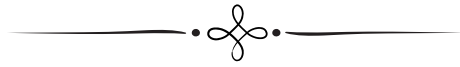


The Forbidden God

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*The DieTerran Chronology:
Book One*



venu g. joshi



www.whitefalconpublishing.com

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Venu G. Joshi



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A Map of DieTerra

Prologue

'I'll be back tomorrow for more,' Lorie called over her shoulder to Yol, who had baled up some fresh hay for the girl to carry home.

Lorie stumbled, clutching on to the bale, as she exited the stables to her push cart parked outside the gate. She swung the hay high, landing it in the cart with a soft thump. A push on the handle set the wheels rolling and she was on her way home.

Her horse, Lightning, was a white barb and one of the only three horses in the village. With her father and mother out, it came upon Lorie to feed him, which she didn't mind in the least. She wanted to take him out for a graze, but the forest scared her. Even the elders refrained from entering the forest after nightfall; not even in groups.

The sun was on its way down and dusk had begun to fall. Lorie gazed at the reddened sky, pushing her cart on the dirt road towards her cottage. The sound of the smith's hammer rang at a distance, other than which the village was silent as usual.

A movement in the trees caught her eye and Lorie spied her friend Eve coming out of the woods. Her long black hair were tied up in a neat bun, with a white flower pinned in it. Her cotton skirt hung till her calves that she wore under a loose, blue shirt.

'Eve!' Lorie dropped the cart's handle which met the ground in a small cloud of dirt. Eve turned to look in her direction. On seeing it was Lorie, she smiled and rushed towards her.

'What were you doing in the woods?' Lorie asked.

'What do you think?' Eve said fluttering innocent eyes with a hint of smile.

‘You were with that farmhand, weren’t you?’ Lorie said. ‘What was his name again? Crator? Chestor?’

‘Carter.’ Eve snapped. ‘And you know it.’

‘I do,’ Lorie laughed, ‘but it’s always fun to watch your little face turn red.’

Eve waved her friend away dismissively and continued. ‘Anyway. Look what he made for me.’

She excitedly reached down her pocket and pulled out a long white ornament. It was carved to look like two intertwining snakes. ‘He said I should wear it like a necklace.’ She said as she handed it to Lorie. ‘See, he made a hole under the heads.’

Lorie turned the ornament in her fingers. It felt smooth like marble and had a warmth to it. The white material caught the dusk light and showed a tinge of red.

‘What is it?’ Lorie asked. ‘Ivory?’

‘No. And that’s the best part,’ Eve said, barely containing her excitement. ‘Carter found a dead solitary bear in the forest, a few miles north of the village. A full grown, dead, solitary bear.’

‘And this is its tooth?’ Lorie stared at the ornament, horrified. It was twice the length of her index finger. ‘What killed the bear? Moreover, what was a solitary bear doing this close to the village,’ she wondered out loud.

‘Carter found it unsettling too,’ Eve mused. ‘He said the corpse was fresh and had deep gashes all over it, like it was cut down by a dozen swordsmen.’

‘We don’t have any swordsmen in the village,’ Lorie said.

‘Exactly!’ Eve exclaimed. ‘I told him that maybe it was a pack of mud wolves.’

‘I don’t think mud wolves would ever attack a solitary bear.’ Lorie said rolling her eyes. ‘I mean look at the size of its tooth.’ She held out the ornament. ‘Maybe it was the King’s patrol, looking for a hunt in the forest.’

‘Maybe. But who cares?’ Taking the ornament in her hand, Eve giggled, ‘I have new jewelry.’

Lorie rolled her eyes again. ‘Are you even old enough to be wearing jewelry?’ She laughed.

'I'm fifteen,' Eve said defensively.

'Still a year younger than me,' Lorie claimed. 'But some girls grow up faster, I guess.' She patted her on the head.

Eve pushed her hand away gently and laughed. 'I should be getting back. I went out for bread three hours ago.' Eve said as she turned to leave.

'Vi be with you!' Lorie called to her.

'Vi be with you too!' Eve replied, without looking back.

Lorie heaved up the cart and began pushing. The cart started to roll down the road once again.

A solitary bear, here? That doesn't make sense. They stay far away from people. It's in its name.

Also, is there a King's patrol nearby? If it was, father would've known. He wouldn't have gone all the way to the capital.

'Lorie! When does Selma return?' Widow Hilda's voice interrupted her thoughts.

'Tomorrow morning, Aunt Hilda,' Lorie replied. 'She has gone to visit her sister... Aunt Ingrid is sick and Uncle's away on business.

'Mother would've returned today. But she avoids the forest at night.'

'A wise thing to do my dear,' Hilda said, appreciatively. 'Krinn Woodlands are an unforgiving forest for men and beast alike. I remember, when I was not much older than you are...'

'Lighting is hungry, Aunt Hilda,' Lorie interrupted her. 'I'll head home. Vi be with you!' She waved and hurriedly pushed her cart away from Hilda's house.

'Vi be with you too, my dear!' Widow Hilda replied, almost forgetfully. 'Come to me if you need anything.'

'I will. Thank you.'

Lorie turned towards her cottage.

She pushed open the gate with the cart and wheeled it across the yard. She went around the cottage and headed to the stable. Lightning was standing where she had left him. The white barb was chewing on the left over hay.

‘Here you go, Lightning,’ Lorie swung the hay from the cart into the trough. ‘Now chew on this.’

She ran her fingers through his mane. Her parents had once told her that she used to pet the horse for hours when she was little. She smiled at that thought.

‘I’ll get the house cleaned up. Mother would like it.’ Lorie patted Lightning on the neck and headed into the cottage through the back door.

The inside was only dimly lit, from the setting sun, so Lorie started to light the lamps.

I hear they have electricity in the capital. It would be nice to go there some day. Maybe father could take me next time.

Lorie fetched a long broom from the broom closet and started sweeping the floor of the kitchen. Small puffs of dust rose from the floor prompting her to cover her nostrils with her sleeve, lest she start sneezing.

Finishing up the kitchen, Lorie moved to the sitting area. As she swept the dusty floor she noticed a broken flower vase. She kneeled to pick up the pieces.

Did this break during the tremors in the morning?

The western regions of Vameej rarely experienced earthquakes. So when the ground shook that morning everyone had panicked. Luckily the tremors didn’t last too long. The damage caused was minute. In Lorie’s case, a broken vase.

After throwing away the ceramic pieces, she climbed the stairs to the upper floor. Her parents’ room had its door and windows shut.

It’s probably clean already.

Lorie turned to her room and sighed in frustration. Books were strewn across the floor along with her blanket, which sat, crumpled, under the window behind the bed. The lit candle she had left on the table had melted, leaving a spread of hardened wax.

Resting the broom on the door, Lorie entered the room. She picked up the books from the floor and arranged them neatly on the table. She got a knife from the kitchen and scraped the wax

off the wood. A cloud of dust materialized when Lorie jerked the blanket, throwing her into a coughing fit.

Lorie had finished folding the blanket when there was a knock on the door. She opened her window and looked down. A couple stood in the yard.

‘Eve. Carter,’ Lorie called out. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘Open up quickly!’ Eve replied in a hushed voice. ‘We don’t have much time.’

Lorie shut the window and raced down the stairs. She unlatched the front door and pulled it open. ‘Come in.’

Eve looked back one last time to make sure no one saw her with the boy, then hurriedly entered the house, shutting the door behind her. She led Carter to the sitting area and they sat on the couch.

Lorie walked over to the couple. ‘Do you need anything to drink? Water? Juice?’

‘Some water would be lovely,’ Eve said smiling.

Lorie nodded and headed towards the kitchen. She came back with two cups of water.

There was a palpable tension in the room. Today Carter appeared uncharacteristically nervous to her. The usually charming and charismatic farmhand looked anxious. Tapping his foot and staring at the floor, his mind seemed to be occupied with something.

‘Here you go,’ Lorie said as she served the water on the table. ‘So what made our skittish Eve bring you here at this hour?’ She joked.

‘Tell her what you told me,’ Eve nudged Carter with her elbow.

‘Huh?’ He looked up as if breaking out of a trance. ‘Oh, yes. So, Eve told you about the solitary bear, I assume?’

‘Yes. She said you found it a few miles north. It had several deep gashes on its body,’ Lorie said. ‘What about it?’

‘Well, that wasn’t all of it,’ Carter replied. ‘Once I returned to the farm I started to think about it. For instance, it was severely cut but there were hardly any blood trails around it. It was like it got attacked somewhere else and then died in that spot.’

‘So, you’re saying it was walking towards the village and died on the way?’ Lorie asked.

‘That’s what I thought at first. But there were no signs of movement in the surrounding area either. No tracks around the body, human or otherwise.’ Carter replied. ‘It was as if the corpse just ended up there.’

‘How could a corpse just end up somewhere? And that too of a solitary bear.’ Lorie countered. The idea seemed absurd to her.

‘He thinks someone threw it,’ Eve interjected.

‘That’s even more ridiculous. It would take a dozen of the strongest duends to even lift it off the ground,’ Lorie insisted. ‘We’re talking about a twelve foot tall giant here.’

‘Well, thrown or hurled. Maybe they used that giant catapult the royal army uses,’ Eve clarified. ‘The point is, it didn’t walk there. Neither was it carried or dragged.’

Lorie nodded, though unable to grasp the possibility of the occurrence. ‘Did you tell anyone about this?’ Lorie asked Carter, turning back to him.

‘Just Eve and you.’ Carter replied. ‘After I met Eve, I went back to the spot. Something didn’t sit right so I wanted to look at the body once more.’ He fell silent.

‘And?’ Lorie probed.

‘And it wasn’t there,’ Carter looked up. ‘The body had been dragged away. I suspect, by a pack of mud wolves.’

‘Mud wolves?’ Lorie gasped. ‘What are mud wolves doing so close to the village?’

‘I don’t know. But whatever it was, is still out there. Eve wanted me to tell you because you are alone.’ Carter said, looking concerned. ‘Lock the doors and stay on your guard. Tie the horse inside for the night. We’ll take a hunting party to the forest in the morning.’

Lorie nodded, still bewildered. ‘Thank you for coming to me at this hour of the night.’

‘It’s still early. Besides how many times have I told you to never thank me?’ Eve said, playfully punching Lorie on the arm. ‘Anyway, what are friends for, if not to look out for one other?’ She added as Carter got up to leave.

‘Moreover, I got to spend some more time with this one,’ Eve giggled while wrapping herself around Carter’s arm.

‘Why do I think that was your prime motive?’ Lorie said narrowing her eyes. She walked them to the door and swung it open.

‘You know me so well, dear friend,’ Eve laughed. ‘Have a fine night, you. Stay safe!’ She said stepping out the door.

‘You both, too. Go straight home. No wandering about,’ Lorie shook a finger at them.

She shut the door behind her and latched it. Then raced across the room, exiting from the back door. Lightening was still chewing on the fresh hay. Lorie untied his rope from the pole and led him in the house. The horse hesitated a bit but then quietly followed his mistress, ducking to enter the doorway.

‘Weird, isn’t it?’ Lorie asked him. ‘I know you prefer the outside.’ She led him to the kitchen and put his rein around a tap.

‘Let me get your food.’

Lorie filled a pail of water from the bath and set it aside. Taking an empty pail outside, she bent into the trough and picked out the hay with both hands, stuffing it in the pail. She crammed in as much hay as she could before taking it inside.

‘Here’s your food.... And here’s your water.’ Lorie said sliding the two pails within the horse’s reach.

‘I’m going to sleep now, Lightning. Have a good night.’ She kissed the horse.

After rechecking the latches on the doors and turning off all the lamps, Lorie headed upstairs. She entered her still dusty room thinking, *I’m not cleaning it now. We’ll take care of it in the morning.*

Lorie lit a small night-lamp before getting in bed. She pulled the blanket over herself thinking about what Carter had said. *It wasn’t carried. It wasn’t dragged. Could it have been somehow, thrown? What thing can throw a full grown solitary bear?*

Lost in her thoughts, Lorie drifted to sleep. She dreamt about bears and mud wolves and monsters; though her dreams were soon interrupted.

Late in the night, Lorie woke up to faint sounds. As her consciousness returned, the sounds grew louder. People were screaming. Their hollers were now almost piercing the walls.

Smoke. Lorie smelled smoke. Something was on fire. She jumped out of bed with a start and noticed that the smoke was coming from outside.

Lorie looked out of her window and froze. Cottages on the edge of the village were burning. Tall flames were licking the dark sky, shining an orange glow on the village. People were pouring out of their homes, confused, screaming. At the edge of the forest, near the village limits, Lorie saw two distinct figures. Unmoving.

The shorter one was wearing a hooded dark robe. He was pointing at the people running around. The other looked like a furry animal with large antlers and long arms. It stood on two feet, twice the height of the hooded man. Lorie gasped.

Irazurra. Terror crept upon her as her mind went numb. The hulking beast raised its open palm and swirls of fire flew out from it, lapping at the cottages.

A burning man ran out of one of the houses, screaming, causing Lorie to look away. The ground shook to a thumping sound that grew progressively closer and something big began to emerge from the forest.

First Lorie thought it was another solitary bear. But this thing was much larger; huge, like a small hill or mound. The tall trees cracked like twigs giving way to the giant shadow.

Seeing its numerous faces, in the light of the burning cottages, Lorie stifled a scream. Light bounced off the five dozens swords it swung.

The ehunesk casually cut down every person around him, not unlike a bored child crushing bugs, as it made its way into the village.

An ehunesk? What is a damned ehunesk and an irazurra doing here? Lorie broke out in a cold sweat. Tears ran down her face. She stared at the burning people, trying to escape the beasts.

With its giant strides the ehunesk ran ahead of the other two. The creature towered over the cottages cutting down every, man, woman, child it could reach.

Wait. Something caught Lorie's eye. A girl was standing right beside the ehunesk, completely unharmed. Frozen in fear she could not move at all. Lorie could make out her soft sobbing, drowned by the screams, from afar. Then she saw another girl, frozen on the road. This girl was standing in a running stance.

That's not fear. Lorie gasped. *They've been petrified.* Lorie's eyes found the irazurra with his one fist raised and the other palm spiraling fire towards the houses.

Just at that moment, Eve ran out of her cottage, screaming. The robed figure, not far away, pointed at her and she froze in her tracks. He said something to the irazurra and he nodded.

The furred beast pulled his fist towards his chest and girls flew to him landing at his feet. The robed man bent down to chain them; all the while the ehunesk kept up the slaughter.

The dirt road was now soaking and red. The air was filled with rancid odors of blood, burnt flesh and death.

Lorie's stomach turned and she tasted bile in her mouth. She heard Eve scream and then begin to sob loudly as she stared at something. Lorie followed her gaze and saw a severed head on the side of the road. The blonde hair shone red with blood.

Carter. Lorie had to cover her mouth to not scream. The attackers were still a dozen houses from her, she noted.

I have to get away. Lorie ran down the stairs, almost falling twice. Lightning was already restless because of the noise and smoke.

'Can you smell the blood too?' She whispered to him through tears.

She ran her fingers through his mane and Lightning calmed down a bit; so did Lorie. Her legs trembled as she walked across the room. With shaking hands she unlatched the back door.

Orange and yellow light washed over her when she pulled the door open. A wall of fire stood thirty yards from her. Blocking the forest, the fire burnt taller than her cottage.

Lorie stepped in the backyard to fetch the saddle. She walked back in, over to Lightning and began saddling him with shaking hands.

‘You and I are going on a long ride, Lightning.’ Lorie croaked, crying. ‘We’d have to be back before mom returns.’ She pulled on the stirrup leather and tightened the saddle. ‘Guess we’ll have to go out front.’ She squeaked as she led Lightning across the room.

Lorie unlatched the door and quietly pulled it open. Smoke and screams immediately flooded the room. She placed her hand on the agitated horse’s neck.

It was bright as early day outside, Lorie saw; and the assailants were still a good distance away.

Covering herself with a blanket, she got on Lightning. A little nudge told the horse to get going. He bowed his head to get out the doorway. Lorie bent down too, to not hit her head on the doorframe.

Once out, Lorie kicked her heels into the horse’s sides and booked away in a gallop. Without slowing she turned to look behind and saw the attackers had caught three more girls. Eve, now with her wrists and feet chained, sat on the ground, unmoving. Tears ran down Lorie’s face as she drew farther.

‘We have a runner, Zynuk,’ the raspy voice sent chills down her spine. ‘Restrain her now!’ It was a cold hard blade brushing against her neck.

Lorie didn’t look back anymore. She kept galloping. She knew two of those girls, Leah and Fleur. They were both good friends with Eve.

‘She’s too far for me.’ The irazurra’s voice boomed in the distance. ‘I can’t reach her. You do it!’

‘You know I’m not at my best right now,’ the chilling voice was clear in her ears. ‘Why must I always finish your work?’ The robed man sounded genuinely disappointed.

Suddenly, Lorie didn’t want to run anymore. She reined Lightning to a sudden stop. As she stood there frozen, waiting, uneasiness flooded her being.

Don't stop. Run. Run. Like snapping out of a dream, her senses returned.

Lorie kicked her heels and Lightening was galloping once again. She could see the edge of the village. She could enter the forest within moments.

'She broke away,' the cold voice was amused, 'she is strong, Zynuk, the little princess broke away.'

A strip of fire began to rise at the village limits as Lorie heard loud thumps hastily approaching her. She didn't look back; she didn't have to. The irazurra was chasing her.

Lightening sped up, preparing to jump over the fire. The horse had launched himself up easily gliding over the rising fire when Lorie felt a sudden downward tug.

The horse whinnied in agony as Lorie's blanket flew away. The irazurra dug his claws deeper into Lightening's thighs causing the horse to nearly fall in the fire. But Lightening bucked the beast in his snout and galloped into the forest.

Lorie turned to see the irazurra rolling in the fire. His fur was blazing and he was bellowing in pain. *Why won't he just snuff it out?*

She looked down and saw Lightening had caught fire too. Patches of hair on his legs were burning, though that didn't hinder the horse's determined pace. Lorie reined Lightening into a patch of long grass where the thick grass and dew doused the fires.

A soft sizzling sound, barely audible over the pattering of hooves, caught Lorie's attention. Curious, she turned back to discover the source. Scanning the dark forest, her eyes moved to the horse's thighs. The wounds from the irazurra's claws were oozing a dark fluid. The fluid bubbled and made sounds not dissimilar to water on a hot pan.

Lorie stroked the brave horse's mane, realizing its suffering. As the sizzling grew louder, Lightening slowed down and began to buckle. After trotting a dozen strides, the horse collapsed to the ground.

Lorie jumped off to prevent getting her leg caught under him. She examined the wounds which had grown bigger. The fluid was eating away and charring the horse's flesh.

Lorie kneeled in front of Lightening's face. The horse was heaving softly, struggling to breathe. She stroked his muzzle with tears streaming down her face.

As the horse's breathing grew quieter, her sobs grew louder and in a few moments the horse turned still. Lorie lifted her head and stared into Lightening's lifeless eyes.

My Lightening. My sweet beautiful Lightening. Suddenly her brain went numb and she froze in place.

'Where is my strong princess?' A chilling voice echoed in the forest, almost singing. 'Come to me my dear.'

Lorie pushed herself up and started walking towards the voice. She shook her head forcefully. *What are you doing?* Lorie turned and dashed in the opposite direction.

'She broke away again!' The voice seemed almost amused.

Lorie ran. She ran like had never run before.

Moonlight was filtering through the canopy, faintly illuminating the woods. Lorie didn't know she could run this fast. The trees around her were a blur. She cut her foot on something. She didn't care. Soon her eyes adjusted to the dimly lit forest and she could see where she was going. At least that was a relief.

Lorie let out a sharp shriek when something slammed hard into her ribs, sending her to the ground. The world went black as the wind left her chest. Terrified she had been caught she looked up.

Realizing she had run into a low hanging tree branch, Lorie got up in a blink and resumed her sprint. Her chest throbbed and she couldn't feel her feet anymore but she kept going.

Don't stop now! Keep running! Lorie didn't know what else to do. Everyone in her village was probably dead or captured. Eve, Carter, Yol, Widow Hilda. What will her mother think when she came back? Will she ever get to see her again?

I will see her again. Lorie wiped her tears without slowing.

There was a wild rustling in the trees above her. All of a sudden, from the canopy, a large shadow dropped to the ground.

Lorie threw her arms in front of her face before she crashed into the furry giant.

‘Found you,’ the irazurra boomed, looming over her. Lorie’s eyes went wide with horror when she lost control of her body.

I’m petrified. The irazurra bent to shackle her wrists with iron cuffs that were attached to a long chain. They looked heavy.

‘Make sure they are properly locked, Zynuk.’ The robed man appeared from the trees. ‘I don’t want her escaping again.’

His hood covered his face, leaving it dark. ‘Let’s make a camp soon. I would like to speak with her.’ A big ring glimmered on his finger. It held an emerald the size of a baby’s fist.

‘Should I hand her to Meg?’ The irazurra asked. Zynuk easily stood six feet taller than the man, but he still seemed to be cowering before him.

‘Yes. Do that.’ The man said lightly. ‘Meg! Come here my boy.’

Lorie heard tree trunks cracking; the ground thumped as loud footsteps approached her. Being petrified, she couldn’t turn to look. Her body felt like a rigid rock, held in place.

The ehunesk carried a large sack on his shoulder and a small one tied to his waist when he emerged from the forest. He stood in front of the hooded man, and bowed.

If a hill could bow, that is what it would have looked like. The man waved him with his hand dismissively and bent in front of Lorie.

‘You won’t try to run again, will you, honey pot?’ His breath smelled sweet. ‘Cause if you do, sweet Meg here will cut you down in an instant. Now, are you not a smart girl who values her life?’ His voice was soothing and understanding. Lorie could see his chin covered in fiery hair. Rest of his face remained dark in the hood’s shadow.

The man, without straightening up, snapped his fingers at Zynuk who in turn made a gesture with his fingers. Dragged by the weight of her own body and the chains, Lorie slumped to the ground. She tried lifting her hands but the shackles were too heavy.

The man stood up holding the chain and threw it at the ehunesk. Meg caught it in one of his large hands.

‘Try not to speak, honey pot.’ The man said as he turned away from her. ‘Stay behind us, Meg.’ He ordered the ehunesk.

‘Yes, my Lord.’ Several dozen faces roared in a deep incoherent voice. He tugged on the chain pulling Lorie off the ground. She stumbled to get on her feet but eventually gained balance.

Lorie staggered behind Meg as he pulled her chain.

The rank smelling ehunesk towered in front of her. His arms were longer than a large tree and just as thick. She could count about three dozen smaller arms holding rusted weapons. Most of them held curved swords and sickles, some held axes while others held spears and crooked daggers.

There were around seventeen faces in front of her. Though, only about ten were looking at her. Three of them were looking at the trees, some at the ground and some towards the sky. One thing they all had in common, was that they were all disfigured.

Almost all had their noses shattered, over half were missing an eyeball; some were missing their lips while some were missing their teeth; the rest had their skulls caved in. To Lorie, it looked like a display of the ugliest, most deformed faces of DieTerra.

‘We’re not using this one?’ Zynuk asked in his booming voice. Lorie couldn’t see him, walking behind Meg, but she recognized the irazurra’s distinct bellow.

‘Not like the others.’ The man replied. ‘I plan on keeping her.’

