at them with his free hand, noticing for the first time he was no longer wearing his shirt or vest.

He gave Gwenivere an amused, inquisitive glance.

She suddenly found interest in Seera.

What’s going on? he asked, noting as the pull to the Amulet grew. Gwenivere stood beside him, reaching for her own dagger.

The Elder Bloods, Seera sneered. Dietrich looked back at her, his blood boiling as hers did. A wave of hatred enveloped him.

The people who summoned the Behemoth? And the fiends?

Seera didn’t answer. She didn’t need to. He already knew what the answer was.

Yes.

“Seera is going to get you out of here,” he said to Gwenivere. “It’s not safe.”

“Me? Why not us?”

The demand in her tone was back, so soon after he’d barely survived the battle.

“It’s too dangerous,” he said. Seera was there before he

asked, already prepping to take Gwenivere away.

“Come with me,” she said, grabbing his arm. Dietrich was torn by the concern in her voice, desperately wanting to accompany her back to her palace and rest.

I still need the Dagger, he reminded himself. And Gwenivere is the key to persuading Roland to give it to me.

He looked back up, careful to keep his gaze on Gwenivere’s face. Even that seemed to sway his thoughts.

The pull toward the Amulet grew stronger.

Seera? he asked. These Elder Bloods—these are the same people who led all the fiends against Voradeen? Who called on the Behemoth?

Seera bellowed a deep, low grumble. *Yes.*

So my chances of dying here quite high, correct?

Silence.

“Dietrich, come with me,” Gwenivere insisted, tapping her Amulet. “I can feel it too now, whatever is out here. I can help you—”

She didn’t finish her statement. Couldn’t. Dietrich had closed the distance between them and pulled her close to him, swooping her up into his arms.

Before she could curse him or hit him—or stab him, by the look on her face—he carried her a couple feet, stuck one of his needles in her neck, and tossed her onto Seera’s back.

*Gwenivere Verigrad was seen with the desert scum's dragon. I
can try to twist this in our favor.*

A letter between Anastasia Verkev and an unknown party

CHAPTER 38

GWENIVERE



Gwenivere cursed as Seera lifted off the ground. The Sadyan prince still stood alone in the creek below.

Quickly Gwenivere thrust the dagger she held back in its sheath, clutching tightly to the dragon. The air was cold. It was made worse by the coming night and the water that still clung to her from the stream. She leaned against Seera's dark scales, tired and fatigued, and wished terribly Dietrich had come with her.

She grabbed tightly to the chain of her Amulet, the strange pull for it waning as the dragon carried her home.

She was so tired. When was the last time she'd slept? Had it really only been last night that Dietrich had met her in her chambers?

So much had happened. So many terrible things had happened. And she was so tired, and her body ached, and her

mind was so weary from *calling* . . .

She closed her eyes, just for a moment.

And opened them again when Seera nudged her. On a palace balcony.

She'd fallen asleep? After all that had happened, she hadn't thought herself capable of that. She rubbed at her neck where she felt a numb, dull pinch, noticing a small needle sticking from her skin. Grimacing, she pulled it out and slid from the dragon's back. The needle must have come from Dietrich.

The dragon nestled her head against Gwenivere's stomach, seeming to know the distress that filled her. Gwenivere tensed at first, unsure as the beast pushed gently against her, then obliged when she realized its intent.

"Thank you," she whispered. She backed away, looking into her crystal-colored eyes, and nodded as she saw the pleading worry within them.

"Go save him," she said. The dragon turned away, dark wings opening. When she leaped from the balcony, it was silent and graceful.

"Gwen?"

The princess spun around, the scared, dirty face of her small brother staring up at her. She gasped gratefully and fell to the ground, embracing the young boy as he ran into her outstretched arms.

"Aden," she whispered. Her heart lifted as he draped his tiny hands around her. She hugged him, pressing his face against her chest and away from the scene of their burning city. He sobbed, his eyes red and his shoulders shaking. Someone's blood stained his clothes.

Maximus's blood.

Gwenivere shushed him and rocked him gently. She kissed his head, thanking the Creator he was alive and unharmed.

Just past them stood his protectors: Dorian and Elizabeth, the three Prianthian sisters, and further back, nearly a foot

above them all, a bloodied knight, wiping tears from his eyes.

Was that . . . Maximus?

Gwenivere nodded to them all, knowing they had questions. And she had questions for them too, especially Maximus, who indeed stood seemingly unscathed behind the others.

That elixir Dietrich used—could that have been what had saved Maximus? Gwenivere remembered someone had put an arm on her shoulder when she'd been questioning Maximus during the Peace Gathering. Had it been Dietrich trying to get her attention, come to help her save her brother's knight?

It doesn't matter, Gwenivere decided, kissing Aden again. In that moment, all that mattered was that her brother was safely in her arms.

The pebble and petal will melt the ice, but break and wither with the winter. All because the Shadow will save the mortal heaven, only to be the name that tears it apart.

Evean prophecy

CHAPTER 39

DIETRICH



Dietrich stood tall, blind without the Amulet to give way to the Elder Bloods' presence. He knew they were out there, though, rapidly approaching. They were likely eager to confront the man who had defeated their Behemoth.

Perhaps I'll die after all, he mused, trying not to startle at the sounds of the forest.

"Dietrich Haroldson," a voice said. The prince looked toward where the voice had come from, chills running down his spine. There were only two, a man and a woman, both with pale skin and long, dark hair. They were siblings—twins more than likely—their nearly identical features seeming both perfectly young and unnaturally old. The woman's eyes glowed, ever so slightly, and the sight of her evoked an odd fear in Dietrich's gut. He held up his dagger, preparing himself for the battle that was sure to come.

The dark-haired man snickered in response.