‘When will we drain the others?’ Zynuk asked.

‘We’ll do it tonight only.’ The man answered in a cool voice. ‘Waiting wouldn’t do them any good now, would it?’

‘No brother,’ Zynuk laughed, ‘it won’t’.

Meg’s faces made a grunting noise, which Lorie thought might have been a laugh.

‘How many do we have?’ The man inquired.

‘Seven,’ Zynuk replied.

‘Seven,’ the man mused. ‘That should last me a little over four weeks.’

‘Meg.’ He called out. ‘Make sure not to squeeze them too hard. We need their bones intact.’

‘Yes, my Lord.’ The faces rumbled in unison.

That's what's in the sack? Horrified, Lorie stared at the sack on Meg's shoulder. *Eve might be in there. Is she still alive?*

Now that she was looking at the sack she noticed a dark stream running down from it. Blood flowed down Meg's shoulder, to the side, over one of the faces, which would stick out his tongue time and again lapping at the blood. The repulsive action nauseated Laurie. She held her breath, swallowing the bile which gushed up her throat.

'Did you see, that one girl was wearing a solitary bear tooth,' Zynuk laughed.

Eve.

'I noticed. That reminds me.' The man said. 'Meg?'

'Yes, my Lord?' The faces groaned.

'What do you do when the bear you are slaughtering gives you a tiny scratch?' The man asked with curiosity.

'My Lord?' Meg asked in a confused unison.

'Do you fling it in the air, miles across?' His voice, inflicted with anger, was as cold as iron on ice.

Lorie gasped when she saw the mountain-like beast tremble. 'No, my Lord.' Meg replied in a barely intelligible voice.

'How long did it take you to find him?' The man asked.

'Seven hours, my Lord,' Meg replied like a child who was being scolded.

'A third of the day wasted in looking for a bear corpse.' The man sounded disappointed. 'Will you be careful next time, Meg?'

'Yes, my Lord.'

Why is this monster scared of that man?

The man sighed. 'Will you play me some flute, sweet Meg?' His voice was soothing once again.

Meg grunted as he put a hand in the sack on his waist and pulled out a flute, big enough to break a man's back, if hit with.

As one of the faces began to play the flute, Lorie couldn't believe her ears.

The ehunesk played some of the sweetest sounding compositions she had ever heard. It started out happy with a gleeful melody, then it grew tense and then sad. The man

hummed along during most of the parts. Lorie walked staring at her feet; mesmerized by the music she lost track of time.

‘That clearing looks good enough.’ She heard Zynuk say. ‘Can you screen us there, Meg?’

Lorie snapped awake when the ehunesk stopped playing.

‘Ungh!’ The faces grunted in approval.

Meg turned to his side and followed the two across the trees, bending half and breaking the rest.

‘Screen us, Meg. I’ll take her from here,’ Zynuk said. ‘Also hang the sack on a tree. Let the bodies lose as much blood before the lord drains them.’ Meg’s faces grunted once again.

As Zynuk pulled Lorie away, she saw the hooded man sitting on a rock reading a scroll he had picked out from the small pile of scrolls on his side.

The irazurra took her to the edge of the clearing and pushed her down. Sudden terror crept in Lorie’s mind as she remembered hearing stories about irazurras kidnapping humans to breed with them.

She sighed in relief when Zynuk tied her to a tree and left promptly. With her back against the trunk and the clearing behind her, Lorie faced the forest.

‘What are these?’ She heard Zynuk ask.

‘This one is Enisyus requesting the Pillars of the Fiachori shrine, for protection,’ the man replied. ‘The rest are various expenses from the previous months.’

‘The Pillars?’ Zynuk spat. ‘How many do they even have?’

‘Four from what I hear,’ the man said. ‘They don’t have the three heads, yet.’

‘When was the last time they had all seven together at the same time?’ Zynuk wondered.

‘About three hundred years ago,’ the man replied. ‘But even four Pillars pose a threat.’

‘You’re not seriously fearing them, are you?’ Zynuk sounded surprised.

'Only a fool doesn't fear the fire. Keeping water by their side, is a sign of the wise.' The man stated. 'You knocked the redhead out, I assume.'

'Of course!' Zynuk said defensively.

With a sudden jerk, Lorie's head slammed against the tree. Her vision started turning dark as her consciousness faded.

Lorie woke up with a start, drenched in cold water. Zynuk stood before her holding a steel pail. The woods were still dark and it seemed like the hours before dawn, Lorie thought.

'Get up,' Zynuk grabbed her by the shoulder and lifted her.

With her head still hazy she trudged alongside him. They walked towards the clearing where the man sat by the fire, his hood still on. He was drinking something from a jeweled golden cup, with his back towards them. She couldn't see the ehunesk anywhere. As her mind began to clear, Lorie noticed she wasn't shackled anymore.

'No need to force her, Zynuk,' the man called out, without lifting his head. 'Now that I'm feeling full, I doubt she'd run away. Why don't you let us have a chat?'

Zynuk released her shoulder and walked into the forest. Lorie just stood there motionless. She hadn't been petrified; she just didn't want to move.

I can run away right now. But I don't want to.

'Come and sit with me, my dear.' The man invited her.

Lorie walked to the man and sat across from him. His copper beard shone in the light of the fire, hood still shadowing his face.

The emerald ring on his finger glimmered, when he set the cup on the ground. He moved towards Lorie and took her curls in his fingers. 'How many redheads were there in your village, my dear?'

'Just me,' Lorie replied.

'And how many had green eyes?' He asked.

'Just me.'

'What about your parents?' The man wondered.

‘They both have black hair and brown eyes,’ Lorie replied. She found it unusually easy to talk to him. His voice was soothing.

‘You weren’t born to them, were you?’ He pressed.

That question made Lorie snap. ‘I was!’ She lied.

‘Very well.’ The man said, not satisfied but not caring either. ‘From today onwards you will work for me.’

‘No one is allowed to own slaves anymore.’ Lorie rebuked.

‘Not as a slave.’ The man said, calmly, taking off his hood. ‘You will work for me.’ He repeated as he looked her in the eyes.

Lorie gasped when she saw his face. ‘You... you are...’ The words were lost in her throat. She knew that face. Everyone knew that face. The girls in the village would blush at the mere mention of his name. ‘You are...’

‘Yes, my dear, I am your beloved,’ he laughed. ‘Now tell me, have you ever been to the capital?’



Израйла

The Dawn

CHAPTER ONE

Thaldea, Idul The Ingens

Aermes woke up with a face warm from the early morning light. He pushed himself up, groggily rubbing his eyes and yawning. The sun had started to come up from behind the woods across the river. He spotted the seekers, with their sieves and nets, getting ready on the banks. Some were already waist deep in the river, looking for gold or any signs of it.

Aermes knew he was late for work, but lately he couldn't bring himself to care about that. As a seeker, he waded in the waters from sunrise to set, searching the riverbed for gold he never found. Aermes got out of his wire bed and walked towards the mirror. His morning ritual for the last ten years had been to see how awful he looked after he had woken up.

He studied his reflection. His long hair were a shiny, black mess and his eyes shone golden in the rising sun. Other than that he looked terrible. His burlap tunic had multiple tears in it, as did his pants. His feet were caked in dirt from yesterday's work.

Aermes wet a cloth with some water from a pail beside the window and scrubbed his face clean. He yawned again, not having slept well the night before. The entire night he kept waking from dreams of cursed men and bleeding giants and giant bats on giant trees.

Now that he thought about it, Aermes hadn't slept well since his father had left him in Thaldea. But what had kept him up the most, all these years, was wondering why he had left him with Tedar and Kyryn, out of all the people in the world.

'I know my little wolf is strong.' That was the last thing Aermes remembered his father saying to him before he left to never return. Not that he ever said he would. 'A man should make a good life for himself and the ones around him,' he used to say to him. Aermes looked at his feet and fingers caked with dirt. *I'm sorry father.* He lifted the trapdoor and climbed down the stairs.

The room Aermes called his was the attic, meant for the storage of food and other provisions, which he had pushed to the western corner to make more space for himself. He had stopped complaining long ago. Though, not one day passed when Aermes didn't miss his father. A life of luxury, however short, is not easily forgotten.

Walking down the quiet lobby he noted Tedar wasn't home today. *He went to the city with Tai.* Aermes concluded.

Tedar, like many others in their neighborhood, was a gold supplier. They never had enough to be a supplier, but that's what they called themselves. Tedar sold gold to merchants and jewelers in the city. He had five seekers working for him. Six, including Aermes.

The others would have been in the river for hours. Aermes was always the last one. Mainly because he never made an effort to be early. The smell of freshly baked bread greeted him when he walked down the stairs.

Kyryn was walking about the kitchen, humming, as she arranged food on the table. Aermes prepared himself, knowing fully well what to expect. He glided towards the table and pulled out a chair.

'Fair morning, my sweet man,' Kyryn chimed, hurrying out of the kitchen with a plate of fruits. Her auburn hair, wet from a fresh bath, fell around her shoulders and down her back. She wore a white cotton tunic that came to her knees and brown leather

sandals on her feet. From the prominent outlines on the thin cloth, it was apparent she wasn't wearing anything underneath.

'I made you some bread.' She said before leaning in to kiss him. And unlike most aunts, Kyrin went straight for his lips and gave him an almost belligerent kiss. Aermes froze still, like he always did, not resisting nor reciprocating the gesture.

Kyrin was a beautiful woman, fair skinned with an alluring body, fancied by the neighborhood men and envied by the women. She had made tempting Aermes her hobby in the recent years, which she seemed to enjoy a lot. As a young boy with raging blood Aermes had at times found himself seduced beyond his senses but had somehow managed to never act on it.

'A man's honor is the only thing that lives after his death.' His father's words would sound in his head and he would find himself in control of his thoughts and actions.

Aermes tore a piece from the warm loaf of barley bread dipped it in honey and bit off a big chunk. The sweet honey complimented the soft bread as they mixed in his mouth. Kyrin pulled up a chair and sat next to him.

'You don't need to go to the river today. We can sit at home and talk,' Kyrin looked at him with her beady brown eyes full of excitement.

'And I can get beaten up by Tedar again,' Aermes said without lifting his head. He knew only an insane man would turn down an offer to spend time with Kyrin.

'What if I tell him you worked really hard all day, but couldn't find any nuggets?' Kyrin chirped, playfully moving her fingers in her hair. She put her elbow on the table and resting her face on the palm she gazed at Aermes. 'You know I'd do anything for my man.'

'Tedar is your man,' he replied dryly, still not looking at her.

'Tedar is my husband. You are my man.' She sounded offended for some reason unknown to Aermes, but he had stopped trying to understand her long back. 'Stay. With. Me,' she whispered in his ear, leaning in to wrap herself around his arm.

Aermes felt the warmth of her body when her bust pressed up against his shoulder. Hair stood up on the back of his neck and his mind began to turn foggy as blood began to recede from his head.

‘You know I can’t, Kyrin,’ Aermes stood up pushing the chair back, freeing his arm from her embrace. Kyrin sighed, got up and started towards the kitchen.

‘If you change your mind you know where to find me,’ she turned smiling and blew him a kiss.

Muttering to himself, Aermes walked to the staircase and pulled out his net and sieve from under it.

The net was a five feet long metal pole with a square wire mesh at one end. While the sieve was a concave metal sheet about a foot across with holes poked in it to let out the water. Aermes picked up his equipment, put on his mud caked sandals and headed to the back of the house.

A knock on the front door stopped him in his steps.

‘I’ll get it,’ Kyrin put on a long robe and rushed to open the door. She was more than a little surprised to see a duend, clad in light armor, standing at the doorstep.

The man wore smooth metal greaves covering his knees and shin, and a tasset around his waist that hung over his thighs. The overlapping plates of the black metal shone in the sunlight.

The duend wore a pauldron on his right shoulder and vambraces on his forearms. A hemp bag hung on his left shoulder and a long-sword rested on his back. He had the tough look of a warrior seasoned by battles. The soldier wore his golden hair short with a stubble. Kyrin found the man’s face beautiful and pleasant to look at.

‘Fair morning, my Lady.’ The duend bowed. ‘Is Lord Dakians home?’ Kyrin hadn’t seen many duends in her life. They lived in a settlement on the edge of Thaldea, where duends were a rare sight. ‘I have traveled a long way to see him, my Lady.’

‘He’s here. Please come in,’ she bowed awkwardly before leading the man inside.

‘Take a seat on the couch please.’ She called out without looking back as she crossed the room to the back of the house.

The man unstrapped his long-sword and propped it against the couch before sitting beside it.

‘You haven’t left, have you, Aermes?’ She found him sitting on the stairs eating an apple with the net resting on his shoulder and the sieve on his lap.

‘Just leaving,’ Aermes said through a mouthful of apple and began to get up.

‘Someone has come to see you.’

‘Is it Markum? Tell him I’ll see him in the evening.’ Unlike Markum he had somewhere he was supposed to be. Though he already was several hours late.

‘No, it’s a duend. He’s looking for *Lord Dakians*.’

Aermes felt taken aback by that. The words hit him with a sudden flood of emotions, heavying his heart and clogging his throat. In a moment nostalgia, pride, anger, drowned the boy.

No one had called him that in twelve years. He was just Aermes. He had come to accept that. A no name seeker in Thaldea.

‘I’m no Lord. Look at me,’ he seethed through clenched teeth.

‘No need to be angry at me,’ Kyrin said calmly. ‘There is a man outside waiting to speak to you. Now, don’t be rude.’ She gave him a slight shove and walked him to the sitting area. ‘I’ll get you both something to drink.’

Seeing Aermes enter the man got off the couch at once and kneeled in his place. With his head bowed he spoke, ‘Greetings, my Lord! My name is Olin Bawthrawn. It’s a pleasure to see you.’

‘Get up!’ Aermes spat, ‘Do I look like a lord to you?’

Olin’s blue eyes scanned the boy. He wore a tattered rag as a shirt and his pants were torn from places. Mud had dried on his feet and his sandals were barely holding together. His gaze moved to Aermes’ face and he caught the light reflecting off his golden irises. His shiny black hair shone in the sun.

The duend closed his eyes, took a deep breath and smiled. ‘I don’t need to look at your appearance. Your presence is enough for me to recognize you, Lord Aermes Dakians.’

‘But procedures must be followed.’

Olin reached into his bag and after rummaging for a few moments brought out two items. One was a golden vambrace with figures carved on it and the other was a small golden tube. He took the tube in his right hand and stood in front of Aermes.

The golden tube, with a tree etched on the surface along its length, had glass covering both its ends. The hollow semi-spherical glasses were fixed such that their outer surface faced the tube’s center. The space between the glasses was filled by a luminescent silver fluid. Olin put one end of the tube on Aermes’ eye causing the boy to step back immediately.

‘What are you doing?’ Aermes asked.

‘Just confirming your identity, my Lord,’ Olin replied calmly. ‘There are some very talented impersonators, as I bet you know.’

‘No one would bother impersonating me,’ Aermes laughed.

‘You undermine yourself, my Lord,’ Olin shook his head. ‘Now, if you’ll allow me to.’ He lifted the tube to his eye. Aermes stepped forward and put his eye on the other end. ‘Keep it open, my Lord.’

Olin began to slowly turn a brace on the tube that moved independently of the rest of it. He hummed to himself when the brace made clicking noises as he moved it back and forth for several moments.

‘Alright!’ Olin brought down the golden tube and exchanged it for the vambrace.

Now that Aermes looked at, it he recognized the carvings on the golden surface. Along the middle were a wolf, an ox and a bear. The wolf, an image all too familiar to Aermes, had suns for eyes and stood on his hind legs with his teeth bared. The ox had his head down, horns pointed to strike while the bear walked on all fours, thunder emanating from its back. On one side was an elephant with his trunk held up and a falcon in flight, its either wings made of fire and water, while on the other side were carvings of a stag ready to sprint and a salmon jumping out of water. It reminded Aermes of a poem his father used to sing to him.

*Wolf, Ox, Bear, form the heads,
Elephant, Falcon, march ahead,
Stag and Salmon, every era,
Make the Seven Pillars of DieTerra.*

'Seven Pillars,' Aermes murmured with awe.

'Yes, my Lord,' his words seemed to please Olin. 'Your right hand, my Lord.' Aermes gave his hand to the duend, which he held by the wrist. 'This might hurt a bit.' He said clasping the golden vambrace on Aermes' forearm.

Caught by surprise Aermes let out a short scream, before holding his breath. It felt like a hot brand was pressing against his skin. He looked at the vambrace and the carved wolf was glowing. Olin was already looking at the carving and was quick to separate the vambrace off Aermes' arm.

Aermes noticed a wolf marking had emerged on his forearm, similar to the one on the vambrace, which began to disappear as soon as the vambrace was taken off, along with pain.

'What was that?' Aermes asked rubbing his arm.

'The vambrace examines a person's lineage. It was made to scrutinize a Pillar's identity,' Olin spoke, 'and you, as I knew, have been identified as the Wolf and the seventh Pillar.'

He turned around, dropping the tube and vambrace in the bag, he reached deeper and pulled out a black wooden box. The polished wood shone like onyx.

'This is why I have come to you today, my Lord.' Olin extended his hand, presenting the box to Aermes.

'I got you both some fresh apple cider,' Kyryn called out exiting the kitchen. Olin promptly withdrew his hand and sat on the couch after dropping the box back in the bag.

'It took me a while to move the barrel,' she said as she walked towards them.

Kyryn placed the tray with two mugs on the table in front of Olin. Sensing she had interrupted something, the woman straightened up. 'Let me know if you need seconds,' she said before hastily retreating from the room. Olin watched her leave, bowing his head.

‘What was that about?’ Aermes asked, confused.

Olin looked up at the boy, his blue eyes earnest as he brought the black box out once again. ‘This box contains a valuable entity, my Lord.’

The polished wood looked lustrous and rich. The box was lined, with what looked like gold, on the edges. A wolf figure, similar to the vambrace, was embedded on the lid. Carved from black quartz the wolf stood on his hind legs baring its fangs.

‘Your father entrusted me with this. He knew a good many people were after it, which they still are, and Lord Aasim kept it safe to the best of his abilities.’

‘My father?’ Aermes looked up from the box. ‘My father gave this to you? Where is he right now?’ A thousand questions welled up in the boy’s head.

‘I’m afraid I don’t know, my Lord,’ Olin replied. ‘The last time I saw him was over a decade ago. I’ve been keeping this safe for him since.’ He handed the box to Aermes.

‘What’s in this?’ Aermes asked as he felt the carved wolf with his fingertips. The quartz felt uncharacteristically warm against his skin.

‘It’s a treasure, my Lord, passed down by your ancestors,’ Olin spoke like trying to remember something. ‘It has passed many a hands and decided the outcomes of several of the greatest battles in the history of DieTerra.’

Aermes lifted the wooden lid. In the box, surrounded by red velvet cloth sat a smoky crystal. It was shaped like a dome with a round top and a flat bottom. The crystal was brilliantly cut and shone like it was emitting light from its core. Aermes could see the dark smoke inside the transparent crystal constantly move. It seemed alive. Restless.

He sat down next to Olin and reached in to pick out the crystal, when Olin put his hand over Aermes’ and shook his head. ‘Not here, my Lord.’ He spoke in a low voice. ‘Let us step outside. Somewhere we would be alone.’

Aermes withdrew his hand and closed the lid. ‘I know a place.’

Olin stood up and lifted his long-sword resting against the couch from the scabbard and began to fasten it on his back.

‘Kyrin, I’m going out for a while,’ Aermes called out.

Kyrin stuck her head out from behind the kitchen door. ‘Alright, be safe,’ she beamed at him.

‘Let’s go, Olin,’ Aermes said to the armored duend standing by him.

‘After you, my Lord,’ Olin bowed.

Aermes and Olin stepped out from the back door of the house. A field about half a mile across stood between the house and the river. Since Tedar was considerably richer than the rest in the community, his house was built with strong oak brought in from the eastern Ingens and sat on an expensive plot, on a rise, close to the bank. Aermes began to cross the field moving away from the river.

‘Olin, how did you know my father?’ he asked over his shoulder. The duend stepped up to walk beside him.

‘I served your father, my Lord. And his father before him.’

Aermes cocked his head and squinted at Olin. He didn’t seem that old. He looked like he was barely in his forties. The duend had a thick head of blonde hair. His skin was fair and unwrinkled. Even his posture was that of a young soldier.

Aermes, followed by Olin, jumped over a narrow canal to get on a dirt road. With the town behind them they walked into the woods.

‘I am Keeper who serves the descendants of the Order of Divinity,’ he continued, ‘we receive, protect and deliver, anything you give us, to anyone you instruct.’ Olin turned to Aermes who still appeared confused, maybe even more than earlier.

‘Your father came to me at Fiachori and asked me to keep the Yadroliq safe, until the right time to deliver it to you came, my Lord.’ Aermes looked at the black box in his hand.

The Yadroliq packs a cosmic kick.

‘What do you mean the right time?’ Aermes asked as they walked deeper into the woods.

Like any forest in the Ingens the canopy was thick, nearly blocking the sunlight. Though it was midday, it seemed like late dusk.

They turned from the road and navigated through a thicket into an open field. The field was almost round, surrounded by tall bur ashes. Their reddish-brown leaves shone as the sunlight filtered through them, casting a similar color light on the forest floor.

‘I’m afraid I’m not the right person to answer that, my Lord. You can ask Master Vrinma, when you meet him,’ Olin replied.

Master Vrinma. Aermes knew that name. He remembered his father used to talk about him all the time. They waded through clumps of long grass on the edge of the clearing.

‘We’re here,’ Aermes declared. He looked at the box in his hand then back at Olin. ‘Doesn’t Master Vrinma live in Fiachori?’

Olin turned from analyzing his surroundings to Aermes. ‘Yes, my Lord. And that’s where you are to go. After you find the Ox, that is.’ The duend hummed, ‘though I don’t believe that is a necessity,’ he thought out loud.

A hundred more questions popped up in Aermes’ head, but he held himself back. He brought the box up to his face and eyed Olin.

‘Go ahead, my Lord.’

Aermes lifted the lid and reached in to pick up the crystal. Shivers shot up his arm the moment he touched it, but Aermes didn’t let go. He lifted the crystal out of the box and scrutinized it closely. It shone brighter in the faintly lit forest.

Aermes felt sure that what he saw was not surrounding sunlight being refracted but the crystal giving off its own light. He felt the stone slightly tug on his hand. He ignored it.

‘What am I supposed to do with this?’ Aermes was genuinely clueless.

‘Wield its power, my Lord,’ Olin said in a matter-of-fact fashion. ‘Give me a moment.’ He slung the hemp bag off his shoulder, started digging in it and brought out what looked like a leather chest strap. Two long straps intersected to make an X and at the intersection was a shallow bowl like pocket to hold something.

‘The Yadroliq, my Lord.’ Olin held out his hand towards Aermes.

The tugging of the crystal in Aermes’ hand got stronger before he placed it on Olin’s open palm. A sense of overwhelming exhaustion flooded him when he let go of the crystal. It felt like even standing required a conscious effort.

Olin affixed the crystal in the pocket and held the chest strap, taut, in both his hands. The crystal fit snugly in the leather pocket with its dome facing inwards and the base exposed.

‘Take off your shirt, my Lord.’

Aware of the dried dirt on his body, Aermes awkwardly removed his shirt. Olin pressed the base of the crystal on Aermes’ chest and fastened the straps. Two straps went over his shoulders and two around his waist, making an X on his back.

Shivers originated in Aermes’ chest where the crystal touched his skin. It took him a while to notice that the shivers had a rhythm to them. *Pulses*. Aermes thought. *Cosmic kick*.

The pulses were strong in his chest but if Aermes concentrated he could feel them till the top of his scalp and the bottom of his feet. It was like his entire body was in a state of vibration. Also the crystal was pushing against his chest, in the same direction as before, when he had held it. Aermes wondered if he was imagining it.

‘Now, my Lord, try to strike that tree.’ Olin raised his eyebrow thoughtfully, ‘would you prefer to use my sword?’

‘I prefer using my fists, Olin. Reckless men need no weapons.’ His father used to say that too. Olin chuckled at his reply.

Aermes turned to the tree Olin was pointing at. The bur ash stood easily over sixty feet, taller than any of its comrades. Its trunk was at least five feet across. He glanced back at Olin and saw him standing with his arms folded in front of his chest, smiling expectantly.

He gestured Aermes to go ahead, like how one tells a child to pet a kitten he’s too afraid to go near. Aermes walked up to the tree and crouched in front of it.

‘So I just hit it?’ He shouted to Olin.

‘With all your strength, my Lord,’ Olin shouted back. ‘Draw upon the Yadroliq’s power.’

Not knowing what that meant, Aermes coiled his arm and struck the tree trunk with a mighty blow. With a loud thump followed by a muffled scream Aermes fell back, holding up his now purpling fist, heaving in pain. Olin ran up to the fallen boy.

‘I don’t know why I expected you to succeed in the first try, my Lord.’ Olin said, apologetically. ‘It took Lord Aasim over a week to draw the littlest amount of power from the Yadroliq.’

Aermes shot him a look with his eyes watering in pain, and said with a flat tone. ‘Well, thank you for the reassuring words.’ Olin gave him a genuine smile and helped the boy up.

‘Give it one more try, my Lord. This time don’t strike with your body but let the Yadroliq strike through you. And don’t withdraw immediately. Hold your punch.’

Aermes dusted the grass off his pants and got ready once more. *Let the Yadroliq strike through me.* Aermes closed his eyes and felt the crystal pulsating through his body. *Cosmic kick.*

He coiled his arm and saw the pulse traveling through his bicep to his forearm and finally to the fist before decimating into the air. He counted the pulses in a breath and familiarized himself with the rhythm.

Aermes opened his eyes. The world had gone quiet around him. As a pulse left his bicep he threw his punch. The pulse passed through his forearm into his fist by the time he struck the trunk. Aermes felt the pulse pass from his fist into the tree.

There was no pain this time. No new pain at least. He kept his fist on the trunk, not moving from his stance, he directed another pulse into the tree. Then another and another one after that.

A soft crackling began to sound from the wood. Olin perked his ears and stared at the tree, all agog.

With loud cracking noises, breaks began to appear on the bark around Aermes’ fist which grew instantaneously. Faint light spilled out from the breaks and with a thundering noise, a foot wide crack appeared along the trunk and ran to the top of the tree splitting it in half.

Wide eyed with awe, Aermes stepped back as the two halves slowly started to fall in the opposite directions. The light from the cracks died out as soon as Aermes withdrew his fist. White-faced, he turned to Olin who was clapping happily, his eyes brimming with excitement.

‘Well done, my Lord.’ Olin said, appreciation thick in his voice. ‘I knew my expectations weren’t wrongly placed.’ It seemed to Aermes that Olin was more impressed with himself, than him.

‘I might share your emotions if I knew what in Vi’s name did I just do.’

‘If only you knew how relevant that expression of yours is, my Lord,’ Olin laughed. ‘It takes people weeks to months to draw upon the stone’s power for the first time. Your father did it on his eighth day. But then too, he could just crack a mudbrick.’

That came as a shock to Aermes. His father was the strongest man he had known. Kings came to him to borrow his strength; princes kneeled before him, and yet, according to Olin, he could only crack a mudbrick after eight days? Aermes found that hard to believe.

‘What does this mean?’ He asked, still not able to make any sense of the day’s events. *I didn’t go to the river at all today. Tedar would kill me.* Aermes nearly laughed at his thoughts.

‘It means you are to head to Dinso, my Lord and seek out Master Vrinma at the Fiachori shrine,’ Olin answered.

Aermes put his head down thinking. He didn’t understand why he was even considering crossing to the far end of the world but Aermes smiled to himself. Today reminded him of the times he used to travel with his father.

He’d remembered some unbelievable things, which he continued to believe were dreams he’d had from his father’s stories; because believing they were real would have made him insane. Then again, he was never truly sane to begin with. He had just subdued himself.

The Yadroliq gave a sudden hard tug against the strap. ‘Olin. Why is this pushing itself against me?’ Aermes asked pointing at the stone.

‘It’s not pushing against you, my Lord, it’s pulling towards the Ximiyaliq.’ Olin had the answer at the ready. ‘The Ox carries it and I hear she’s moving across the Ingens.’

Aermes nodded, taking Olin by his word. ‘So I’m the Wolf and she’s the Ox? Who and where are the others?’ He had given up trying to wrap his head around this using logic. Now he was just going with the flow, the pace of which was being set by Olin.

‘The adjutants have been training at Fiachori for a year now. We know both the Ox and Bear are on the move. According to the Seers, the Bear is heading for Fiachori with her sister as the Ox closes distance between them.’

‘So I can head to Fiachori straight away. Or find the Ox and Bear and go with them?’ Aermes wondered out loud.

‘Yes, my Lord. That’s up to you.’ He looked at the ground then turned a serious gaze to Aermes, ‘I’m leaving at nightfall tonight, my Lord. I’d like it if you could come with me.’

Tonight?

Olin reached into his bag and took out an envelope. The paper had turned brown from age. ‘This is for you, my Lord.’

The old envelope bore a Dakians wax seal. *A wolf on his hind legs, baring its fangs, with suns as its eyes.* Aermes promptly took the envelope from Olin’s hand.

To My Little Wolf. Seeing it written in his father’s hand, Aermes felt tears beginning to brim his eyes. He blinked rapidly, took a sharp breath and he stuffed the envelope in his pocket.

‘I need to think about it, Olin.’ Aermes said as he moved to unstrap the Yadroqil.

‘That belongs to you now, my Lord. Regardless of your decision,’ Olin stopped Aermes’ hand. ‘But I sure hope to see you at town limits by nightfall.’ He sincerely added bringing his hands down and bowing.

‘I need some time to think, Olin.’ Aermes repeated. His mind felt hazy and numb. Thinking felt like walking through a room filled with thick resin. He picked up his shirt from the ground and started walking towards the road.

‘Very well, my Lord.’ Olin called out from behind, ‘I will wait at the town entrance till moonrise.’

Aermes took a road that brought him to front of the house. The longer walk gave him time to think, though it did him no good. *Only a couple hours to dusk.* Aermes stared at the sky before turning towards the house.

Kyrin stood up and ran to him, when he stepped in through the doorway. She’d been sitting on the couch, waiting, it seemed.

‘Where have you been?’ She sounded angry and concerned at the same time. ‘Three hours is not a while.’

Kyrin leaned in and hugged him, but retreated immediately when she felt the hard crystal against her chest. ‘What’s that?’ She asked.

‘I need some time alone, Kyrin,’ Aermes moved her aside and walked to the stairs.

‘What’s wrong Aermes? What happened with that duend?’ Kyrin called out from behind but he climbed straight up. He headed for the stairs to the attic and ascended them to his room. Climbing in through the floor, he shut the trap door behind him. Aermes pushed one of the grain sacks over the door to ensure privacy. Sitting down on the torn mattress he hastily opened the envelope and pulled out the letter.

We are in difficult times, my son. If it were up to me you’d have a father instead of receiving this letter. But I couldn’t defeat the powers that threatened us. The powers you might have to face one day. Forgive your father for forcing this burden upon you.

The only thing I have wanted is to keep you safe. But since you are reading this, it means I have given up on that. There is something coming my son. Something bigger than any person, city or nation. Seek help from the allies, you know who they are, and prepare yourself for a storm.

Trust Olin. He has served us well, starting from my grandfather. He is wise, strong and kind. Value his words.

I’m sorry, I can’t stand by you in this. I’m not sure if I will be around, by the time you read this.

*I am being pursued and I don't know how long I can stay hidden.
People will come after you too, once they know who you are. Stay
cautious and believe in your strength.*

Head for Dinso, son. Seek the Master.

DieTerra needs its Wolf.

The Wolf who bears suns in his eyes.

CHAPTER TWO

Brulf Woodland, Entral The Ingens

The moon shone high over the canopy of the forest. Bur ashes were towering dark shapes on the sides of the road; swaying titan shadows in the wind. Aermes had been sprinting since he had last rested and ate, at dusk. He had cooked himself some stew from a rabbit he had caught.

Aermes couldn't have thought of traveling through the forests by himself if not for Olin's training. He knew things now that he didn't three days back; how to setup camp, gather wood, lay traps, read tracks and look for fresh water, among other things. He learned more new things in these past three days than he had in the last ten years.

The Yadroliq gave a gentle tug as Aermes strayed from the path. He turned slightly to walk in the indicated direction. Skin from his chest had begun to grow around the stone like moss grows on rocks. He put his hand under his shirt to feel it.

The skin had moved further up than yesterday and now was beginning to grow under the pocket of the chest strap, starting to cover the Yadroliq's dome. He wouldn't need the chest strap, to hold it in place, in a few days; he guessed.

'You can comply with Yadroliq and let it lead you to the Ox. Or you can head straight to Dinso.' Olin had reminded him before they had parted.

Aermes chose to find the Ox. Not for any reason other than that he was fascinated by this woman, awed by Olin's description of her. And knowing she was so close, he didn't want to give up on the opportunity.

Auda. He thought to himself smiling. Aermes' mother was a duend too. She was a beautiful and strong woman, and though he had never spoken to her, he knew her through his father and her numerous portraits around the castle.

'It wasn't her fault,' was all his father would say whenever he asked him how she died.

A strong wind fluttered Aermes' cloak as it blew leaves off the ground. The bushes on his side rustled. Caution won over him and Aermes eyed the bushes for any signs of movement.

Roads on the Brulf woodland were known for their bandit ambushes. The wide bur ash trunks and high thicket growth alongside the roads provided a perfect hiding spot.

Aermes wasn't too worried about bandits though, there were other things on his mind. He had heard about tupua settlements in Brulf woodland near the Entral-Idul border, which wasn't far from where he was.

He had also heard about accounts of vosbri sightings in these woods. They were said to consume the eyes and the genitals of their unsuspecting, desiring victims. Compared to that bandits didn't seem too scary.

With the bag on his shoulder getting heavy and his shins beginning to hurt, Aermes felt tired. He found a patch of green beside a tall bur ash and slunk his bag to the ground. After looking around for a moment, he walked to the nearest bush and broke off an armful of branches, which he laid on the ground by his bag.

He sat down with his back against the tree, took out a knife from his bag and began scraping the leaves off the branches. Within no time, he had made a small pile of wood in front of him ready to be set alight.

Aermes faced his palm towards the pile and gave a small push with his mind. The pile burst into a big flame, nearly burning

his hand. *I overdid it again.* The golden coating on the knife's hilt shone in the light of the fire.

Tedar loved his gold, Aermes knew that. How angry would he have been when he would have found his knife missing, along with his best clothes? Would Kyrin have told Tedar that she gave them to him or that he stole them? *Probably that I stole them.*

Aermes thought back to the day he had left Thaldea.

After reading his father's letter, Aermes decided to travel to Dinso and seek the Master in Fiachori. He took out an old bed cover and tied up his least torn clothes in it. Slinging the bundle over his shoulder, he headed downstairs where he found Kyrin sitting on the couch, tapping her feet tensely.

'I'm leaving, Kyrin.' He said to her.

'What? Where?' Tears had already been welling up in her eyes, 'Tell me what happened. Tell me where you are going.'

Aermes was slightly astonished by her reaction. She did save him from multiple beatings over the years and gave him food in secret, when Tedar locked him in the attic; but he never knew Kyrin actually cared for him.

Now that he thought back, despite all her advances towards him, she had never hurt him in any way, directly or indirectly. Why had he been blind to it?

'I'm going to Dinso, Kyrin... That's what my father wants.' He reached into a pocket and brought out the envelope.

With trembling hands she took the envelope from him. She moved her fingers on the wax seal and tears started rolling down her cheeks.

'This is from your father?' She asked, smiling through tears, in a cracking voice. Aermes nodded a yes.

Kyrin sunk into the couch. She took out the letter and began to read it.

'I loved your father,' she finally said, without lifting her gaze from the words; lost in her memories. 'And he loved me... before he met Aenwyn... I like to believe he did.' She shook her head and

her wet eyes looked at Aermes. 'Did the duend give this to you?' She asked. 'Where is your father now? Is he in Dinso?'

'Yes. Olin gave this to me. Father had given this to him a couple years after he left me here,' he replied, 'And I don't know if father is in Dinso. But the Master is and Olin said he had *answers*.'

'So you have decided to leave then,' she sighed. 'No point in trying to stop you. You're your father's son after all.' Smiling she pushed herself off the couch.

'But I'm not letting you take those torn rags for clothes. Give me a few moments, I'll prepare a travel bag for you. Take a bath till then, you look dirtier than a mud wolf.' Saying that Kyrin walked up the stairs.

Aermes sighed. He felt tired. The small fire in front of him burnt steadily. *Still a few hours to dawn*, he thought as he lay down for a nap. Closing his eyes he recalled the time he had spent with Olin and the training he had received. He saw how after he had said his goodbyes to Kyrin, he had set out on the road to meet the duend.

Olin was already waiting at the town limits, leaning against a tree, riffling through an assortment of scrolls. He straightened up seeing Aermes approach and shoved the papers in his bag.

'I knew you'd come, my Lord.' Olin called out, admiration spilling from his voice. 'And earlier than expected, same as Lord Aasim.'

'Apparently you know me better than I do,' Aermes said

Olin eyed the boy in front of him. The young lord appeared to be an entirely different person from the one he met this morning. He wore an outfit akin to those of noblemen, complete with a plain cravat and a cloak.

Dressed entirely in black, he wore a pair of slacks creased in front along with a shirt with standing collars. He wore a darker velvet vest on top the shirt which had a long V neck and buttoned

slightly to the right. His cloak, frilled at the shoulders and straight from there till his ankles, was held in place by a thin golden chain across his chest.

The black boots too, had golden embroidery of what looked like vines. Also, a black bag hung on his right shoulder. His hair, slick and combed to one side, appeared longer than they did in the morning. And on a skin as fair as a duend shone the golden eyes of the Wolf.

‘Lord Aermes... You are...’ Olin started.

‘Looking better than the morning right?’ Aermes joked. ‘I know.’

‘... perfectly dressed for the night,’ he finished. ‘Smart choice of color, my Lord. You would be nearly invisible in the woods.’

‘And that’s good, I assume?’

‘It’s perfect, my Lord,’ Olin replied. ‘Shall we.’ Outstretching his arm he gestured Aermes to lead.

Aermes started to walk and Olin fell beside him. ‘So what is the plan, Olin?’ he asked, brimming with excitement.

‘A caravan leaves from here to a river port up north in a few moments. We’ll take a steam-boat from there to Entral. There we will get off at the first port on the Garogh and head into the forest for some training.’

Olin continued, ‘I believe two days should be enough to cover the basics. After that I have to head north to the Klell Peaks, to conduct some business with a naono company.’

‘And I will look for the Ox?’ Aermes asked.

‘Yes my Lord, if *that* is your choice,’ Olin agreed. ‘Her name is Auda Skirri and I believe she is in Entral at the moment, as is the Bear, Ren Doi and her sister.’

‘According to my estimation, you should catch them before they leave the Ingens, if you set out the third morning from today,’ he added. ‘Where is the Yadroliq pointing right now, my Lord?’

‘That way,’ Aermes pointed in a direction slightly left to the one in which they were walking.

‘North West... That means they are crossing the Ingens to get to the east coast,’ Olin deduced, ‘they still have some way to go. You will definitely catch them.’

The road ended at a crossing where it joined another, wider, road which came from the south and headed north, into the woods. ‘The caravan should pass from here,’ Olin said. ‘I believe there is still some time... We might have to wait, my Lord.’

‘It’s fine,’ Aermes shook his head. ‘Besides there are some things I want to ask you, which I think wouldn’t be possible in a cabin full of people.’

Olin agreed with a nod. ‘Do go ahead, my Lord.’

‘Firstly Olin, what is the *power* of the Yadroliq,’ Aermes rubbed his chin gazing ahead, ‘I mean what happened to the tree when I punched it.’

Olin lowered his head, getting his thoughts in order he spoke. ‘The world around us is made of different elements like gold, silver, iron, carbon... All these elements in turn constitute of tiny fragments called atomos. In the most basic sense, a trained bearer of the Yadroliq can tap into these tiny fragments, manipulating, combining or splitting them to release massive amounts of energy. The energy released is so great that there have been instances in history where it has been known to pulverize entire towns in an instant.

‘Hence, the bearer must have complete control, if he is to wield the full power of the Yadroliq. When you split the tree today that was less than a mere ten-thousandth of the Yadroliq’s true strength, used by an untrained bearer.’ Olin turned to the boy with a smile, expecting more questions to follow up.

Aermes bowed his head and took it all in. ‘What can the Ximiyaqiq do? And what stone does the Bear have?’

‘You want to know everything right away, my Lord?’ Olin laughed. ‘Master Vrinma wouldn’t be happy if I do all his work.’

Aermes frowned, but pushing one’s luck and failing is still better than keeping silent and doing nothing. ‘So tell me this.’ He asked. ‘What kind of people are the Ox and the Bear?’

‘Well,’ Olin started. ‘Auda is a duend noble woman, from the country of Aswem, in Canem. A skilled sword-fighter, she began her training in combat at the age of six.’ Noting an awestruck Aermes he continued. ‘She has been training with the Ximiyaliq for two years and is the Ox.

‘Ren and her sister Sui are half-ninfas from ChowMos. A hard past has made Ren the woman she is today, fierce, unfriendly and wary of strangers. Especially protective of her sister, she has been wielding the Electroliq for nearly a year now. She has become an exceedingly strong bearer, enough to make powerful enemies during her travels from ChowMos to Entral.

‘I don’t know much about Sui, but I hear she’s a sweet girl who is inseparable from her sister,’ Olin added. ‘My Lord, however they may be, I want you to always remember that they are your brethren and require the same respect and trust that you would reserve for your family, sometimes even more.’

‘I understand, Olin,’ sincerity was thick in his voice. ‘They sound like remarkable people. I’m really looking forward to meeting them.’

Both turned their heads south when faint sounds of hooves on the ground began to approach. Two guards rode on horses in front of the caravan which constituted of three long-wagons, each pulled by two stallions. Gas lamps swung on the front and back of the wagons casting long shadows on the road.

The guards wore the familiar red uniform of Flamell Transportation Company, who held a monopoly over the public transportation modes in the Ingens; both the roadways and waterways.

‘To North Brulf.’ The guard on the right called out.

‘Passage for two,’ Olin replied. ‘To Froft Point.’

‘The middle cabin,’ the other guard said pointing to the long-wagon. The ripples across the dark wood of the wagon shimmered in the soft light of the lamps.

‘Thank you.’ Aermes and Olin walked past the guards towards the long-wagon in the middle.

The characteristic red strip with black roses of the Flamells was painted on the sides of the long-wagons. Olin walked ahead of Aermes to the cabin door on the back and knocked on it twice. An old man opened the door from inside.

‘Passage for two,’ Olin declared ‘Froft Point.’

‘Ten kruits,’ the old man spoke with a rough lazy voice.

Olin dug around in his bag and fetched a small pouch. He took out some coins in his fist and counted them as he dropped them in the old man’s open palm, one by one.

‘A young lord an’ a escort, eh?’ The old man noticed Aermes looking over Olin’s shoulders. ‘From what keep might ye be, me Lord?’

‘The lord would not be bothered,’ Olin demanded in a stern voice.

‘Travelin’ in secrecy, eh?’ The old man raised an eyebrow. ‘Can keep a secret for five kruits mo’, me Lord.’ He addressed Aermes in nearly a whisper.

Olin sighed and dropped five more coins in the smiling man’s hand.

‘Climb aboard, sers.’ The old man moved back to his seat clearing the doorway.

Olin reached out and grabbed the doorframe and stepped aboard, his long-sword hitting the top slightly. He unstrapped it in a jiffy and stood it against the empty bench beside him. He then held out his hand which Aermes took and climbed on board.

The old man pulled the door shut behind him as Olin settled on the bench with the long-sword between his legs. Aermes sat next to him, facing the old man, who eyed him curiously.

Other than them and the old man there were eight more passengers in the cabin. A high merchant’s family of three, that included the parents and a child sleeping in his mother’s lap. Two, from the looks of their shoddy armor and long-axes, mercenaries and three farm workers in tattered sacks.

One of the mercenary was snoring loudly while the other eyed them with suspicion. He exchanged a glance with the merchant,

who Aermes now assumed had hired him. The merchant's wife looked at the cabin floor trying hard not to make eye contact.

The field workers stole glances off and on; resentment and anger dripped from their eyes. *These aren't my clothes. I'm a seeker too. I'm one of you.* Aermes thought. But he knew that that wasn't true. He was a Dakians of Clasbeka, most likely one of the last two.

'Get some rest, my Lord,' Olin told him softly. 'It's at least five hours to Froft Point. Then a three-hour steam-boat ride to Upper Wisit in Entral.'

Aermes gave a sincere nod. Clutching onto his bag in his lap, he settled back and closed his eyes.

The rising sun's light shone through the cabin windows as Aermes opened his eyes. He dreamt about a mountain crumbling to dust and walking in a dark cave with his father who he didn't recognize. Confused as to where he was he looked around and saw Olin by his side.

With his arms crossed over the guard of his long-sword and forehead resting on the pommel, Olin appeared to be asleep. The long-carriage went over a rock giving the cabin a sudden bounce. The jerk shook Olin awake who mumbled something inaudible and turned towards Aermes, with his eyes half open.

'You're awake, my Lord!' Olin spoke with a start and all signs of sleepiness disappeared from his face.

'Yes. Only just,' Aermes replied. 'Did you sleep?'

'I took a few naps, my Lord,' he sounded awake and alert. 'Looks like we're here.' He said gazing out of the window across the cabin.

Aermes could see Froft Point bustling with fishermen carrying their nets, farm workers getting ready for the day, vegetables and fruits being arranged on carts, people setting up their shacks for business.

Compared to the bigger towns, river ports were much smaller with a handful of residents. But these towns were notably

prosperous. Since ports were a hub for trading and business, nearly every resident of a port was either a trader or a shopman.

Aermes was watching a bent over porter carrying a sack on his back when the cabin came to a stop. There was a knock on the cabin door which woke up the old man sitting across from him.

‘Froft Point.’ A voice called from outside.

The old man, not bothering to fully wake up, turned the handle throwing the door open. Aermes stepped out of the cabin with a little spring, his bag swinging on his shoulder, followed by Olin, long-sword in his hand. The old man pulled the door shut behind them muttering sleepily.