“You are Xia’s son,” the woman said, walking closer to him. He threw his knife out toward her, more a threat to halt her advance than an effort to hurt her, but she stopped the dagger with the slightest lift of hand.

It fell to the ground with a thud.

The woman smiled, an uncomfortable, sinister smile. Her blood-red lips peeled back to expose white, perfectly human teeth.

Dietrich had half expected them to be pointed.

“Perhaps it might be better to let things be,” she said, analyzing him with subdued excitement. Her twin’s amusement faded, his displeasure obvious.

“Better to take him now,” he said, *calling* a dark element. Before he could cast it, Seera flew in, landing between them. The man grunted in frustration, but the woman’s smile widened.

“You. You are Zoran’s girl.” She pointed at Seera. “Well it seems I can’t kill either of you.”

She gave them another grin before turning away, knowing full well they wouldn’t risk provoking her. She beckoned her brother to follow, the man still glaring, but he too joined in her retreat.

The two faded back into the forest, gone as quickly as they’d come.

Dietrich held his breath, not wanting to believe he was safe only to have them suddenly return. He swallowed, trying to unravel the strange words the woman had spoken.

They’re gone, Seera said.

Dietrich looked up at her uneasily, beads of sweat dripping down his face. He exhaled, knowing the dragon was right, then sheathed his weapon and walked back into the cold water of the creek. He waded in until his torso was fully submerged, the few burns he still had searing with pain. He grimaced and closed his eyes, his aching muscles finally telling

him just how tired they were.

He stayed there, letting the moment stretch, not wanting to think of all those who had likely died that day.

Is she safe? he asked, watching as his fingertips began to texture. Seera didn't respond, instead walking a short way into the forest and breathing flames onto a small stack of branches. She coiled her legs and laid down, curling up as close as she could to the fire's warmth.

Seera and Savine, they're very susceptible to the cold, Dietrich remembered, recalling the sad truth Zoran had revealed. He looked up, the twinkling of stars finally coming forth as the moon brightened. *It makes them weak.*

Yes, Seera finally answered, her slit eyes opening and closing heavily. She watched the flames, the reflection of them glowing dully in her gaze. *The princess is safe. For now.*

Dietrich nodded, glancing back sorrowfully at his dragon. He knew how fatigued he felt, his mind registering the weary nature of his own body, but that was all he knew. He could sense Seera's pain, but he couldn't feel it, couldn't comprehend her sensitivity to the cold. He walked out of the icy water and grabbed what was left of his clothes, then walked over to her and grabbed a red *aurora* in his mind. He pushed the element's warmth into his hands, kneeling down beside her and guiding his palms gently across her scales. She grumbled, a soft, throaty purr. Her lids shut as he put his strength into keeping her warm.

I won't let you freeze, he said, enjoying the way the crackling fire dried his wet skin. When the dragon didn't answer, he smiled, knowing his soothing warmth had put her to sleep.

Alone, Dietrich tensed at the sudden solitude of his thoughts. Try as he might to evade them, all he could see were the Elder Bloods, commanding more and more fiends to kill. He closed his eyes, trying to escape his musings, and eventually slipped into a cold and haunted slumber.

*Despite selling wares of every kind, element shackles are still
what we make the most profit on.*

Fiona Collinson

CHAPTER 40

X'ODIA



“Let her go!” someone screamed. “Please, she’s innocent! Let her go!”

X’odia panted, eyes opening wide. Everything around her was spinning and swirling and twisting. A sickening pound beat against her skull.

“X’odia!”

Her eyes focused in time to see Ravel being held back by two men. She winced as a strong hand latched onto her arm, pulling her up onto shaking feet.

It was the soldier with the blue cloak and grey-blue eyes. His armor was wet and bloody.

“Was she aiding you?” he asked someone. X’odia looked to see he was speaking to the man from the balcony, the one who’d looked to control the fiends. His wrists were pulled together by thick, glowing shackles.

“Yes,” he answered, smiling. “She was.”

X’odia opened her mouth, desperate to refute the man’s lie, but her voice hadn’t returned from the pull of her vision. She stood fearful, hardly able to stay upright, and trembled as the soldier surveyed her.

“Odin,” he said, beckoning someone over. Another man stepped forward, significantly older than the first, and stood at attention.

“Sir?”

“Find a place for the other prisoners and interrogate them. Until Pierre gives the order, you and your men will stay stationed here in the city.”

The older man—Odin—nodded.

I’m innocent! X’odia thought, wishing her lips could form the words. She tried to say them, opened her mouth and forced her tongue, but her voice still refused.

“What will you do with the girl?”

A wiry man, hardly taller than X’odia, sprung out from those around them.

“She’ll come back to the Forest of Fiends with us,” the soldier answered. “Bind her.”

X’odia knew what would happen if the shackles clamped shut. They would block her from her elements, separate her from fire and air and water and lightning. She tried to shout again, to say something in her defense, but when the words wouldn’t come, her only choice was to run.

Move, she told her quivering muscles. *Move!*

Before she could make it an inch, the soldier yanked her back. She grimaced at the pain, arm aching.

“You could kill them,” the other prisoner whispered. “You know you can.”

X’odia trembled, meeting the feral glance of the prisoner beside her. She could kill them, she realized, could kill all of them and save herself and the Evean sailors. Her muscles were

weak and her body fragile, but the *auroras* inside her mind, the *auroras* with the strength of the Shield within them, raged excitedly. Even if her physical self was unstable, the *call* of her elements was not.

No, she told herself, tears forming in her eyes. She thought of her faith, of the warmth and the pureness in the Creator, and forced her elements down.

I can't.

She looked through her dark curls at the other prisoner, the corners of his mouth upturned, then watched as the clasps of her element shackles buckled shut.

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