The only ones to get off, Olin and Aermes stepped aside, as the caravan resumed forward, before they started towards the port. Blanketed in light morning mist, which wasn’t uncommon during the early hours of dawn, the town was already up and moving.

Tall wooden posts indicating the berth numbers of the harbor were visible over the buildings. The town constituted of about five dozen wooden structures, Aermes estimated, nearly all of them were two-storey with shops at the bottom and living quarters on top.

‘What business do you have in Klell Peaks, Olin? If you don’t mind me asking.’

Olin thought for a moment before replying. ‘Master Vrinma, has contracted a naono company for the manufacture of a few articles, my Lord. I am to go and see if the work is going as scheduled and that the articles are as per Master’s specifications.’

Aermes hummed. ‘And when will you return to Fiachori?’ He asked skipping over the questions he had about the sort of articles.

‘I suppose I’ll be back in a month and a half, my Lord,’ Olin thought to himself. ‘Five weeks to be precise,’ he said turning towards Aermes. ‘After my business at Klell Peaks I will be heading to Canem to see an old friend,’ he added beaming.

The Yadroliq gave a strong push against Aermes’ chest. He had grown so used to the tugging and pushing already, that his

mind had phased it out. This time it was as if the Yadroliq was trying to get his attention.

Aermes felt a small itch where the stone touched his skin. *Am I getting a rash?* He thought scratching around the Yadroliq's base.

'I think I might be getting a rash, Olin.' The duend turned to look at him. 'The skin around the Yadroliq has begun to itch.' He clarified.

That bit of information seemed to startle Olin. 'What?' He asked his face painted in shock, 'already?'

'Already what?' His reaction alarmed Aermes, who stopped in his steps and wide-eyed stared at the duend. 'What's with that face?'

'I'm sorry, my Lord. That took me by surprise, is all.' Olin sighed and shook his head. 'I didn't expect the Yadroliq to accept you so soon. It's barely been a day.'

'Accept me?'

'Let me explain, my Lord.' Olin began. 'We, the Keepers, have been keeping track of the family lineages of the Pillars since the *First Seven*. Though for the most part we know who the next bearer would be, it's still the stone who chooses its bearer. In the rare instance of a stone rejecting the bearer, we deliver it to the next most eligible person.

'Now the stone accepting the bearer results in it slowly becoming a part of their body. Once the stone is one with the bearer, they can wield its power in all its entirety. Normally this process starts after two to six months. But in your case it seems to have started overnight, my Lord.' Satisfied with his explanation he turned to Aermes with an expectant expression.

'What do you mean by, becoming a part of the body?' Aermes asked warily.

'It means that the body grows around the stone, engulfing it completely,' Olin answered with a hint of fascination in his voice. 'The stone becomes like another organ to the body.

'It can be only separated from the bearer after death or if the bearer requests an extraction from us, the Keepers, which is a strenuous process.' He explained further.

Aermes hummed, 'so that's when you met my father at Fiachori?'

'Precisely my Lord.' Olin nodded. Aermes hummed again staring at his feet, pondering on the man's words and started down the street.

They walked quietly for the rest of the way with Aermes lost in his thoughts and Olin glancing at every shop or person they passed. The entire harbor nearly came into sight as they exited the market and the cool river breeze greeted them on their cheeks.

'Up the Great Garogh!'

The wooden harbor extended about two hundred yards on both sides. The fishing-boats that lined the harbor were dwarfed by this one steam-boat docked amongst them. It was large enough to carry two wild elephants standing face to face and still have room for a few dozen people. The boat had a long cabin on the deck for passengers to sit in and a small wheel house above it.

'Up the Great Garogh!'

The short man standing in front of the white steam-boat called out again. 'Up the Great Garogh to Falkot.'

People climbed aboard by walking the ramp that was lowered from the boat's deck to the harbor. Most of them carried loads on their heads and were quite clearly merchant folk. Aermes spotted several farm hands and day laborers get on too.

'That's our call, my Lord,' Olin noted politely gesturing Aermes to walk towards the steam-boat.

A wide strip of red with black roses on it, was painted on the side of the boat. On the stern it read, *White Peregrine*, and under it in a smaller font, *Flamell Transports*, in bright red.

'Passage for two,' Olin said as he approached the man. 'Upper Wisit.'

The man nodded. 'Three kruits each, ser.'

Olin took out his pouch and paid the man.

'Welcome aboard the *White Peregrine*, my Lord,' the man greeted Aermes as they started up the ramp. 'She is the fastest on water,' he said waving to them. Aermes waved back to be polite.

‘Let’s go to the bow, my Lord,’ Olin said once they stepped on the deck. ‘I like the wind there.’

They walked to the bow and sat on the bench that extended along the bulwark all the way to the back, on either sides. Aermes pulled his bag off his shoulder and sat it on his lap.

‘It must be packed during busy hours,’ Olin noted scanning the boat. They were the only passengers sitting outside, the rest sat in the long cabin with their fishes and piles of wood and wool. ‘I’m going to close my eyes for a while, my Lord.’

Aermes nodded. Now that he looked at him closely, Olin did look tired. He placed his long-sword on his lap, crossed his arms and closing his eyes, rested his back on the bulwark.

Over the river, the sunlight glimmered across the rippling water, in shades of orange and red. Aermes fixated at the sparkling surface riffling through a hundred things in his mind.

He made a list of questions he would ask the Master. He practiced several different conversations he would have with the Ox. He reminisced about his father and his young days, before the gentle rocking of the deck lulled him to sleep.

Olin woke up with a start from the loud honk the steam-boat sounded, signaling its arrival, as it approached the harbor at Upper Wist. The chimney above the wheelhouse puffed out thick black smoke with the boat chugging across the river.

‘You had a good sleep,’ Aermes remarked. He finished folding his cloak and neatly tucked it in his bag. The vest and cravat were gone too.

‘Indeed, my Lord,’ Olin straightened up, wiping drool from his lips with the back of his gloves. ‘Did you get some rest too, my Lord?’ The sun was rising steadily in the horizon and the mist no longer hung above the water.

‘I took a few naps,’ Aermes smiled at him.

Olin didn’t get the joke but he didn’t let that be known and returned a slightly wider smile. ‘Today would be a long day, my

Lord,' he said gazing across the river at the approaching harbor. 'We would try to cover as much as we can.'

The boat docked on the harbor in the next few minutes. The ramp was dropped and Aermes and Olin climbed off, followed by two fishermen and a day laborer.

'Have a good day, my Lord and ser!' The short man from earlier called out waving at them. Aermes waved back, again. 'This guy is too friendly.'

'Everyone wants to be friendly to a lord, my Lord,' Olin said matter-of-factly as they started down the wooden harbor following Aermes. He began to strap the long-sword on his back, 'where is the Yadroliq pointing to right now?'

Aermes didn't have to think, he pointed with his right hand to the side and Olin nodded. After stepping off the harbor they didn't go towards the town but turned on the road towards the forest. A wooden sign pointing ahead read *Brulf Woodland*.

'Still North West, closer to the eastern coast than yesterday,' Olin thought out loud. 'She must have easily covered over three hundred miles since last night.'

'That's possible on a horse, right?' Aermes asked.

'The fastest horse on DieTerra, the Vameej quarter horse, *can* run fifty miles in an hour. It can run at that speed for no more than four hours in a day.' Olin replied, curiosity heavy in his voice. 'Now, I'm not sure how she's doing that, but I'm confident that she is skilled at using the Ximiyaliq.'

'That's fascinating,' Aermes spoke his mind.

'It indeed is, my Lord,' Olin replied before diving into his thoughts.

The air became sweet and cool as they entered the woodlands. Light filtering through the canopy lit the forest with soothing shades of yellow, red and orange. Leaves carpeted the dirt path, while wild thickets and towering trees rose in all directions.

Aermes remembered plenty stories he had heard about the Brulf woodland. About vosbris that would trick travelers, about secret bases of the New Union, about snakes hundred feet long

that swallowed entire herds of cattle, and all other kinds of old wives tales.

Looking around he could see mostly bur ashes, but he also spotted a couple of oaks he didn't recognize along with some tall yellow-green aspens.

Aermes turned to the Keeper walking beside him. His golden hair sprung with his every step. The black light armor, though dented and scratched in places, still had a significant allure to it. The man's face was stern but kind, lively but wise.

'Olin,' Aermes called to get his attention. 'There is something bothering me, something I wanted to ask you, but I'm not sure if I should.' He spoke cautiously.

'Only one way to find out, my Lord,' Olin laughed.

'Alright.' His voice was sincere. 'How old are you Olin?'

Olin smiled wide and turned to face ahead. 'Three hundred and seventy-three, my Lord,' the duend declared, nearly proud. 'I'll turn three-seventy-four in a few weeks.' He added turning back to Aermes, who was gawking trying to get a handle on a thousand questions and replies that sprouted in his head.

'How?' That was all he could muster the mental strength to stammer.

'Well I suppose Master won't mind if *I* tell you this,' Olin said, still smiling. He seemed to be waiting for this question. 'The Keepers belong to a kind called the *Forever*s. Our average life span is over ten times that of a normal person. That being considered, the lord can say I'm barely in my forties.' Olin gave out a loud laugh. The loudest Aermes had heard him laugh till now.

His laugh put Aermes at ease. Letting out a sigh he looked up at Olin and asked. 'But you are a duend, aren't you, Olin?'

'Yes, my Lord,' Olin agreed. 'Forevers are born in all high-beings' families that are humans, duends, ninfas and miatagarris; though the birth of a Forever is a rare event. One child out of a hundred-million is a Forever. At present we know of only twenty-four Forevers living on DieTerra, including me.'

Aermes hummed. 'So you must have seen a lots of things.' He mused loud.

‘Lots and lots, my Lord.’ Olin replied, amused. ‘I will tell you some stories about your great-grandfather when I get back to Fiachori.’

‘That would be nice,’ Aermes said to a grinning Olin, who seemed friendlier and more relaxed than his earlier courteous and formal self.

‘I have another question Olin.’ He had a hundred, but he couldn’t ask them all at once.

‘Go ahead, my Lord.’ Olin invited.

‘In his letter,’ Aermes began. ‘Father speaks of powerful forces and people pursuing him. Do you know who he’s talking about?’

‘I might have an idea, my Lord,’ Olin replied sounding unsure. With a quick nod Aermes gestured him to go ahead.

‘The Council of DieTerra has been bothered by the Pillars’ existence since their birth,’ Olin said. ‘They have viewed the Pillars as a threat to them and so the Peacekeepers have clashed with the previous Pillars on multiple occasions.’

‘As they cannot directly attack the Fiachori shrine they try to target the Pillars when they are alone. They use their Peace-Monger units at times for tasks as such.’

‘Peace-Monger units?’

‘Yes, my Lord,’ Olin nodded. ‘They are the elite squads of the Peacekeepers, second to only the Generals in strength. No one knows how many there are or how they look because they carry out operations in secret.’

‘The Council orders the use of Peace-Monger units for the most sensitive missions. They are efficient, brutal and powerful, my Lord and I believe they were after your father when he was forced to leave you in Thaldea.’

Aermes gazed ahead, his mind a mix of disbelief and confusion. ‘They might come after me too?’

‘Once they see you as a threat, yes, my Lord. And that is why you will have to train.’ Olin spoke with concern in his voice.

‘So let’s start soon,’ Aermes sighed and fell back into his thoughts.

They walked for another hour before Olin said pointing to a small clearing across the trees, 'that place looks good, my Lord.'

Aermes couldn't see the clearing because of the trees in the way. But as he craned his neck and gazed past them, he saw a sprawling pasture perfectly hidden by the wide trunks and tall bushes.

'It's difficult to spot,' Aermes spoke, from personal experience. 'So that's good.'

They turned off the road into the clump of bushes. They walked past the tall bur ashes and a few aspens, which added sprinkles of color to the canopy and crossed a final thicket to arrive at the open field. Aermes estimated that it must be at least two-hundred yards across.

Olin's bag landed on the ground with a thump. 'Yes, this will do.' He said scanning the field, nodding to himself. Aermes also slid his bag onto the ground next to Olin's.

'Are we ready to start, my Lord?' Olin asked him, eagerness thick in his voice. Aermes gave a determined nod.

'Very well. Let's start with a traveling technique, if you wish to keep up with Lady Skirri. Otherwise you might just slow her down,' Olin said grinning. 'It was your father's favorite way to travel and he once crossed the Ingens in two days, using this.

'He called it, *Atomos Foot*.'

The fire had gone out and the sun had begun to rise as wisps of smoke rose from the white ashes of the burnt branches.

Aermes propped himself up with an arm, awoken by a grumbling stomach. He squinted at the faint sunlight filtering through the canopy. *Early hours of dawn*, he thought to himself.

The push of the Yadroliq was more like a thump now. *Am I close?* He wondered.

Aermes stood up and gave his back a long stretch, getting it ready for the road, when his stomach groaned again. He had traveled almost a hundred miles last night and that was only because he was going at a careful pace.

He brushed off the grass from his pants and cloak. Irritated at the grass blades that stuck to the fabric, he took off his cloak and gave it a few violent jerks. Still not satisfied with the result he put it back on, indifferent.

Aermes hung his bag on his shoulder and started scoping for something to eat.

‘Rather than searching for food in trees, look for food on the ground, in the bushes,’ Olin had told him.

He walked around, still in the direction the Yadroliq pointed, scanning the thickets for signs of anything edible. A bush with bright green leaves caught his eye. Nearing the bush he noticed several red thorns on the gray branches. *Gooseberry*, Aermes thought to himself.

Dropping his bag he bent down and began foraging for ripe berries in the bush, not as carefully as he wished; getting numerous cuts and scratches from the sharp thorns, as a result. But in the end, he had two fists full of gooseberries which he began to chow down hungrily.

He tasted the sweet juice in his mouth as it ran down his chin. He was hungrier than he had realized.

Since he tasted dirt earlier, he washed the next batch with water from his flask and stuffed them in his mouth all at once. Now that Olin wasn’t around, he wasn’t a lord anymore. Just a seeker from Thaldea in another man’s clothes.

He had three more fists of gooseberry before wiping his mouth with the cloak and getting ready to leave.

Aermes slung his bag across his shoulder and knotted the strap making it shorter, so that it didn’t sway too much. He checked the strap, tightly wrapped across his body, by pulling on it. Satisfied, he did another stretch, cracked his neck and got into position.

Aermes placed his left leg forward with the knee slightly bent. Bringing the right arm behind him and the left arm in front, he leaned forward. He lifted his right leg and brought it to his chest. He gazed straight ahead and kicked his foot down, hitting the ground.

With a loud blast, Aermes streaked forward and upward at breakneck speed. He changed his posture in the air bringing his right arm in front and taking the left one back along with his upper body to maintain balance. He noticed a tree approaching him on the left. Bringing his left leg in front, he leaned forward and kicked the tree.

A loud bang and crack fifty feet off the forest floor sent Aermes shooting forward thrice faster than an arrow from a duend's bow. In two leaps he had covered nearly a hundred yards in air.

With a drop in his momentum, he targeted an approaching tree on the right. Again moving his upper body back, he brought his right leg forward and kicked the tree. The blast cracked the trunk and sent a flock of terrified birds squawking to the skies.

Leaning forward, Aermes chuckled, zooming across the forest canopy.

As he rose higher, something in the distance grabbed his attention. Several yards ahead, towards the right, he squinted to notice a copse of trees covered in a light bluish mist.

Curious, Aermes turned himself in that direction by lightly stepping against a tree on his left. The tree cracked under the blast as Aermes shot towards the mist. When he got closer, he let himself fall to the ground.

Gazing below he straightened his body, spread his arms by his side and lifted his right knee to his chest; keeping the other leg straight, he fell.

Aermes landed in a crouch, throwing up a cloud of dust and created a small crater around him on impact. He stood up and admired the mist ahead of him.

Sparkling with wonderful shades of blue the mist formed beautiful, hypnotic patterns where it swirled into itself.

Aermes walked into the copse, engulfed by the inviting mist. Sweet smells of cinnamon and mimosa invaded his nostrils. His eyes fluttered at the pleasant sensations the scents brought.

Pulled by the sweet smells he strolled forward, towards their source. But soon the scents changed. Now he could smell limes

and fir and ripe oranges. The cool mist danced around him making patterns in the faint light.

Aermes found himself swaying in his walk. He began to feel lightheaded, almost drowsy, now smelling fresh apples and tasting cool peppermint on his tongue.

Aermes halted when he heard a faint echo from the trees. He perked up his ears and listened closely. There it was again but different. A snivel. Someone was crying. He heard it again. A sob. It was a girl. A girl was crying. He established the direction of the sound and walked towards it.

In a small clearing he found the girl sobbing softly, on her knees, with her back towards him. The mists made it difficult to see but he could make out auburn curls resting on her shoulders and down her back. Aermes' gaze followed the hair along her back and his eyes came upon her bare bottom.

She's naked! Aermes held his breath as he stopped in his tracks but then slowly began to circle her.

Lecherous thoughts began to well in his mind which Aermes pushed out with great effort. Her skin was smooth and fair; sitting there she seemed akin to a marble sculpture.

Aermes stepped in front of her and saw that she was sobbing with her palms covering her face. Her fingers were long and supple, and her thighs resembled milk in both color and vitality.

Aermes caught himself leering at the swell of her ample breasts and pulled his gaze away. He bent down in front of her, held her wrist gently and pulled her hand away.

'What's wrong?' He asked in his gentlest voice.

The face that stared back at him was the most beautiful face he had ever seen. The beady green eyes that were wet from crying gazed at him. Moist eye lashes stuck together. Full red lips quivered to answer.

It took Aermes all of his strength to keep himself from grabbing the back of her head and begin kissing. An animalistic lust began to swell rapidly in his heart.

'They took everything.' The sweetest sound in the world chimed in Aermes' ears. 'They even took my clothes.' Aermes

closed his eyes and let her tender voice wash over him. 'I am cold... and hungry.' Her voice was a warm hug to the unloved.

She stared at him like a wide-eyed child who desired something. Aermes had decided to hold her down and pillage her innocence but a sudden strong pull in his chest distracted him. He was glad.

'I can hunt something for you,' Aermes offered. But it came out as a bare mumble.

'You don't need to do that.' Her voice was a titillating melody tinkling in his ears.

In a swift motion she pushed Aermes to the ground and got on top of him. Hair on his body stood on their ends when she began to writhe on his pelvis.

He moved his hands along the length of her smooth, warm thighs and grasped her breech, digging his fingers in her skin, causing her to gyrate harder.

She slowly lowered her face towards his. *A man's honor is the only thing-* Their lips touched and his mind went silent. Tongues danced about lustily as their breaths intermingled. Aermes moved his hands to grip her narrow waist.

She moved from his lips to his face and began sloppily licking, kissing his cheek. Resting a hand on his neck, she slipped her wet tongue in his ear, sending shivers down his spine. Aermes pulled her waist down against himself, biting his lower lip reflexively as she withdrew her tongue to start pecking his neck.

Followed by a rustle from the canopy, a shadow abruptly landed next to Aermes with a muted thud. The girl collapsed on his chest and something small rolled to his right.

Confused and disoriented, Aermes looked down at the girl, who had a warm blue liquid pouring out from the stump of her neck.

To his right Aermes saw an unfamiliar egg shaped head, with scaly skin. There was no nose but two slits below which was the mouth, open, lined with curved fangs. The black lifeless eyes stared blankly at him.

A sudden sense of fear washed over Aermes and pushing the body off him he stumbled to his feet. The shadow, he now saw,

was a knight who, leaning on a long sword, was examining the headless corpse covered in green scales as a blue liquid of honey like thickness oozed out of the stump.

The knight wore armor unlike Aermes had ever seen before. Though it seemed to be metal, it was flowing; reshaping itself to the knight's movements, appearing almost liquid at times.

The breast-plate, pauldron, gauntlet, vambrace, greaves, all were made to the exact fit of the knight. Additionally, the metal didn't make its characteristic clinking noise as the knight moved about. It was quiet like a cloth. Quieter even. Aermes noticed that the Yadroliq had ceased its pushes and pulls.

The knight took the helm off and long golden hair fell straight down her back.

No! This, is the most beautiful face.

'You alright there?'

No! This, is the sweetest sound.

CHAPTER THREE

North Brulf, Entral The Ingens

‘Wake up.’

The wind made a soft whisper when it blew through Aermes’ hair; his clothes fluttered against it as he chased his father through the woods.

‘You’re too fast!’ Aermes cried out in protest since his little legs could only cover so much ground. He heard his father laugh and saw him turn behind a tree and disappear. The boy stood there, thrown, not knowing what to do.

‘Wake up.’

The wind blew, flapping his white tunic. He ran forward, after his father, not knowing where he went. Aermes passed the tree where his father turned and searched around it. He heard faint footsteps in the grass before two hands grabbed him from behind and lifted him up.

The hands were strong but loving, coarse but gentle. Aermes giggled when his father turned him in his lap and nuzzled his chest. He laughed and threw around his arms and legs in pure delight.

‘Wake up.’

Aermes opened his eyes to a world too bright. He wasn’t a child. He wasn’t with his father. He blinked rapidly as his eyes adjusted to the light and saw a face hanging over him. Blue eyes the color of a clear sky stared back.

Aermes sat up glancing around in daze. He couldn't seem to recollect where or when he was. He rubbed his head. Something smelled bad, almost rotting. Aermes searched for the source and saw a scaly body oozing out a thick blue fluid. He staggered to his feet nearly falling to the ground again.

'Hey! Take it easy, will you?

'I removed most of the vosbri's venom... But it might still have some after-effects.'

Aermes heard the words, but couldn't understand their meaning. His hand rose to his chest and felt something there. A stone? His memory was hazy.

'Here... Let me try this.' The woman raised her hand and held her open palm in front of his face.

Aermes fell to his knees as his head began to clear. He remembered the mist, the smells, the naked girl, and then he suddenly looked up at the golden haired knight.

'Auda!' He gasped in awe, studying the fair woman standing in front of him.

In a swift motion the duend had the tip of her sword on his throat. Aermes felt the cold steel pushing against his chin as she guided him to stand.

'Who are you?' She demanded in a stern voice. 'Are you one of the Peacekeeper's informant?'

'What? No!' He didn't really understand her but he knew he wasn't that.

Aermes pulled down the collar of his shirt revealing the Yadroliq that was now almost covered in skin. The dome shaped top of the stone was giving off a smoky glow in the canopy's shade.

Auda's eyes widened at the sight of it. She dropped into an immediate curtsy of the western nobles and with her bowed head spoke in a plain apologetic voice. 'Forgive me, my Lord Dakians.'

This was a different person's voice than before altogether; it was a noble trained in the etiquettes of the court. 'I failed to recognize you.'

Without lifting her head, she knelt and lowered her sword to the ground. 'My sword is yours to command, my Lord.' Her voice was flat and dutiful, lacking any personal emotion.

Aermes knew the etiquettes of the nobles; it was one of the first things he had learned along with learning how to talk.

But standing there with this duend girl at his feet swearing her loyalty to him felt ridiculous. Since he only knew himself as a mud covered seeker until a few days ago, Aermes felt a burdening sense of uneasiness.

'You honor me, my Lady,' he mustered his best lordly voice. 'But we don't need titles among us. We are a brethren after all.'

Auda looked up, unable to understand the implication.

'Just Aermes is fine.'

Aermes held out his hand for Auda and helped her up. The metal of her armor was smooth and cold to touch and had swivels moving on it, like currents in water. It seemed to be constantly melting and mixing with itself.

'How is it doing that?' Aermes asked pointing at the spiraling metal of the breast plate. 'Is it some kind of magic?'

'You can say that, my Lord... I mean Aermes,' Auda raised an eyebrow and laughed, as if not sure if he was joking, making Aermes regret asking the question.

Seeing his now embarrassed face, she straightened up and explained in a respectful tone.

'I'm using the Ximiyaliq to do that, my Lord... Aermes.' Noting his silence she continued.

'Ximiyaliq is also known as the stone of manipulation. It gives the bearer the ability to control the elements in their surroundings. For instance, I can turn water to acid, corrode things, poison the air or make my armor flow like liquid.'

Aermes nodded gently, taking everything in, when his eyes went to the headless body on the ground. He stepped back in horror.

'Is that a vosbri?' The severed head stared in the distance with big black eyes.

Auda bent down and picked the head up without any unsurety.

‘Yes. And she was about to bite you just when I came. I had set up camp nearby when I sensed the toxic mist. Along with the toxins I sensed male pheromones, a lot of it. I expected to find a group of men, but when I arrived here it was only you; about to be bitten.’

‘Bite me?’ Aermes rubbed his forehead trying to remember. ‘I remember acting strange having almost no control over my actions,’ he seemed to recollect.

‘Precisely. The vosbri mist contains powerful hallucinogens and stimulants, which they secrete from their body,’ Auda explained turning the head in her hands like a child handling a ball. ‘I don’t think you would have gone near her if she looked this.’ She held the scaly head up, in front of her face.

The lip-less mouth exhibited rows of long curved fangs with two black iris-less eyes staring ahead. Aermes stepped back and laughed nervously, at the ferociousness of the creature who he had almost coupled with.

‘You already had significant amounts of toxins in your blood.’ Auda said. ‘It took me three tries to clean it all out.’ Astonishment, plain in her voice.

Aermes hummed as he walked over to the body examining it from afar.

The body was about the same size as the girl he remembered, narrow with slender limbs. However, the supple fingers were sharp crooked claws, the breasts were scaly mounds on the chest and the skin didn’t look fair and smooth but green and scaly and coarse.

Behind him, Aermes heard a soft thud of Auda dropping the head to pick up her sword. Resting the blade on her shoulder she walked to a bag slumped at the base of a tree not far from the body.

Aermes turned away and hastily untied his bag, which was still twisted unusually across his chest. He straightened his cloak and walked over to Auda who was now kneeling beside her bag. She held her sword, upended, at the hilt, with its point stuck in the ground as she cleaned the blade with a rag.

Aermes scanned the blade and instantly realized that it wasn't an ordinary sword. It was one carried by the high nobles of Canem. He had seen those before, his father had friends who used them, and recently with Olin.

Compared to Olin's sword, this one had a narrower blade and was shorter, if only a little. Though it had similar symbols inscribed along the length of its blade, from the hilt to halfway from the point.

Auda stopped her hand and looked up when she heard Aermes approach.

'That sword,' Aermes said pointing. 'It's a *burkh shver*, right?'

'A *brukh shverd*,' Auda corrected. 'Yes. It's a deund blessed sword. It's been in the Skirri house for over a thousand years. My uncle gave it to me when I turned sixteen.' She smiled at the sword, admiring it like a mother adoring her baby.

Aermes bent down beside her and grazed his fingertips over the inscriptions on the blade. 'What does it say?' He asked, curiously studying the symbols.

'*Eyner vas vyelds dem shverd vet brengen likht tsu der melukhe.*' Auda recited from memory without reading the sword. Then she explained to a puzzled Aermes in Terran. 'The bearer of this sword will bring light to the land... It's low Duennish.'

'There are two kinds of Duennish?' Aermes asked, uncertain.

'Three really,' Auda replied excitedly. 'Low Duennish, high Duennish and royal Duennish. Though, nearly everyone speaks high Duennish now; except the ones who speak royal Duennish, who're scarce.'

'This sword was inscribed by miatarri sorcerers who were brought to Canem as slaves, and for them writing in high or royal Duennish, was an offence punishable by death. So nearly all the blessed weapons have inscriptions in low Duennish.'

Aermes heard intently, taking it all in, smiling at the passion the girl had for something that would have seemed trivial to him. 'I never knew that.' He found himself genuinely interested. 'Though my father did tell me about the slavery of the naonos and miatarri, and its abolishment.'

‘Yes, those were dark times,’ Auda sighed standing up, sliding the sword in the scabbard. ‘Are you ready to leave? We should get moving, it’s already noon.’ She looked to the sky tugging on the strap of the sheath, fastening it to her back.

‘Yes, certainly.’ Aermes got up and dusted his grass covered knees. ‘Auda.’ Remembering an old question, he spoke promptly. ‘How do you travel?’

The girl looked up from fiddling with the strap and beamed at him. ‘Wouldn’t it be better if I showed you before telling?’ She asked with anticipation.

Aermes hadn’t expected a question in return; he nodded all the same.

Auda smiled once more and brought her hands to her sides. With an audible puff of wind below her feet, she was hovering above the ground.

Aermes observed the air around her body had become translucent. His baffled face seemed to amuse her.

‘Oh,’ she tapped her forehead, ‘I’ll need that.’

Auda turned in midair, towards the clearing, in the direction of the vosbri’s body and stooped forward. Like a gust of wind, she flew ahead and was beside the body in an instant, where she descended to the ground and bent to pick something up. She held her long hair in a bun on top of her head before she lowered the helm over it.

Once again, Auda rose upwards and began hovering above the ground. She turned towards Aermes and lifted her visor. ‘Now watch this!’

Sounding like an enthused child, she turned to face away from Aermes. She leaned forward, held her arms back on her side, and with a rush of wind behind her shot ahead; like a bullet shot out of a rifle.

In a blink of an eye, Auda had crossed the clearing and disappeared into the forest. Aermes stood there in a wide-eyed surprise unable to even come close to comprehending the means of her flight.

Just like she flew out, Auda flew back in the clearing and was facing Aermes the next moment. He didn't even have enough time to wipe the look of utter befuddlement off his face which made her laugh. She gracefully descended to the ground and lifted her visor.

'So, what do you think?'

Aermes could see the blue expectant eyes shining inside the dark helm, which had swivels in its metal like the rest of the armor.

'You were astonishing and quick. And quiet too.' Aermes babbled, finding his tongue in time. 'How were you doing that?' There was genuine curiosity in his voice.

Auda took off her helm. 'I might not be able to explain too well, but I'll try.' Aermes nodded, determined to hear an explanation of the feat he just witnessed.

Auda took a sharp inhale and started. 'First, I make my body light, and the air around my body dense enough to make me float. Then I create a column of super dense air behind me and a column of near vacuum in the direction I am facing by expelling all the air out of it. As soon as I do that, the air behind me rushes to fill the empty column and since it's denser than my body, it pushes me ahead. I keep repeating the process until I get tired.'

Aermes listened carefully, trying to understand the method and it nearly made sense to him. 'That is quite ingenious, Auda.' He spoke before his brain would begin to hurt.

Auda smiled gleefully and almost skipped as she did a courtesy. 'Thank you, my Lord.'

Aermes laughed at that. *Isn't she older than me?* He thought eying the girl in front of him trying to keep her hair from spilling out of her helm. *She's surely taller than me.*

'Shall we leave, Aermes?' Auda asked walking towards her bag. She picked it up and slung it across her shoulder.

'Alright!' Aermes tightened the strap of his bag, to prevent it from swinging about wildly.

He got in his stance as Auda began to float in the air once more. 'I'm excited to see your technique, too.' She said eagerly.

Aermes lifted up his right foot, bringing it forward and kicked the ground.

With a blast under his feet he shot across the clearing. He laughed to himself when he heard Auda cheer from the ground, who in an instant was flying below him.

'Follow me!' She shouted, craning her neck to look at him before zooming ahead.

Aermes nodded to himself and kicked the bur ash tree on his left, which snapped like a twig under the blast, launching him behind her.

CHAPTER FOUR

Harroug, Khem Vameej

Sofelan stood in the stone balcony, leaning over the wide bannister as he watched the late afternoon sun descend in the sky. It shone hard over the sandy town of Harroug today; though it was one of the cooler days in that there were several wispy clouds in the sky.

Beyond the town, across the red ground, the White Sanctum's shadows had begun to sweep the lands. And far behind it, higher than the highest tower of the White Sanctum, the peak of the massive dormant volcano, Tim Raug, kissed the blue sky.

Surrounded by a small patch of forestry in the middle of the desert, the volcano was a welcome addition to the sandy panorama.

It was hot out, but the heat kept Sofelan's mind from wandering. The heat from the sandy ground was enough to cook men in their houses, but the Royal Quarters were different.

Over three thousand years old, the quarters had water running in a vein network in their walls, ceilings and floors at all times. The continuous circulation of water kept the insides of the structure cool as a winter night.

Unlike his brother, Sofelan didn't like the comfort. It made him feel guilty. He didn't share his brother's sense of justice either and was rather weak willed as his brother would often say. He didn't think he deserved his name and stature: Lord Sofelan Remurian,

Chief Advisor to the throne, head of the Royal Council and heir of the Remurian family.

Thieves can't be conquerors. His father's words sounded in his head like a breeze blowing on a fire.

Shouts of people pulled him away from his mulling and he directed his gaze below to see a crowd under his balcony. He couldn't make out the faces from up here but he saw most of them were girls hoping to catch a glimpse of Lord Sofelan Remurian.

He waved at them with his gloved hand and scowled under his hood. His face, dark in the shadow, was not to be seen but that wasn't enough to deter these youngsters.

Shouts of *Lord Remurian, Lord Sofelan* had begun to drown his thoughts, so with a final wave and a short nod he turned around and headed into his chambers. Because the one thing he hated more than being alone with his thoughts, was being among people.

He walked to the edge of the room and picking up the decanter, poured himself a cup of Mosan wine. Sofelan sipped the bitter-sweet liquid as he crossed the room again to stand in the balcony doorway and continued staring at the sky. He took another sip, gazing at the sun beaming off the jeweled tower tops of the White Sanctum; the largest Fican temple.

A soft knock on his door made him turn around.

'The Crown Prince of the glorious Vameej Empire; Prince Epolus-The Sun-Varenruth is entering.' A loud voice announced.

Sofelan watched the large door swing open and the tall royal figure walk in with a jump in his stride and a smile on his face.

The prince wore a green long robe with elaborate crystal work on it, from neck to cuff. On his chest, the robe had two elephants with raised trunks, in small and big green jades. Their bodies trickled down to patterns of flowers and stars and suns, done with crystals and stones in shades of green and blue.

On his shoulders he had two spiraling suns in opals whose diamond rays danced down his sleeves to the cuffs. A poor man could live his entire life off this robe, Sofelan imagined.

Epolus had his short amber hair combed to the side and his beard trimmed neatly. Beaming, he walked towards Sofelan with long strides.

'You look happy today,' Sofelan noted.

'And it's great to see you too,' Epolus replied, 'my friend.'

Sofelan scoffed not unkindly. 'Wine?' He asked raising his cup.

'Always,' Epolus said doing a mock bow.

Sofelan set his glass on the round table behind him and walked across the room to fetch the prince some wine.

'You wear that even when you're alone?'

Sofelan looked back from pouring to see the prince slouching in a chair and pointing at his hood and gloves.

'Yes, my Prince,' Sofelan sighed getting back to pouring the wine. 'I wouldn't like anyone to happen upon my face by accident.'

'Even when you sleep?' Epolus called out.

'Yes,' Sofelan turned around with the glass of wine in one hand and the decanter in the other.

'And you still won't do it my way?'

Epolus eyed the man as he set the glass and decanter on the table and settled across from him. The prince reached for his glass and took a long sip.

'No,' Sofelan spoke from his shadowed face. 'Thieves can't be conquerors.'

Epolus' smile drained from his face and a frown took its place. 'That's not the only thing he said, you know.' He said in a low growl.

'Yes,' Sofelan sighed, 'I do.'

'You know why I chose you to be at my side and not that idiot.'

'Because...'

'Because you can think,' Epolus interrupted, 'and act accordingly. That fucker knows nothing besides killing and destroying. But you, you are smart... So when I see you beating yourself over things that cannot be helped you appear to be a bigger idiot to me than him. You understand?'

'Yes,' Sofelan replied, 'I understand.'

'Look here,' Epolus laughed, 'I'm not asking you to dance around, just don't act like you are always about to kill yourself.' He took another long sip from his cup. 'The Mosans really know their liquor.'

‘So the others are situated?’

‘Yes, my Prince,’ Sofelan replied, ‘the three are near the capital and Drereth is expected to arrive anytime now.’

‘Good,’ Epolus nodded to himself, ‘what about Nodius?’

‘He will wait till notified,’ Sofelan said, ‘I also told him to keep an eye on the other two and not let them do anything stupid.’

‘You think he can?’ Epolus raised an eyebrow.

‘I am fairly certain in his managerial abilities.’

‘Well,’ Epolus leaned on the table, reaching for the decanter, ‘so that’s taken care of.’ He poured wine into the glass to the brim. ‘What about the girl?’

‘In her chambers. She still refuses to eat,’ Sofelan took small sips under his hood as he watched the prince trying to maneuver the glass without spilling on his clothes.

‘No matter. She’ll come around.’ Epolus emptied his glass in one long slurp and sighed in satisfaction. ‘You remember when father took us to Viyn?’

‘Yes,’ Sofelan replied, ‘that was the first time we saw gigans. The enormous Council ships were on the shore to take them to Caelum.’

Epolus nodded as his brow scrunched revealing folds on his forehead. ‘You remember what father said that day?’

‘A place worse than an unfair world, is an unfair world with hope.’

‘A place worse than an unfair world, is an unfair world with hope,’ Epolus repeated the words to himself. ‘But we can’t help but hope. It’s in our nature; how can we still ourselves in the unfairness without hope?’

Sofelan’s hood moved signaling a nod from him.

‘Do you know what he meant by that?’

‘No,’ Sofelan replied.

‘When you know you are in a bad place, you make it better.’ Epolus said, ‘I think he was telling us that we are in the worst place imaginable and it is up to us to make it right.’

‘That sounds like him,’ Sofelan agreed.

‘You know why father couldn’t do it himself?’

‘No.’

‘Because he refused to do what he could not do,’ Epolus hung his head. ‘He taught us to do unto others as they do unto you, but instead always forgave when the time came to do unto them.’

‘The good thing is little one, I am not him. I will mercilessly build the world that he envisioned, restore our people from secrecy to glory, and make the entire DieTerra bow before them.’

Sofelan’s smile glimmered in the shadow of his hood. ‘That I believe you will.’ He sipped some wine, ‘I was wondering, what is the role of the Council in this?’

Epolus grinned. ‘The Council is our guardrail,’ he said. ‘If by any chance we fail to do what we want, the Council will be there to save our necks.’

‘And the Pillars?’

‘No, don’t call them that,’ Epolus said. ‘The Seven Percepts of Vivi are the personification of the unfairness in the world. One man lifts a sword to protect his people and is worshiped. Another lifts a sword to protect his children and is called a killer.’

‘I will watch the Seven Percepts crumble, if that is the last thing I do,’ Epolus grunted. ‘Not to return this time.’

‘Do you think he’ll help us?’ Sofelan asked.

Epolus gave him a confused gaze as he poured himself another glass.

‘From the shrine,’ Sofelan clarified.

‘Yes,’ Epolus set down the decanter, ‘he is another man who is sick of the world telling him what to do. He wants to take control of his own destiny. I have seen the hunger for power in his eyes. And power he’ll have.’

A knock at the door made them both turn towards it as it slowly opened, not fully. ‘My Prince, a lady is here,’ the man called out, ‘calls herself Drereth.’

‘Yes,’ Epolus’ voice was loud and authoritative, ‘send her in.’ He went back to sipping his wine while Sofelan stared at the door. He wanted to see this woman his brother would always talk about, the woman who had saved his life.

Drereth walked in wearing her sandy yellow hair in a crude bun above her head. The duend stood over five feet in her faded

mercenary leathers of eastern Canem. Her skin was tanned, unlike any duend Sofelan had met, covered in pink scars big and small.

Sofelan looked at the hard lines of her face and her clenched jaw. A long scar starting on her left cheek crossed her nose and ended below her right ear. She fidgeted with the pommels of the two sheathed curved knives that hung from her waist.

With her head bowed, she stopped a few feet before the table. Her eyes glued to the floor. 'I am at your service...' she said '... My Prince.'

Epolus smiled and got up from his seat, leaving the empty glass on the table. He walked up to the duend and placed a hand on her shoulder. 'Always good to see a friend.'

Drereth jerked at his touch but gave a stiff nod, still not looking at him.

'Well,' Epolus cleared his throat, 'why don't you clean yourself off the ride. You will accompany us to the White Sanctum thereafter.'

'Yes, my Prince,' Drereth performed a deep bow and with a quick turn marched out of the room.

Epolus turned to his hooded friend with smiling eyes. 'Well?'

'She seems quiet.'

'Yes, yes, quiet,' Epolus said, 'quiet and deadly. She can cut down ten men before they can reach for their swords.' He sounded not unlike a boy excited about his new plaything.

'What if these men carry firearms?' Sofelan asked.

'Firstly, firearms are a coward's weapon.'

'Peacekeepers.'

'Cowards,' Epolus corrected. 'Secondly, I have heard that Drereth can cut down rifle bullets in the air.' A smirk appeared on his face.

'Now that would be a sight, wouldn't it?' Sofelan laughed.

'One we might not get to see.'

Epolus studied the large astro-dial in the corner. The brass rings and circles moved steadily some slower than the others.

'It's almost time to see the High Priest. I will change into something more Fican and send for you.' He said rolling his eyes.

'As you wish,' Sofelan leaned forward and poured himself a glass.

'Will you be alright?' Epolus asked.

'Yes,' Sofelan sighed.

'The last time...'

'I remember what happened the last time,' Sofelan snapped, 'I am not a child anymore.'

'Well, that's great then,' Epolus patted him on head. Humming he turned and started towards the door. 'Change out of those robes,' he called out, 'they smell like dust and dog.'

Sofelan watched a server boy push the door open for the prince. He pulled it shut soon after. Sofelan brought his sleeve to his face and sniffed. He did smell like dust and dog.

Epolus strode through the red gallery; his steward beside him carrying a bejeweled blue umbrella that matched the prince's robe. The doorway at the end of the lobby shone with the red light of the setting sun.

Epolus was dressed in a simple long robe fastened to the side. The blue robe had strips of crushed amethyst running along its length. On his head he donned the customary turban of Vameej royalty, studded with a large opal in the middle.

Drereth kept at the prince's side with her blades on her hips; her hands on the pommels, restless. The steward brought the umbrella over his prince's head as he stepped out in the desert heat.

Conducted by four white Vameej quarter horses, the royal carriage waited for Epolus, shimmering with a red glow.

Sofelan stood beside the carriage in a long yellow robe with a yellow hood over his head, obscuring his face from view. He completed his outfit with a pair of white doeskin gloves and white leather boots. His steward stood by him, holding an umbrella over his head.

Epolus laughed as he approached the man. 'Why do you need the umbrella, you hooded freak?'

Sofelan shrugged and motioned at his steward. 'He insisted.'

The carriage master rushed to open the door while Epolus snorted. 'He doesn't get to insist.'

Sofelan sighed as he followed the prince into the carriage. 'The boy is persistent if naught else.'

The prince and his advisor headed to the back of the spacious carriage while the stewards and Drereth settled in the front. Epolus reached for the cabinet beside the window and pulled out a round bottle of rin juice. He was tilting the bottle to gauge the amount of liquor left when Sofelan took the bottle out of his grip.

'You don't want that,' he said.

Epolus hung his head like a child who was refused a treat and slumped on the cushioned lounge. Sofelan placed the bottle back and sat beside his prince.

A slit in the front of the cabin slid open to reveal the carriage master behind it. 'My Prince, a large crowd has gathered outside to see your majesty.'

'Tell them we're in haste,' Epolus called out from the back. 'We'll stop on the way back'

'As you command, my Prince.' The man slid the slit shut and followed by the sound of a sharp crack the carriage jerked forward and the rhythmic pattering of horse shoes against the cobblestone began.

'It shouldn't be more than a few minutes,' Sofelan said when he saw Epolus begin to tap his feet.

'Yes, yes.' Epolus said.

'Something troubling you?' Sofelan asked.

'I'm just a little concerned.'

'About?'

'The meeting,' Epolus replied 'the High Priest, what if he realizes?'

'These are only men,' Sofelan said, 'not even good ones at that. The stories are about their ancestors, thousands of years ago. A Fican priest is as adept at the magical arts as the next rock you'll see.'

'Yes, but still,' Epolus looked up. His lip was doing a nervous twitch, 'you are telling me you aren't the least bit concerned?'

‘Well why should I be?’ Sofelan replied, ‘You are Epolus Varenruth and I am Sofelan Remurian. If someone should be nervous, it should be the priest.’

Epolus couldn’t see his face under the hood but he knew Sofelan was smiling.

The only rare times when Sofelan showed absolute confidence was when Epolus was doubting himself. The slowing of the carriage caused the prince to move aside the curtains to peek out the window. The city was small and passed by them soon enough.

They entered the temple’s premises through a giant white doorway, wide enough to let in a hundred men abreast. Epolus recognized the smaller structures along the wall as the thousand sanctums, their shape replicating the White Sanctum. The tall wall enclosing the compound disappeared behind a grove of yellowing trees in the distance.

Epolus moved away from the window to notice Sofelan with his head bowed and hands folded. ‘We are here.’

‘Yes,’ Sofelan said. ‘Do you feel something?’

‘A little,’ Epolus replied. ‘I had expected more.’

‘Could it be the ground?’ Sofelan wondered, ‘or the Epriollum?’

‘It should be the Epriollum,’ Epolus stated. ‘Let’s see what we can find.’

With the neighing of the horses, the carriage came to a gradual halt. Epolus heard the footsteps of the carriage master rushing to open the cabin door.

Evening sun flooded the dim cabin when the door swung open. The stewards and Drereth climbed out followed by Sofelan and Epolus, who took his sweet time.

Outside the carriage he found a group of men, waiting, in long tunics of color similar to Sofelan’s robe.

An old man in the middle donned a tall onyx obelisk on his turban that had thin silver chains wrapped around it. His robe was embroidered with what Epolus recognized as depictions of Vivifica’s heart while the others’ robes were plain.

Epolus walked up to the old man and performed a bow. ‘High Priest.’

The old man also bowed as deep as his body would allow. Wrapped around the turban, the silver chains made soft clinking sounds. 'We are honored to be in your presence, Your Grace.' His long wispy beard swayed from his chin.

'Thank you,' Epolus placed his hand on the priest's shoulder prompting him to straighten up, 'And I in your.'

Turning away with his hand still on the priest's shoulder, Epolus pointed to his carriage as two soldiers carried a large chest towards them. The men waddled up to them and placed the chest at the prince's feet.

Epolus gestured one of the men to open the chest.

The man promptly bent over, unlatched and swayed the top open. Glimmering in the evening sun, thousands of neatly stacked square coins stared back at Epolus. Satisfied, he nodded to himself and waved the soldiers away. The men bowed deep before taking their leave with haste.

'A small gift from the family,' Epolus beamed at the gawking priest. 'Nine hundred thousand gruths.'

The royal currency was rare in this parts of the empire. Much more so in such quantity.

'Parts of the temple need rebuilding and maintenance for decades now, my Prince,' High Priest said, 'we would put your gift to good use.'

The High Priest snapped his fingers and two acolytes hurried forward. They lifted the chest with great effort and padded across the gardens.

'What happened to the temple?' Epolus asked as he fell beside the High Priest.

'The temple?' The man looked older from up close.

'You said it needed rebuilding and maintenance.'

'Ah yes,' they walked along the gardens skirting the white temple building. 'It's been like that for three decades now, the roof and a wall of the house of Oorine had collapsed. We have blanketed it with tarp, but now with your donation we will be able to finally restore it.' The old man smiled at the sky.

‘It’s my pleasure, Your Piety,’ Epolus said, ‘the temple must be getting old.’

He watched a group of young boys dressed in the whites of the acolytes, working with long scissors and sickles on a giant grass elephant that stood in the garden. Epolus assumed, the complex was emptied out in view of the royal visit, since the only men around were the priests, acolytes and the young trainees.

‘It is over four thousand years old, my Prince,’ the High Priest said, ‘but the collapse of the house of Oorine wasn’t because of that.’

‘It wasn’t?’

Epolus looked back and saw Sofelan and Drereth trailing them not five feet behind; followed by the royal guards who looked out of place in the complex with their red and gold armor and shields.

‘No, my Prince,’ said the High Priest in a raspy voice of an old man, ‘this was before you were born when your grandfather ruled the empire. On a black night when no moon or stars shone, a pack of irazurras rode down on the temple from west. We don’t know what they wanted but this was the first and only time their kind revealed their existence to the people of the empire, so brazenly.’

‘It was my fifth year as an acolyte. I was cleaning the High Priest’s chambers when I heard blood curdling hollers descending from Tim Raug. I stepped out and climbed the wall to see dark shapes galloping towards the temple. Dark evil shapes of death and malice. I ran down screaming; not words just screams of a man overcome by fear.’

The High Priest shook his head as they turned a corner still keeping the garden on one side and the temple on the other. The light of the setting sun had begun to color the white marble walls the slight red of a ripe peach. Two young trainees walked by them carrying large sacks on their shoulders.

‘We would have all died that night,’ the High Priest mused, ‘with this temple burnt to the ground, had she not been staying with us.’

‘She?’ Epolus asked.

‘Aira Skirri. I can still see her face if I close my eyes. White skin, golden hair; the most beautiful woman to walk the lands.’ Epolus

thought he caught a sparkle in the old man's eyes, 'by the time she woke up and climbed the wall, the beasts had started hurling fiery boulders at the temple, and one of them came crashing through the roof of the house of Oorine. But that was the last of it. She raised a hand and the irazurras on their demonic horses froze in their place; their blood boiled in their veins and along their mounts they died where they stood.

'That day, I asked myself if the royal and noble families have it right and we are worshiping the wrong gods. I mean, I watched this woman slay over a dozen of the most dangerous beings on DieTerra without even breaking a sweat. But when she walked down the wall, I heard her say something which is the reason why I stand here as the High Priest of the White Sanctum.'

'What did she say?' Epolus asked.

'Vivi bless us.' The High Priest smiled the toothless smile of an old man.

'Here we are.' He called out as he led the royal party to a giant square in the middle of the gardens.

Five wide paved paths converged at the square which flaunted a large fountain at its center. Epolus walked towards the fountain, examining the statue of the marble lady standing in the water.

The figure donned a golden crown and a red shroud that fell off her shoulder exposing her teat. With one hand she tilted a long necked vase that continually poured water into the fountain. Her long hair had vines braided in them while from her ears hung the sun and the moon. In the other hand, she held a bundle of wheat plants; their heads heavy with grain.

'That's Areha; Vivi as the goddess of vitality.' The High Priest spoke from behind. 'If I can have your attention, my Prince.' The old man stood with his head bowed and hands behind his back.

'As you can see, there are five temples around us,' Epolus looked around and noticed the giant white structures surrounding them. The one behind him stood twice as tall as the others while the one to the west was the smallest.

'In the north,' the High Priest started, 'and the largest, is the house of Vivifica, to the west and east are the houses of her

father and mother, Oorine and Elayla, and to the south reside her children, Haineth and Rigayla.'

'What about her brother?' Epolus asked eyes scanning the temples at the distance.

'Ah,' the old man uttered uncomfortably, 'My Prince has done some reading. Perdyr, Vivifica's brother was cursed for deceiving and was cast into the darkness. The First Priests considered him unworthy of acknowledgement, let alone worship.'

'So he's dead?' Epolus asked as he started along the High Priest towards Vivifica's temple.

'He's as dead as the Goddess is alive, my Prince,' the High Priest laughed softly, 'in that we don't know, but we do believe.'

'That he's dead?'

'... and Vivifica walks among us.' replied the High Priest.

'Alright,' the prince nodded to himself. 'Your Piety, why is the father's house so much smaller than the others?'

The High Priest smiled at the young prince. 'Oorine, my Prince, Vivifica's father, exiled Vivifica from her homeland for impious reasons. Vivifica wandered in the dark skies for eons before discovering DieTerra. We worship him because whatever the motivations for his actions may have been, he led the goddess of light to our world, and for that we are grateful.'

They stopped in front of the curved white steps leading up to the entrance of the north temple. Epolus hadn't noticed from the distance but the steps were wide enough for five dozen men to walk abreast. He estimated there to be over fifty steps to the top.

'We are right on time to catch the great bath.' The High Priest started up the stairs.

'The great bath?' Epolus asked.

'Every day we bathe the goddess twice, after sunrise and before sunset.'

Epolus motioned Sofelan to walk beside him as they climbed the stairs and the High Priest talked about the building of the temple and how at the time there was no settlement for miles in any direction. '.. They travelled twenty miles every day...'

‘Has the king’s party arrived?’ Epolus whispered in Sofelan’s ear.

‘I’ll find out, my Prince,’ Sofelan bowed and turned around. He took one of the royal guards with him and descended the stairs with haste.

Epolus saw him talk to the guard who was nodding furiously. Sofelan patted the guard’s shoulder sending him running down the pavement towards the square with the fountain. He watched him go for a while before climbing the stairs to join the royal company which was at the temple’s entrance now.

Through the gate, Epolus saw that the inside of the giant temple was crowded with people packed together; their backs towards him, hands held high and palms facing the sky. Their chants were low reverberating hums in a near unison.

Across the sea of people he saw what he assumed were the white shins of the famous idol. Taller than the tallest pillars, the marble legs rose out of Epolus’ view. The sounds of Fican chants echoed in the hall and poured out the gateway.

‘Helae Vivifica, samae Vivifica.’

‘Hear us Vivifica, bless us Vivifica,’ the High Priest translated, ‘this way, my Prince.’ He gestured for Epolus to walk beside him.

The High Priest began skirting the temple. The chants grew fainter as they moved away from the gate till they were almost inaudible. The soldiers clanked in their armors and Drereth’s knives chimed on her hips, not far behind Epolus.

Another gate appeared ahead, this one smaller and closed, with two acolytes waiting by it. On the High Priest’s signal they swung the door open and the chants poured out once again.

Epolus spotted the altar not far from the gate and above it stood two giant feet. The marble calves gleamed in the setting sun, with a shade of the sky. Sofelan craned his neck in trying to get a look at the idol’s head.

‘Almost two hundred feet,’ the High Priest was smiling at him. ‘You’ll get a better view during the climb,’ he added before gesturing the party to follow him and pacing ahead.

Epolus walked behind him with Sofelan by his side and the rest of the party on their tail.

From the gate they had just entered from, young acolytes in rows of four marched in with flaming torches over twice their height. They strode towards the hall's walls with the tall torches bobbing over their heads. The boys stopped in front of the massive metal lamps.

Shaped like two slender hands holding a wide saucer, the lamps were positioned high on the walls. From their shine, Epolus assumed that they were made from a silver alloy.

Like dancers repeating their routine, the acolytes raised their torches higher and plunged the flames into the lamps' saucers in one synchronized motion. Within seconds, big flames rose in the saucers, painting the marble hall in an orange glow.

'There are three hundred and seventy one steps, my Prince,' the old priest announced as they arrived at the staircase.

The stone stairway spiraled along the idols back all the way up to the head. The steps were wide and low which reduced the fatigue of climbing for Sofelan, if only a little.

Upon reaching the knees he noticed that the idol wore a ring on her left thigh. Shorter on the left and longer on the right, a triangular marble skirt draped the idol's waist barely serving its purpose. The round buttocks shone in varying tinges of orange and yellow, from the lamps below.

Not able to reign in his curiosity Sofelan asked, 'why is she so... exposed?'

The High Priest chuckled at the question. 'Clothes were an accessory not a necessity when Vivi descended to the lands, my Lord.' He moved his hand slowly, gesturing towards the marble idol. 'This is how she walked among us. This is how we worship her.'

The old man's voice was heavy with what Sofelan thought was pride. He looked at Epolus who nodded seriously by his side but had his eyes firmly affixed on the idol's behind. Epolus couldn't help but feel a slight tightness in his slacks as they approached the waist of the magnificent maiden, slender and curved.

Vivifica wore a thin marble chain around her midriff. Her right hand was by her side, palm facing outward and fingers pointing to the ground. She held up her left hand in a blessing gesture. The idol had nothing but garlands of fresh flowers covering her bust, though Epolus could still make out the smooth mounds peeking out from the sides.

Her long marble hair flowed down along her right shoulder, carved to look wet from a fresh bath. Her head, on which she wore a crown of stone flowers decorated with massive gems and crystals, rested atop her long swan-like neck.

The staircase led them to a wide platform directly over the idol's head. The High Priest stepped onto it followed by the Prince and his royal party. Circling a hole in the middle of the platform, were other priests and acolytes who bowed at the group's arrival.

Tall containers with massive handlebars lined the sides of the square platform. Sofelan saw a wide window in the ceiling, across from the idol's face. The red sun kissed the horizon behind the distant shape of Tim Raug.

'Vivi keeps a watch from that window,' the High Priest spoke, staring out the window himself.

'A watch?' Epolus asked, curious.

'A watch for her brother,' the High Priest replied, 'half out of love, half out of fear.'

'Why in that direction?' Epolus' voice was stiff.

'Because that's where he'll come from,' the priest smiled an old smile, 'shall we begin?'

The High Priest clapped his hands twice and the acolytes and priests standing around them acquired immediate momentum. They lifted the tall urns from the handles and one after the other emptied them in the hole on the floor. The contents of the pots washed over the idol's head and dripped down her massive marble body.

Honey, powdered sugar, followed by mead, fruit wine and a final batch of fresh scented water, bathed the goddess that evening.



Vosbri

CHAPTER FIVE

Wrell Wilds, Entral The Ingens

Aermes kicked dirt into the blazing fire to bring it down. It was a few hours past midnight and the woods were silent as a grave. Though they were much thicker and more populated than Brulf woodland, nothing here dared to make a sound in the night lest it be hunted.

They had traveled for over ten hours since noon, making only short stops to refresh and eat. Auda had gone for a bath to a lake they passed a few hours back; which was easily over a hundred miles away, but she promised to be back soon. She had taken off her armor and left it by the fire, where the flames danced across the metal in twisting shapes.

Auda's armor was unlike one Aermes had ever seen. He picked it up to examine it again. The armor consisted of a total of six parts, significantly less than a standard knight's armor. These included a helm and metal casts for the upper body, arms and legs.

Instead of having a separate gauntlet, armbrace and couter for the arm, she had one metal cast from the finger tips to the armpits that was hinged at the elbow. She would place it over her arm and strap it from behind.

Once affixed, she would make the metal flow and close the opening on the backside, thus completely armoring her arm.

The other parts worked similarly. One cast covered the upper body from shoulders to pelvis and the others covered the legs from pelvis to boots, all of which were strapped from behind.

Once everything, including the helm, was on, Auda would make the metals flow and close all the open spaces, hence making herself invulnerable against weapons.

The only opening was the horizontal slit on her helm's visor meant for her to see. Aermes turned the armor in his hand. The metal, though looked like steel, was much lighter.

Aermes stood up with a start when he heard sharp rustling sounds from a distance. Carrying a strong breeze with her, Auda flew in the clearing. Aermes saw her eyes glow in the warm light of the small fire as she sped closer.

She dropped herself beside him and seeing his defensive stance smiled and spoke gaily. 'Oh it's just me, love.' Then suddenly becoming aware, she bit her tongue and added, with a bowed head. 'I'm sorry, my Lord... it just slipped out.'

Aermes laughed at the quick transition. 'It's quite alright,' he said, waving his hand. 'Nothing worth apologizing for. In fact, I wouldn't mind if it slipped out more often.' He saw Auda's face flush from the neck up causing her to look away. Aermes' smile grew wider.

'How much did we travel today?' He spoke diverting her attention. 'Must have been over three hundred miles.' He sat back down in his spot, facing the fire.

'It was over four hundred miles, I think,' Auda answered sitting down, still not looking in his direction.

'Which way is Ren?' Aermes asked.

Auda's body had absorbed the Ximiyaliq over a year ago, leaving no mark on the skin. So unlike Aermes' Yadroliq, her stone didn't physically guide her but gave her mind a sense of the direction.

'Still east,' Auda replied, her eyes lost in the flames. She turned her head following the flames' dance. Her golden hair were wet which made them seem almost dark in the night. She wore black breeches with long boots, a loose white shirt with a green corset peeking from inside. 'She has not been moving since yesterday morni-'

Auda abruptly straightened up and perked her head, like an animal listening for a sound.

'What happened?' Aermes asked, uncertainly.

‘Someone is close by,’ Auda replied; eyes rolled to the corners as if trying hard to hear something. ‘There is one. A man. He’s wounded. He’s bleeding profusely.’ She reported while watching him with expectant eyes of a child waiting for an order.

Aermes was a little startled by the sudden information and didn’t know what to do with it. ‘Can you help him?’ he asked her, debating in his head if they should leave the man be or risk revealing themselves.

Auda gave a brisk nod. ‘I can stop his bleeding.’ She declared with confidence. ‘I’ll know what to do if I see him.’

Aermes fingered the stubble that had grown on his face. ‘Do you think we should go?’ He asked her.

‘I’ll do as you *command*.’ She stated.

A laugh nearly escaped Aermes’ mouth but noticing the serious expression on Auda’s face, he held it back. ‘I’m not your lord, Auda.’ He said in a doting voice. ‘Tell me what you think... For instance, I don’t believe there is any harm if we go see this man.’ Thinking to himself he added. ‘Even if something does go wrong, we’re more than capable of taking care of ourselves.’

‘I think so too,’ Auda said nodding repeatedly. ‘We should hurry, he won’t make it for long.’

‘Let’s go then,’ Aermes said getting up. ‘Will you be wearing your armor?’ He asked picking up his bag and cloak.

‘It will only take me a moment.’

Auda was already fastening the metal cast on her left leg.

Aermes smiled and swung his cloak over his back. He locked the gold chain in its socket, securing the cloak on his shoulders. He had put his vest back on since it had grown colder. Kyrin had only packed him black clothing, which he thought was pretty clever; it was the color of the night.

Aermes looked over to Auda who was fastening the metal cast on her left arm now; the final piece not counting the helm. Once she was finished she brought her hands by her side and the metal armor began to melt and close the gaps on the back.

Virtually in an instant, the metal had covered her entirely and shrunk closer to her body forming a second skin of steel. She bent down to pick up her helm with dexterity alien to an armor

wearer. Holding her hair on top, she put on her helm. Which, after coming on, flowed down to meet the rest of the armor; hence closing the final opening on her neck.

Aermes finished tightening the strap of his backpack when Auda called out in an echoing voice from the helm. 'We can walk.' Her visor melted away revealing her face.

'We can walk. He's only a few yards away.' She repeated. The metal flowed back forming the visor and hiding her face once again leaving only a slit for vision.

'Alright,' Aermes spoke, releasing the bag's strap. 'Which way?' He turned towards her.

'That way!' She pointed to the trees on his right while picking up her bag from the ground, again with ease. Odd for someone wearing a suit of metal.

Aermes began to walk in the direction Auda pointed while she caught up with him, flying above the ground.

'I thought we were walking,' Aermes said with a hint of sarcasm and a raised eyebrow.

Auda's helm melted away revealing her face as she giggled softly, seeming pleased with her actions. 'No, *you're* walking.' She spoke frivolously. 'I can do *this*.' She pointed down at her feet that were hovering off the ground, silently.

Aermes let out a laugh, pleased to find her back to her usual self.

After a few minutes of walking, he noted that Auda was humming a soft tune. It seemed familiar but he couldn't quite place the song. It sounded like a distant memory. A good one. However, he didn't ask her, because that would have meant interrupting her, which he didn't want to do.

Aermes' hand subconsciously went to his chest to feel the Yadroliq. It was now nearly buried in his skin in all entirety, with just a small part of its top, wide as a fingernail, exposed. He couldn't feel the dome shape under his skin as it seemed to have descended into his chest. Aermes found himself trying to construe how the Yadroliq could have passed through his rib-cage.

Lost in his thoughts, his eyes started to move about and sooner than not they landed on Auda and his mind went silent.

There was no moonlight, but Auda was clear to him as the dawn. He saw her fair face glow with a faint light in her open helm, while a long strand of golden hair flapped to its side.

His eyes caught a tree branch swaying in the wind and the green of the leaves was easy to perceive. Aermes looked around and the forest seemed lucid to him; lit by a blueish light. He could not understand what was happening.

He turned back to Auda as she began humming at a higher note. He saw her eyes clearer than the day. Blue as the summer sky, her irises, had a ring of indigo around them.

'We are almost...' Auda turned to Aermes and found him watching her. He broke his gaze instantly.

'Aermes?' He lifted his head to look at her. 'What's wrong with your eyes?'

The unexpected question threw him off. 'What do you mean?' He managed to mutter.

'They are glowing... golden.' Auda said her own eyes widened with shock. 'It's scary.' She stared at him.

Aermes turned his sight down and he could see the ground clearly in a blueish hue; the dirt, the tiny stones, patches of green-brown grass. 'I haven't got the slightest clue.'

He rubbed his closed eyes, then slowly opened them to the forest ahead. A dark shape rested against a tree at a distance. 'Is that him?'

'Where? I don't see anything.' Auda tried to look in the direction Aermes was pointing. 'We are close...'

'Yes! I see him.' Aermes spoke. 'He's about twenty yards straight ahead.'

'Twenty yards?' Auda exclaimed. 'I can barely see till five.' She squinted, trying to make out the dark shapes but let out a disappointed sigh at her incapability.

Aermes saw the man clearer now, sitting a pool of darkness. The blood didn't look red to him for some reason.

'Let's hurry!' He said, running the last few yards, with Auda by his side, flying faster.

The thin man was slumped over, with his neck hanging to the side, almost lifeless. Aermes turned to Auda who had dropped herself to the ground beside the man. 'Is he...?'

'No, he's still alive,' Auda spoke with confidence. 'I'm going to stop his bleeding.'

Aermes bent down in front of the man to take a look at his face. The man's skin was pale and he appeared abnormally petite. He looked at the man's long thin arms and stick like fingers. *Miatagarri*.

'Hey! Are you awake?' Aermes called out to him.

His eyes went to the man's clothes. The material was too rich to be anything that a farm worker or a common townsman would wear.

A uniform. Aermes thought who the miatagarri might be working for, when his eyes were caught by a symbol sewn on his shirt. It was drenched in blood but Aermes could easily recognize two spears making a cross over a white mountain. *The New Union*.

'That should do it,' Auda claimed softly, standing next to him.

The miatagarri took a sharp inhale that startled Aermes and blinked his eyes open. He straightened his neck, confused at his sudden consciousness and found Aermes looking right at him. Alarmed he pushed himself back, not realizing his back was against a tree.

'Calm down, we are friends,' Aermes spoke in a gentle voice. 'She has stopped your bleeding.' He said pointing up at Auda, who stood at his side.

The miatagarri hastily touched places on his arms, stomach and back; still reeling from something, he stared back at Aermes, face wrought with confusion.

'My name is Aermes Dakians and this is Lady Auda Skirri.'

He motioned his hand towards Auda who glared at him, certainly not comfortable with sharing her family name. Aermes closed his eyes and gave her a calm, reassuring nod. *Seek help from allies, you know who they are.*

'You are a soldier of the New Union?'

The miatagarri now stared at them with more disbelief than confusion. 'Lord Dakians and Lady Skirri?' He looked at Aermes

with astonishment, then Auda. 'I am Cober, my Lord.' He addressed Aermes. 'Yes, my Lord. I fight for the New Union.' He said calming down, returning to his senses.

Suddenly, his eyes went wide as if remembering a forgotten horror. 'My Lord. Save her. You must. Lady Doi. My Lord, the Widowmaker. He'll take her to Caelum. They'll kill her.' He started to blurt in a muddled voice, having a fit of panic.

Aermes put a hand on his shoulder. 'Calm down, Cober.' He spoke in a considerate voice. 'Tell me slowly, what happened.'

Auda bent down in an instant. 'You said the Widowmaker, didn't you? And what happened to Ren? Where is she?' She suddenly sounded desperate and flustered.

Cober took a deep breath, calming himself. 'Yes, my Lady. Lady Doi arrived at our base last morning, with her sister. We had orders from the western headquarter to host her and arrange her travels to Dinso. We were going to leave for Perlac tomorrow morning. But...' He hung his head and stared at the ground.

'Go on!' Auda urged.

'We were attacked by a Peacekeeper unit of over a hundred soldiers led by the Widowmaker and a Tauri appeaser. They slaughtered everyone, even commander Bast. I somehow escaped my pursuers by *bending* them.' He kept looking down. 'They have captured Lady Doi and her sister. They'll set out with them for Caelum in the morning.' His voice was thick with regret.

'The Widowmaker has caught Ren. And they're with an appeaser?' A terrified Auda muttered under her breath. 'This sounds bad...' She slowly shook her head sideways.

'Who is the Widowmaker?' Aermes turned to Auda not completely following.

She glanced at Cober who was still focused on the ground then turned to Aermes. 'He is a Lieutenant General of the Peacekeepers, one of the worst at that. He has been known to slaughter entire villages, killing indiscriminately.' She spoke, her voice tense with anger. 'He fights with a *sok balga*, a naono tremor-hammer, built under special orders of the Council.'

‘He brought down our base with that, my Lady.’ Cober spoke, looking up, his eyes wet with tears. ‘We couldn’t stand against him.

‘Save, Lady Doi. Please my Lady, my Lord, you must.’ The miatagarri kneeled and bowed, with his forehead touching the ground.

Aermes lifted him up by his shoulders. ‘And do that we will.’

He stood up followed by Auda. Cober also staggered to his feet, leaning onto the tree for support. He glimpsed at Auda and then Aermes.

‘We will deliver her, my friend. I promise.’ Aermes put an arm around the soldier and smiled. ‘You take care of yourself.’

Cober gave a stiff nod. ‘A village is only a few miles south, my Lord. I should be able to get there in a few hours.’ He turned to Auda and bowed deeply, nearly down to his waist. ‘I thank you for this life, my Lady.’

Auda stood straight and the noble’s voice came out. ‘It was my duty.’ She patted his shoulder. ‘Now get to that village, you’ll need to eat soon to recover.’ She added, sounding like her usual self.

‘Cober...’

‘Yes, my Lord?’

‘Remember to take off your uniform,’ Aermes warned. ‘You know how common folk look upon the New Union.’

‘Yes, my Lord,’ Cober hung his head in despair.

‘So then, we’ll be leaving Cober,’ Aermes said and gave him a playful pat on the back.

Cober straightened up and smiled at them. He bowed once again, not as deep this time. ‘My Lord, my Lady. I was lucky to have met you.’ He turned away and walked into the woods.

Aermes hadn’t noticed before but the woods had gone dark once again. There was no bluish hue. He turned to Auda and she stood, a dark shape next to him. Her features barely visible.

‘Shall we get going?’ Aermes asked her getting into his sprinting stance.

‘*Nit tsu glebben!*’ Shaking her head, she sighed under her breath. ‘They’ll hear us from miles away if you blast in with that technique of yours.’

Aermes straightened up and froze, having no idea of how to react; not unlike a child being called out on his shortcomings.

‘You’re flying with me,’ Auda declared with authority.

‘Sure,’ Aermes mustered speech with a calm demeanor. ‘But, wasn’t *I* supposed to command *you*.’

He couldn’t see it but he knew Auda was flushing under the dark. ‘M-My Lord, I didn’t mean it in that manner. If I have offended...’

‘You know I’m jesting,’ Aermes gave her a jovial clap on the shoulder. ‘Now, how are we going to do this?’

‘First,’ Auda started with almost a giggle. ‘Do you want to ride in the front or the back?’

‘Ah... Front!’ Aermes replied at once as if completely understanding the implication of Auda’s words.

Auda circled Aermes to get behind him facing his back, where she halted. Aermes noted that her helm had closed itself again, signaling she was prepared for a quick flight.

‘Now try to keep your balance,’ Auda warned from over his shoulder. ‘I can hold you, if you like.’ Her voice lacked humor this time and was plain serious.

‘I think I will be fine,’ Aermes tried to sound as confident as one who doesn’t know what to expect could.

With a soft jerk, Aermes caught the ground moving away from him. He was standing in the air the next moment.

‘Now comes the difficult part,’ Auda’s voice didn’t come through the helm.

Aermes felt cold metal on his back through his clothes as Auda’s body pushed against his and they shot forward like lightning. Aermes expected the wind to hit his face but that didn’t happen.

His body felt like it was submerged in a liquid, thicker than water. He looked around and glimpsed at the trees blurring past him. As they began to gain altitude and the ground raced further away. In a blink, they were out of the woods and flying above the canopy.

Aermes looked up at the clear sky. The stars seemed like streaks of light but the moon stayed still. Aermes wondered if he could speak to Auda.

‘Auda?’ He called her out as a test.

‘Yes?’ Her soft voice was clear in his ear. Now that he noticed, there was no sound around them. When he used Atomos Foot, there was plenty of noise, of the loud blasts, the wind in his ear, his rapidly flapping cloak. But flying with Auda, he couldn’t hear a thing. It was as if they were flying over the forest in a glass chamber.

‘What is an appeaser?’ Aermes had been bothered by that word; and since the New Union soldier, Cober, and Auda herself, had appeared to be terrified of it, it made him even more curious.

‘Yes. You wouldn’t know about them, I presume,’ Auda mused almost to herself. ‘There are not many of them around the Ingens. Well, most of them are in the royal cities.’

Aermes felt the chill of her armor on his back. Even through his cloak, vest and shirt he could sense the smoothness of the metal.

Is she pushing against me harder than before? The thought made the hair on the back of Aermes’ neck stand; or was it the cold metal. Regardless, he pushed similar thoughts out of his head and concentrated on Auda’s explanation.

‘The Peacekeepers built the appeasers under the Council’s orders about seven years ago. They are their ultimate weapon. From a distance they appear as large passive high beings, as some kind of gigans, but they lack any form of compassion or consideration for life. Appeasers only follow the commands of their handler, which is usually a high rank Peacekeeper officer,’

‘They were *built*?’ Aermes interjected to make certain Auda didn’t misspeak.

‘Yes,’ Auda reaffirmed. ‘The Council had them built when the New Union began to appear as a threat. They might also be planning to use them against the Overlords. The appeasers were made to counter large forces and even stone-bearers.’

‘They are classified according to their destructive capacity. The weakest is the Proto, then the Tauri and then the top three:

Blue, Red, and the strongest, White. A Proto can take on a troop of about a hundred trained soldiers, while a White wouldn't flinch against an army five hundred thousand strong.'

Aermes thought for a moment, regarding the forest top blurring past below his feet. He had so many questions sprouting in his head. But he decided on not quizzing her to annoyance. 'How do you know so much about appeasers?'

'Well...' Auda began in a melodic voice. 'One of my uncle's brother was involved in fashioning them and we have two Proto appeasers in our castle guard.'

Aermes laughed. He didn't know why. Maybe it was the casual nature of her voice. 'So your family is on pretty good terms with the Council.'

'In a way.' There was no melody this time, only tension. 'According to Cober, the Widowmaker had a Tauri with him. They're strong. Much stronger than a Proto. And they have an elemental power. That will be a problem. As if the Widowmaker wasn't enough.'

Aermes could sense the nervousness in her voice. 'So we have to subjugate the Widowmaker and the Tauri. The troops shouldn't be a problem, right?' He tried sounding confident but ended up sounding unsure.

'Right,' Auda stated flatly. 'But it still might not be enough.'

'What do you mean?' Aermes puzzled, perplexed.

'If they have captured Ren, then they are certainly using *tigwyn*.' Auda paused for a moment, sensing silence from Aermes she added. 'It is a distinct kind of naono metal, constructed by the Peacekeepers for the sole purpose of incapacitating stone-bearers. Once shackled with *tigwyn*, the person is unable to wield their stone's power, as it absorbs the stone's pulses.'

'Now, to free someone, any other shackle could be broken, cut or melted, but not *tigwyn*. It is impervious to all kinds of elements and forces. The only way to get it off a person is to unlock the cuffs with its key, which would be in the Widowmaker's possession.'

Aermes gazed at the horizon and noticed the moon had descended across the sky. Dawn was about to set in. He thought

to himself and vowed. 'You can leave acquiring the key to me. I will defeat this Widowmaker.'

'I would expect nothing less from our Lord Dakians.' Auda spoke after several silent seconds.

Aermes smiled to himself, not knowing how he will beat a Peacekeeper Lieutenant General, but elated for having a purpose other than seeking gold in rivers.

Scanning the horizon, he noticed a crumbling structure rising above the trees off at the distance. Aermes was squinting to get a better look at the construction when Auda began to descend.

'Are we here?' Aermes quizzed in an unsure tone.

'Almost.'

Within a moment they flew from the sky to the forest floor like a bird performing a smooth landing. Aermes felt the air around him thin and return to normal as soon as their feet touched the ground. He felt weak in his legs like they were unable to take his weight, but he kept his balance.

Auda stepped beside Aermes and pointed to her right. 'It's just under a mile that way.' She stated with her helm melted back, the faint twilight illumining her face. 'We're going to walk till there.'

'You mean *I am* going to walk.' Aermes laughed.

Auda turned to him and beamed. 'This time I'm going to walk too.'

'Oh?' Aermes sassed teasing her.

'It's because of the appeaser.' The playfulness had drained from her voice. 'I have heard they can sense if a stone-bearer wields their power near them for a certain distance.' Her face held a passive expression.

'So flying in is out of question.' Aermes snickered from nervousness.

'Yes,' Auda replied without turning to him.

Even while walking, Auda possessed cat-like silence. Wearing a full body armor she walked softly enough to make Aermes' footsteps sound like thunderclaps in comparison.

Aermes looked up as the red began to seep into the dark sky, signaling the onset of dawn. Of the day and the battle.

CHAPTER SIX

Ruins of Sewi, Entral The Ingens

The air was rank with the smell of blood and flesh. A pile of blemished bodies laid at the edge of the clearing.

From the looks of it, most of them were from the New Union; with their uniforms stained in blood, some had their heads caved in or missing, while the rest were missing most of their limbs.

There was one Peacekeeper body for every ten of the New Union, however that didn't make the scene any less gory. The pools of blood growing around the bodies shone dark in the faint light of the rising sun.

The clearing was nearly seven hundred yards across, Aermes estimated. He, along with Auda spied from a thicket on a rise, far enough from the clearing to not be spotted.

Stone structures rose from the ground. The highest towered over the bur ashes, dwarfing the others which were anywhere from five to twenty feet tall. From the large bell the size of a small house, which would have been golden at one point, peeking out of its top window, Aermes knew the structure was a bell tower.

The once white buildings, constructed from large stone blocks, were now green from the wild vines and moss growing on them. The construction was distinctly ancient with stone arches over the windows resembling winged vipers and footed serpents.

Something about the structures seemed odd to Aermes which he couldn't put his finger on, until he realized that none of the structures had doorways. They all seemed like towers large and small, but had only balconies and windows around them but no seeming entryway.

'It's just the tops. The rest is buried underneath,' Aermes turned to Auda, a distracted expression on his face. 'Those are just the tops of the buildings. The rest of the city is buried under the ground,' Auda clarified.

'It must be the ancient city of Sewi,' she claimed with awe. 'Numerous groups of excavators went to look for it, to never return. Then about twenty years ago they said the city was lost. I wonder what happened...'

She was now nearly talking to herself, as if reciting from memory. Her eyes traveled from one structure to the other, from balconies to windows; when they landed on the pile of the dead, Auda immediately tore her gaze away from the scene.

Aermes counted there were over seventy bodies in the pile. A group of Peacekeeper soldiers climbed out of a half-buried window of the bell tower, carrying more New Union bodies.

'Leave the rest in there. Let the fuckers rot.' A voice bellowed from afar.

Aermes' gaze traveled to the other end of the clearing, seeking the speaker.

The Peacekeepers had set up camp away from the massacre. There were three white pavilions with myriads of bedrolls spread around them. The owner of the voice sat at the entrance of the largest pavilion with his legs crossed, eating something from a bowl.

Auda followed Aermes' gaze and inhaled sharply, making him look at her. 'That is the Widowmaker!' She said, gaping at Aermes. 'I don't see the appeaser anywhere though.' She added, moving her eyes back to the camp, concern and nervousness clear in her voice.

Aermes turned his focus towards the pavilions and scanned the Widowmaker closely.

The man sat on a stool, hungrily eating from a bowl, wisps of his long red hair dancing in the wind. His pearl white armor, shining in the light, appeared to be otherworldly and unlike anything Aermes was familiar with.

‘Is that some kind of special armor?’ He asked Auda.

Squinting, she spoke in a low voice. ‘Yes, it’s an *ekinsi teri* or second skin; a special armor developed by the Peacekeepers for their high rank officers.’ She turned to Aermes locking on his face. ‘It’s coated with *tigwyn*, hence reducing the impact of direct stone attacks to the body. Additionally, the base is made from *qatan bolat*, one of the hardest known alloys on DieTerra, the same as the appeasers’ skins.’

Aermes thought for a moment and then mused. ‘So if I were to punch his armor...’

‘You wouldn’t do much damage, I assume,’ Auda completed his thought. ‘The *tigwyn* would nullify most of your stone and no one can strike *qatan bolat* with their fist and not have it broken.’

The new information made him anxious, since Aermes planned to rely on the Yadroliq’s brute strength to pull through.

Auda noticed this and added. ‘I could’ve poisoned him but with *tigwyn* I can’t affect his body from this distance.’

Aermes hummed mindlessly as his eyes found the Widowmaker once more.

He noticed a sizeable golden warhammer leaning against the man’s thigh. The head of the hammer was wider at the faces like a two-headed drum while the grip was thick with a silver spiral band running down the golden handle. The man’s white cloak flapped with a passing breeze. On his cloak Aermes saw a symbol that he recognized from his childhood.

The outer circle represents DieTerra while the inner one represents its inhabitants. The diagonal line running through both of them represents the bond between the Peacekeepers and the Council. The line starts at the golden sphere on the top right and ends at the red sphere on the bottom left. The red sphere is the Peacekeepers and hence the golden one is...? Aermes remembered one of his father’s lessons.

A soldier came up to the Widowmaker as he was putting his bowl down and performed a Peacekeeper salute by stomping his right foot while simultaneously thumping his chest with his right fist.

‘Commander Hvok.’ The Widowmaker looked up lazily. ‘Word from Caelum. The *Pilgrim* is expected to arrive in two hours.’ The voices carried over to Aermes across the clearing, easily.

‘Two hours, huh?’ The Widowmaker spoke with visible disinterest. ‘You should start wrapping your shit up then.’

‘Yes, sir!’ The soldier saluted again then marched away.

‘What’s a pilgrim?’ Aermes turned to Auda who was scrutinizing one of the pavilions.

‘A pilgrim?’ She eyed him with confusion. ‘The *Pilgrim*! Where did you hear that?’ Her voice changed from confused to urgent in an instant.

‘That soldier said that the *Pilgrim* would be arriving in two hours.’ Aermes replied calmly despite Auda being evidently distressed by the word itself.

Auda took a sharp inhale turning towards the clearing, concern and fear shadowed her face. ‘Oh this is bad. We have to go in soon.’ She shook her head then returned her eyes to Aermes.

‘*Pilgrim* is one of their sky ships.’ Her eyes were wide and face passive. *Desperation*. Aermes thought. *Sky ship*?

‘We have to get to them before the *Pilgrim* arrives,’ Auda pleaded to an invisible god.

Loud footsteps tore Aermes’ gaze towards the clearing. Through the trees, along with a dozen Peacekeeper soldiers, carrying a buffalo on his shoulder, a large shape walked into the clearing.

The figure, that dwarfed the tallest soldiers around it, was easily over ten feet tall. He wore the characteristic white shirt and red slacks uniform of the Peacekeepers.

Aermes knew already before he asked Auda. ‘Is that the...’

‘Appeaser! Yes,’ Auda completed his question while answering it. The appeaser’s head was bald with the Peacekeeper symbol tattooed on the scalp.

Auda turned to Aermes, her face reflecting determination and desperation together. 'Ren is in that pavilion,' Auda pointed to the one in the middle, next to the larger one. 'I will release Sui first. Considering that's what Ren would want me to do.'

Aermes nodded, intently listening to her.

'But as I don't know where they are keeping Sui, I will have to ask Ren.' She mused focusing on the pavilion she had pointed at earlier. 'Since my using the Ximiyaliq would alert them, I would have to sneak into Ren's pavilion. When I give you the signal, I need you to create a distraction and keep the appeaser and the Widowmaker at bay for at least a minute, by when I should be able to rescue Sui and join you.'

Aermes ran scenarios in his head about how he will keep the Peacekeepers busy while Auda explained her plan further.

'Now, we don't know what elemental ability the appeaser has, being a Tauri. So be on your guard for that. Also remember to keep your punches away from the Widowmaker's armor, since hitting it would be mostly redundant.

'His *sok balga* can generate powerful tremors with its strike, so don't get caught by it.' Auda paused to take a quiet breath and continued. 'Once I have secured Sui, I will return to fight by your side.' She repeated. 'After acquiring the key from the Widowmaker, I will free Ren and we'll book out of here.'

Auda turned towards Aermes with an expectant expression, as if waiting for his approval.

'That sounds like a decent plan,' Aermes mused thoughtfully. 'What will the signal be?'

'You'll know,' she smiled a small smile, at a joke which only she understood.

'So let's head out,' Aermes gestured her to lead the way.

Auda stood up and began to walk down the rise, with Aermes following right behind. They circled the rise and started towards the clearing, taking covert and quiet steps while staying hidden behind the large tree trunks and thick overgrowth.

Auda halted behind a thicket a few yards away from the clearing, waiting for Aermes, who came from behind and stopped by her side.

Auda turned to Aermes, her tightened lips displaying resolve. Aermes put a hand on her back and with a slight nod gestured her to go ahead. She returned a stiff nod and turned away in a crouch to begin circling towards the pavilions. Auda kept behind the trees as she quietly sneaked towards the encampment.

Aermes' gaze returned to the Peacekeepers in the clearing. They were roasting large chunks of meat over a wide fire pit. He searched for the appeaser and found him standing beside the Widowmaker who was now picking his teeth.

The Tauri stood still like a statue, gazing in the distance not looking at anything particular. He was so motionless that Aermes began to believe that the Tauri wasn't even breathing.

'Intrud-,' the sudden scream fell into a muffled silence. Aermes smiled to himself, finally understanding Auda's joke.

With a swift kick to the ground and a deafening blast, Aermes was flying over the Peacekeeper encampment. He could see all eyes fixed on him as he plummeted to the ground. He landed in the middle of a large group of soldiers with a thunderous bellow.

The intense shock wave that emanated from Aermes threw the soldiers around him off their feet.

Bodies of some Peacekeepers smashed against the stone structures and trees, while the others flew away crashing to the ground with loud thuds. In an instant, he had rendered over half the Peacekeeper force unconscious.

Aermes stood up in the center of the large crater that his landing had created.

Amidst the cries of the approaching soldiers, he heard a loud whistle from behind. Aermes turned to see the Widowmaker beaming a toothy smile and striding towards him, with the hammer on his shoulder, alongside the appeaser.

From this distance, the Widowmaker didn't look as threatening as he was supposed to be. He had a fair face with handsome features; other than the long scar that started below

his right eye and went all the way down his cheek, disappearing under the jaw.

In his other hand, he held a marble-white helm that he slowly lowered over his head, covering the sides of his face and nose but leaving his chin and jaw exposed.

Being taller and bigger than most of the soldiers, the Widowmaker didn't look that small walking alongside the appeaser. That being said, the appeaser still stood nearly four feet taller than him. A long strand of red hair tickled the Widowmaker's nose as he leisurely closed the distance between them.

The sound of successive bangs alerted Aermes.

Recognizing the sound as rifle shots he instinctively threw his hands to his sides, closed his eyes and touched upon the Yadroliq pulsating in his chest. With an ear-splitting boom the stone generated a blast wave from his body.

The invisible wave traveled outwards throwing the soldiers in the air once again and ricocheting the bullets it encountered. The extreme force pushed back the Widowmaker, who shielded his face behind his arm but stood his ground. The appeaser however just stood motionless, seemingly unaffected.

'What an unexpected surprise, Lord Dakians,' he called out from the distance. 'I am Lieutenant General Gerond Hvok of the Peacekeepers' seventeenth division. It's nice to finally make your acquaintance.' He added performing a mock bow.

He turned to the appeaser and mused. 'Well if he's here wouldn't that mean the Ox is here too?'

Before he finished the sentence, following a loud bang, Aermes was already flying in front of the appeaser's face with his arm coiled back.

By the time the appeaser moved his oval irises from Hvok to notice the person in front of his face, Aermes planted a heavy blow smack on his brow.

With a thunderclap like blast, the appeaser streaked across the ground, ploughing massive amounts of dirt, as his body raced across the clearing. The giant disappeared into a grove of trees, felling a few on impact, sending birds cawing to the sky.

Aermes also recoiled from the force of the hit, landing on his feet in a crouch. Hvok turned away from the grove where the appeaser disappeared to face Aermes.

‘Magnificent strike, my Lord,’ he admired with deceptively genuine emotion.

‘And let me take this moment to say that you have your father eyes.’ He noted in a causal tone.

Wearing a big smile on his face, Hvok brought down the hammer in a quick swing.

With the grip clutched in his hands, the silver spiral band lengthened immediately closing the small distance between them until the hammer was heading straight down for Aermes’ skull.

Caught by surprise, Aermes instinctively brought his forearm above his head blocking the hammer’s face. The violent shock from the hammer pushed Aermes down to his knees, cracking the ground below him.

Tremors from the hammer continually traveled through his body and pushed Aermes further down, resulting in the ground beneath his feet to collapse, forming a shallow hole around him.

The shocks travelled throughout his body, rattling his bones and rippling his blood. Aermes felt like his insides would fall apart any moment.

Sensing the dire desperation of its bearer, the Yadroliq reflexively sent out a powerful pulse that Aermes subconsciously directed to his forearms aiming at the hammers face.

With a loud bang the hammer flew away, pulling Hvok with it, who landed gracefully at a distance, while Aermes staggered to his feet.

‘Remarkable block, my Lord,’ Hvok avowed from afar. ‘It had Olin written all over it.’

Before Aermes could open his mouth to reply, he heard a thundering noise from the direction where the appeaser was thrown.

Aermes could not believe his eyes for in an instant; with his hands held to the side, the appeaser was flying rapidly in his direction, not far removed from the ground. It took Aermes a

moment to notice that the appeaser's backward facing palms were generating winds to propel the ten foot giant through the air.

The appeaser flew straight up, gaining some height, and then suddenly began to plummet towards Aermes, who jumped out of his way in the nick of time, causing the appeaser to punch the ground instead.

With a deafening thump, the surface beneath the appeaser's fist began to crack as the ground shook intensely, prompting Aermes to almost fall over.

'Come back, Broal,' Hvak called out from behind. 'We still don't know where Lady Skirri might be hiding.'

The appeaser directed his palm towards the ground in front of him and with a heavy gust of wind launched himself in a backward arc, landing beside Hvak.

'See, so Broal here has tremor-knuckles and aerokinetic palms.' He called out to Aermes who was still reeling from the two sudden attacks. 'I just wanted to share that with you.' Aermes looked up at his sudden change of tone.

'I hope you have caught your breath, Lord Dakians,' Hvak flashed him a smile. 'Ready?'

'Go kill him,' Hvak ordered the appeaser who in the next moment was flying headlong towards Aermes. Broal coiled his arm as he neared the boy, ready to strike.

Aermes, stunned at the sight of the giant bulleting towards him, closed his eyes and brought up his forearms in front of his face, to block the blow. Instead of receiving the blow he was ready to counter, Aermes heard a loud clang of metal on metal.

He opened his eyes to see Auda hovering with her back towards him, her sword's blade blocking Broal's massive fist.

Auda's sword quivered under the tremors from the appeaser's knuckles; ripples moved visibly across the metal, but she held firm. She raised her other hand and brought it down in a swift motion.

Broal's body smashed to the ground, following the motion of the hand, splitting the ground around him.

'To me, Broal,' Aermes heard Hvak call out coolly.

Without lifting his head from the ground, followed by the loud whoosh of wind blowing out of his palms, the appeaser flew in a backward arc to the Widowmaker.

Auda hovered to Aermes' side and both of them shared a look of relief and resolve.

'Lady Skirri, you have grown into a nubile young girl,' Hvok boomed from the distance. 'Your mother gave me my most defining feature.' He declared loudly pointing to the scar on his face.

'It wouldn't be too tough to kill you both right here.' Hvok stated with easy confidence of a lion aggressing a goat. 'But I'm a little sleepy and also if I killed you now, I'd deprive myself of a good fight in the future.' He once again beamed his toothy smile.

Auda and Aermes exchanged confused looks.

Hvok fingered around his neck and pulled out a chain with a locket, from underneath his armor. He tugged it free from his neck and hurled it towards Aermes. Swinging his hammer on his shoulder, he turned to walk away, followed by Broal.

Aermes stepped back not knowing what to expect as the chain landed at his feet. He looked at the locket.

A key!

By the time Aermes looked up Hvok and Broal had reached the end of the clearing. 'How did you know my father?' He called out loudly to Hvok.

'Ask that shitfaced Olin.' Hvok shouted back without turning. He lifted his right hand to gesture goodbye as he left the clearing and entered the forest, the giant shadowing behind him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Ruins of Sewi, Entral The Ingens

‘This way.’

Auda, followed by Aermes, hurried into the white pavilion. She clutched the key in her hand, unsure of what had just transpired.

In the center of the pavilion, Ren sat on the floor, cuffed around a large pole that held up the pavilion’s roof. Her hands were visibly pulled to the ground from the weight of the *tigwyn* cuffs.

On hearing footsteps approaching, Ren looked up and saw Auda scuttling towards her. Relief flooded her on the sight of the duend’s face.

‘Is Sui fine? Did you get her?’ She asked when Auda bent in front of her.

‘Yes, she is fine. I will go get her right now.’ Auda replied without looking up from unlocking the cuffs.

She turned the key and followed by a loud clank the cuffs split open. She held Ren by the shoulders and helped her up.

Ren was dressed in a black robe that came to her shins. The sleeves were wide and loose, while the rest of the robe hugged her body snugly. On her waist she wore a red cloth belt that overlapped itself several times securing the robe.

The leather slip-on shoes she wore, also black, were light and comfortable. Her legs were wrapped in a black garment that continued into her shoes. Red ribbons criss-crossed over

the black of her legs, starting from the shoes and disappearing below the robe.

Ren wore her shiny dark hair in a long braid that fell below her waist. A slim golden chain was weaved along the braid which, on its end, held two golden balls. The size of a baby's fists, the balls clinked whenever she moved her head.

She stood a foot shorter than Auda and had the characteristic big eyes of a ninfa with glimmering purple irises; though the lack of pointed ears and a fair skin suggested a mixed lineage.

'Thank you, my Lady,' Ren bowed to Auda stiffly. Aermes noticed that her voice was stern and forced, with a hint of scorn.

'You're welcome, but we're not doing that,' Auda smiled, glancing at Aermes before turning back to Ren. Either she was oblivious of Ren's tone, or chose to ignore it.

'Call me Auda. And that is Lord Aermes Dakians,' Auda gestured to Aermes. 'But he prefers Aermes too.' She turned to him with an innocent face. 'Right?'

Aermes could not help but smile. 'Yes.' He spoke stepping forward. 'Auda, bring Sui and we'll get out of here.'

Auda gave a swift nod to him and a warm smile to Ren before heading out of the pavilion's entrance. The tall cloth door flapped behind her.

A sense of awkwardness washed over Aermes as he found himself alone with Ren.

Olin had told him about both Auda and Ren before he left for Klell Peaks. Though Aermes was looking forward to meeting Auda, he had fretted over his first encounter with Ren. And he had had his reasons for it.

Aermes turned his gaze towards Ren's face to find her staring at him with a grim expression. Her eyes were loathing. He smiled at her, causing her to look away. Circling him, silently, Ren walked towards the back of the pavilion.

Aermes watched her, curious about what she was doing.

Ren appeared to be searching for something among a horde of large trunks. Sighing loudly, she pulled out a large disc shaped

object wrapped in brown rags. She walked over to Aermes while unwrapping the object.

The silver disc, around three feet in diameter, according to Aermes' estimation, looked too big in Ren's small hands. Aermes wondered how she was able to carry it without any seeming effort.

The door of the pavilion flapped causing both Aermes and Ren to look in the direction and find Auda leading a girl by her hand.

'And then he did this, and left.' The girl ruffled her hair with her free hand with Auda focused on her, listening intently.

Aermes saw that Sui was the spitting image of her elder sister. She wore the same kind of robe which was white with colorful embroidered patterns along the sleeves and sides, unlike Ren's solid black.

She wore a black cloth belt that she had wrapped around her waist multiple times. Her long hair were made into an overhead bun, which she had messed up when ruffling her hair. The white garments that wrapped around her legs were held in place by the black ribbons criss-crossing over them.

On seeing her sister, Ren's face and body lost all the stiffness that Aermes had been sensing. She dropped the silver disc on the ground and ran to catch Sui in a hug as her sleeves fluttered rapidly in the air alongside her.

Aermes was expecting the disc to crash loudly to the ground but it didn't.

It made a soft thud upon hitting the dirt. *So it's not too heavy,* was the deduction that came to Aermes' mind. *Maybe it's like Auda's armor.*

The shiny silver was clean enough to show Aermes his reflection. He noticed the disc had a golden cylinder embedded in its center, along the diameter. Nearly a foot in length and two inches in thickness, the cylinder was shaped like a sword's grip.

Around this cylinder, were patterns made from various arrangements of straight parallel lines that bent at different angles or ended at a silver bead. To Aermes, they looked like

tiny silver rivers flowing across a silver plane with a long gold mound in the middle.

‘Gar det bra med deg?’ Ren croaked with tears running down her face as she held her sister.

‘Jeg har det bra.’ Sui nodded then looked up to Auda and smiled. *‘Auda er kjempebra.’*

Auda smiled back, then looked over to Aermes who stood there with a blank face, not understanding the exchange. ‘She said I’m amazing.’ Auda crowed to a confused Aermes.

‘Right?’ She turned back to Sui with a hint of doubt and a raised eyebrow.

‘Yes,’ Ren replied wiping her tears and confirmed with a hint of smile. ‘She said you’re amazing.’

Ren straightened up and walked towards Auda. She took Auda’s hands in hers and looked up to her face. ‘I know we are not doing it, but let me do this just once.’ She bowed and kissed Auda’s hand.

‘Tussen takk, min dame.’ She kept her head down. ‘A thousand thanks, my Lady.’ This time her posture was respectful and her voice heavy with gratitude.

‘It was but my duty.’ Auda admitted with sincerity. ‘I have a sister too. And I would do anything to keep her safe.’

Ren straightened up, letting go of Auda’s hand, but still gazing at her, appreciatively.

‘Besides, we are a family.’ Auda turned to Sui and caressed her face. ‘Which means she is my little sister too.’

Sui let out an ecstatic yelp and caught Auda in a tight embrace who let out a surprised gasp followed by a hearty laugh as she hugged the girl back. Ren stood there smiling faintly.

Aermes was watching the exchange from a distance.

The flow of emotions among the group, made him conscious of his lack of interactions with girls over the past years; so to divert his thoughts he turned his attention to the silver disc on the ground and bent down to examine it closely.

The groups of parallel lines made various shapes. A Z, an F, a square that didn’t close, an L; were some that Aermes was able

to point out immediately. He further noticed that the lines were but fine etchings on the surface of the disc and no two lines ever touched, other than when they met at a silver bead.

Examining the bead closely, Aermes discovered that it was a tiny mound, like a small drop of water on a plate. His eyes soon went to the golden grip embedded in the center. To make it easier to hold, the grip was ribbed all over with minuscule golden mounds. But to him, it appeared to be affixed in the disc. The intricacy of the disc's and grip's design made Aermes confident it was a work of naono craftsmanship.

Remembering his thoughts on the weight of the disc he decided to try and lift it. He noticed a slit in the thickness of the disc that ran along its circumference.

Prodding his fingers in the slit to get a grip of the disc, he began to lift it. Despite using a significant amount of his strength he could lift it only a few inches off the ground.

'What are you doing?' Ren's voice startled him and he stood up in an immediate motion.

The disc hit the ground and made a much louder sound than when Ren had dropped it from her hands. Aermes looked at the disc, rouse with suspicion.

'I was curious as to how heavy it was,' Aermes replied, trying his best not to falter under Ren's fiery glare.

'It weighs *five* stones.' Ren stated flatly.

'Five stones?' Aermes repeated, disbelief thick in his voice. He couldn't comprehend how a small girl could lift that disc with effortless ease.

Ren smiled at him, seemingly reading his thoughts. A smile lacking any sense of friendliness and dripping with detestation. 'Let me show you, my Lord.'

Ren raised her hand and in an eye blink the disc shot to her, and she grabbed it out of the air in a fluid motion.

Auda too was surprised at the sight of this. With a curious voice she asked. 'Is that what the Electroliq does?'

'Yes,' Ren replied, turning to Auda. 'It enables me to control and generate, magnetic and electric fields at will.'

‘You know what that is, don’t you?’ Her voice was thick with loathing as she addressed Aermes.

‘Yes, I do,’ he replied coolly, not shaken by her rudeness. Instead he was expecting that, since Olin had cautioned him.

But Auda didn’t seem to approve, as red anger crept on her fair, perfect face.

‘Ren,’ she snapped. ‘You don’t have to address him as My Lord but he is your *Wolf*, nonetheless.’ Auda kept her voice flat, though the anger in it was thick enough to cut with a knife. ‘I will see him treated with respect.’

Ren bowed her head, looking small, like a kitten being scolded. She let the disc fall to her side and this time it didn’t make any sound whatsoever.

‘Do you understand, Ren?’ Auda sounded enraged and impatient.

‘Yes, my Lady.’ She turned to Aermes and bowed once again, this time with evident sincerity.

‘I apologize for my ungrateful and offensive behavior, my Lord.’ Aermes glanced at Auda who stood there with her hands on her waist, observing Ren. ‘I hope you find it in your heart to forgive me.’

Aermes walked over to her and patted the ninf’s back lightly. ‘Its fine, Ren. I understand.’ Ren straightened herself, looking at him, she saw him smiling down. ‘And it’s Aermes.’

Ren was surprised by the man’s composure and relaxed persona. But she didn’t let it show on her face.

‘Thank you, Aermes.’ She said, turning her gaze to the ground.

‘Alright!’ Auda called from behind with a loud clap. ‘Let’s get moving then.’ She was already her usual self, aglow with an unknown joy.

‘Auda, our bags?’ Aermes asked.

‘Oh, I got them.’ She replied, turning towards the entrance. ‘I’ve kept them outside.’

Aermes nodded and began to follow Auda to the door when Sui held his hand. ‘Aermes?’ She uttered his name with a sweetness that made him nearly shudder.

Now that he saw her up close, Sui was actually much different than her sister.

Unlike Ren, her face was genial with big innocent eyes and skin that had a slight blueish hue of the mountain ninfas. She didn't have purple irises like Ren but a thin blue ring around her dark brown irises. To Aermes, she didn't look much younger than her sister.

'I think we should wear disguises,' she spoke with a melodious voice not unlike that of Auda as she let go of his hand.

'Disguises?' Aermes couldn't grasp the girl's intention.

'That's a good suggestion, Sui,' Ren called from behind, stepping beside Aermes. 'Perlac is a big port, one of the biggest on the Ingen's eastern coast. It is safe to assume there might be Peacekeeper patrols there.'

Realization washed upon Aermes, and he felt ashamed that it came so late. 'Yes, hiding our identity is a smart approach.'

'We should be able to find some cloaks here,' Auda suggested, walking back to join the group.

'Yes.' Aermes agreed. 'Let's look for some cloaks for you all.' Pulling his cloak's hood over his head, he added, 'I'm already quite inconspicuous.'

CHAPTER EIGHT

Perlac, Entral The Ingens

‘So you’re saying he spoke to you and you are telling me this now?’

Four hooded figures walked down the paved streets of the port as the two smaller ones conversed. People walked up and down the busy pavement in brisk fashion and no one appeared to be even glancing at them.

It was a few hours after sunset and the streets were lit with tall street lamps. Electricity was rare in the Ingens except for the royal cities, and clearly Perlac was not one of those; so here they used oil, Aermes noted.

‘I thought you’d get angry,’ Sui replied in Ninfean.

‘And what do you think I am now?’

Sui stared ahead, scared and guilty; she hated agitating her sister.

‘Tell me again, what were you doing running about, when Auda told you to hide?’ Ren asked, annoyance clear in her voice.

‘There was a squirrel,’ Sui replied meekly, with her head down, knowing full well what saying that would mean.

‘There was a squirrel?’ Ren repeated loudly, aghast at Sui’s reply.

Auda let out a laugh, which made Ren glare at her. The sound was gratifying and honey like to the ears and had Aermes smiling to himself.

Unlike Auda, he didn't speak a word of Ninfear, so since Ren began rebuking Sui about an hour ago, Aermes had been listening to their sweet sounding language and sightseeing Perlac. He had never heard Ninfear been spoken before. To him, the language sounded tuneful, almost musical, even when it was being used to scold someone.

'It's not funny, Auda.' Ren uttered in Terran, causing Aermes to look up.

Auda turned towards Ren and could feel her glare from under the dark hood. She smiled and put a hand on her shoulder. 'She's fine, Ren, nothing happened. Besides the poor girl is about to break into tears.'

Ren turned to look at Sui walking alongside her. 'That's not what I am concerned with, Auda.' She spoke, sounding much calmer than earlier. 'It's that she does it every time. She has no regard for other's or her own safety.'

'It's alright,' Auda promised in a soothing voice. 'She has learned her lesson.' She added dotingly.

Ren sighed loudly, seemingly not wanting to argue with Auda anymore. She put her hand on Sui's head, patting her affectionately.

'How far is the harbor?' Auda complained to Aermes. 'We have been walking for over three hours.'

'We passed a sign few yards back,' Aermes answered, turning slightly towards her, though the hoods made it difficult to see her face. 'It should be around that corner.' He pointed to a tall structure at the distance.

Auda sighed and dropped her shoulders in a show of despair and exhaustion, and Aermes returned his gaze to the road and the constructions looming over it.

Percal was a large city, as big as Thaldea, Aermes estimated. Made of white square shaped bricks, the structures in Percal were all over three storey tall, some towering up to six storeys.

The buildings boasted of smooth marble columns and beautiful arched doorways and windows. Aermes gazed above him and noticed semicircle shaped balconies jutting out of the walls.

A lot of the windows were fitted with glasses stained in multiple colors that cast dancing shadows in the lamplight, contrasting the white of the walls.

Aermes assumed they were walking in a residential district since he hadn't seen any shops for a while and he marked clothes hanging on wires outside windows and in balconies. There were no carts loaded with goods being pulled on the road; just waves of people rushing up and down. Once in a while though, a horse or a carriage would pass, parting the crowd for a few moments.

Aermes nudged Auda, reminding her to turn ahead, who in turn passed the message to Ren and Sui. As they approached the turn Aermes read the board hanging on the street light. Under a green arrow pointing left, it read: *Perlac Harbor*.

The group turned the corner as two soldiers in the Peacekeeper white and reds shuffled by them. From the looks of it, Aermes assumed they had been drinking.

As he began to scope the surroundings, he noticed a lot more Peacekeepers in the crowd. Some were just walking about, while others stood at their spots observing the people walking past them.

The buildings on the sides became shorter and thinned as the pleasant smelling city began to disappear. Smells of fish, wood and spices now hung heavy in the air. The structures by the road turned from white multi storey buildings to single and double storey wooden shacks and stalls. However the road, pavement and street lights remained the same.

Ships' horns pierced the atmosphere with loud honks from time to time, signaling their approach or departure.

A shape moving in the crowd caught Aermes' eye. He glanced to the right to see a Peacekeeper soldier rushing through the crowd straight to them. Though hooded cloaks were not an uncommon sight in the Ingens, Aermes hadn't seen anyone in Perlac wearing one, other than them.

He gave Auda a soft poke with his elbow and gestured towards the Peacekeeper with his head. 'Peacekeeper approaching. From the right.' He whispered so as to not alert Ren and Sui.

Auda glanced to her right without turning her head and gave a small nod of understanding. Aermes noticed that keeping her hand on her side, Auda lifted her forefinger and middle finger forming a V.

In a quick motion, she crossed the two fingers by bringing the forefinger under the middle finger.

This was accompanied by a loud gasp from the approaching Peacekeeper followed by a muted thud of his body hitting the ground. A woman's scream along with few loud exclamations rose when the Peacekeeper collapsed in the middle of the road.

Unaware, Ren and Sui turned to glance at the commotion but were ushered ahead by Auda.

Taking advantage of the confusion, Aermes led them through the crowd to the harbor. They passed by many Peacekeepers who didn't offer them a glance but hurried through the crowd towards the sudden disturbance.

The crowd thinned as the group approached the harbor, the entrance of which was marked by a giant wooden structure.

Two large wooden columns, erected on either sides of the entry way, held a horizontal log between them, twenty feet off the ground. A blue oval sign hung from the log with a lamp shining on it. *Perlac Harbor*, the sign was big enough to be read from the distance.

Aermes noticed goods being carried about on backs and carts, and passengers, with their trunks and bags, heading in and out of the harbor gate. An approaching horse cart caused the four of them to step off the road.

When they resumed into the harbor, Aermes sighted a board, lit by two small lamps, approaching on their left. He motioned for the rest to stop as he went up to the board to read it.

The board was divided into four columns. The first showed the number of the berth where the ship in column two was docked. The third showed the type of ship: passenger, merchant, fishing etc.; while the fourth showed the ship's destination. Each row was written in either green, red or white chalk.

After a bit of searching Aermes found it written on the board's bottom right corner in green, red and white chalk respectively: *Departs Today. Departs Tomorrow. Tentative (inquire at berth).*

Aermes found what he was looking for after a while of scrutinizing the long list. Written with green chalk the row read: *32. Gold Falcon. Passenger. Har'lach, Dinso.*

Satisfied with himself, Aermes trotted to the others, who he found were talking in soft whispers. Seeing him approach, they stopped in the middle of their conversation and turned to Aermes, who began as soon as he was close enough.

'There is a ship which leaves for Har'lach tonight.'

'Just what we needed,' Auda smiled at the girls. 'After you, Aermes,' she gestured for him to lead the way.

Aermes nodded and began down the wooden harbor. 'Let me do the talking,' he suggested over his shoulders to the ladies behind him.

Approaching the end of the path, they saw a board hanging from a street lamp in the middle of the road. The two arrows painted on it, pointed to left and right; under them it read: *1-40 and 41-80.*

Aermes turned left, with the other following him close behind. He saw a small board at his waist height that read *40* nearing them. There was no ship docked at the berth.

As they continued down the path, they saw two tripple masted merchant ships, one hundred oar galley with the Council's symbol painted on the hull and one small steam boat, which seemed to be used for fishing.

They could easily make out their ship from the distance. The double masted steamer was large enough to dwarf the largest ships around it, with its shorter mast taller than the longest ship in its vicinity.

The gold color of the steamer had begun to flake and had peeled off from the sides. The main deck had two storeys of cabins built on it; Aermes speculated from the two parallel rows of windows. Above the roof of the cabins, he could see the captain's cabin and a large smoke stack behind it.

There was a giant stern wheel on the steamship's side which Aermes assumed would be present on the ship's other side too. He saw the familiar red strip with black roses of the Flamells painted on the side of the ship. On the hull, it read in big golden letters: *Gold Falcon*.

Aermes approached the old man who sat on a stool beside the ramp which led to the steamer's main deck. The scrawny ticketer regarded the approaching group with lazy eyes. Upon nearing the man, Aermes took off his hood and pushed his hair back from his face.

'Passage to Har'lach.'

'Four people,' the man grumbled. 'Eight silver caeneers.'

'I'd like a large private cabin.'

The old ticketer scoffed with disdain. 'Two golden caeneers.' He gazed at Aermes' face expecting to see shock or anger.

But Aermes quietly reached into his pocket and brought out a purple silk pouch. He unlaced it and put his hand in, fetching two gold coins. He pressed the coins in the amazed ticketer's palm.

'You mercenaries, boy?' He asked noticing the shape of Auda's long sword under the cloak and misidentifying Ren's disc as a shield under hers. 'Going to admit yourself to the Forest King's service?' He jeered as he rummaged for something in his pocket. He brought out a metal key and extended it towards Aermes.

'Nothing of that sort,' Aermes smiled taking the key from the old man's hand.

'Room twenty-eight. On the main deck. It big enough for six men.'

Aermes nodded and gestured the ladies to go ahead. He put his hand in the pouch and brought out two coins.

He pressed them into the old man's palm before walking away. 'Here is for forgetting about this encounter.'

The ticketer sat there baffled, staring at the two silver caeneers in his hand as Aermes followed the others onto the deck of the *Gold Falcon*.

CHAPTER NINE

The Silence Vameej Ocean

Ren stood on the second storey deck, leaning over the railing and staring off into the darkness. There were twenty odd people other than her on the deck, which still made it seem nearly empty because of its large size. Auda and Sui sat with Aermes, on a bench a few yards away.

Aermes had been throwing up for the last two days they had been on the ship. Ren found it funny but tried not to laugh at his misery or she might incur another scolding from Auda. Though she didn't care much for Aermes, she felt indebted to the duend woman and respected her.

Even Auda's account of how Aermes held back the appeaser and the Widowmaker, so that she could rescue Sui, didn't paint him in a brighter light in Ren's eyes. She couldn't help but feel disdain every time she looked upon him.

It was because Ren knew men. She knew their lecherous minds and the debauched fantasies they harbored in them. Though he acted different, she knew in the end he was more of the same; and soon he would show his true colors, she knew.

Ren could hear the stern wheels whirring in the water, slapping loudly against the ocean, propelling the steamship en route. The masts of the steamer had been unfurled since dusk, when the wind had stopped blowing.

Overhearing the conversations of her fellow passengers, Ren had learned that they had entered a part of the ocean called the Silence. According to the passengers, *the Silence was always moving*, which she found a little hard to understand.

A ship which didn't encounter the Silence on its way across the ocean, might find itself in it on its way back, even if it followed the exact same route.

A woman told stories of ships vanishing in the Silence, along with their passengers, never to be seen again; but the others were quick to dismiss her for stating some old wives' tales as facts.

Ren noticed a thick mist beginning to settle in when she gazed to the sky. And with the mist came a faint smell of rotting fish that grew stronger every passing moment. She covered her nose tightly with the sleeve of her robe.

'What is that smell?'

Ren turned to her left and saw Auda walking towards her with Sui. Aermes lumbered along with them, grazing the railing with his hand to keep his balance.

Ren felt a moment of pity at the man's condition, but the moment passed quickly. Auda and Sui leaned against the railing on either sides of Ren.

'What are we looking for?' Auda joked staring into the darkness.

'A smile, perhaps,' Sui suggested from the other side earning herself a glare from her sister and a laugh from Auda, who patted Ren's back several times.

Aermes arrived staggering and leaned against the railing next to Auda, hanging his head over it. He let out a groan, slowly moving his head from side to side, as if acting out the cause of his sickness.

'What is this smell?' Aermes complained without lifting his head.

'I don't know,' Auda replied softly. 'But I can sense its flowing in from there.' She pointed in a direction slightly right to where they were facing.

'Wow!' Sui exclaimed. 'Auda-storesoster is so amazing.' She sang extending the sound of the last word.

Aermes lifted his head slowly to look in the direction Auda was pointing at and squinted. He straightened his shoulders, standing up, scouting in the direction intently.

‘Are there any islands in the Vameej Ocean?’ Aermes asked Auda still gazing into the darkness. Ren looked up at his face and saw his expression change from curious to that of confusion.

‘Not until Na’ala,’ Auda replied turning to Aermes. ‘But we won’t be going by Na’ala. Why?’

‘I see one over there,’ Aermes pointed in the same direction as Auda’s. ‘It’s not too big...’

Ren along with the others followed Aermes’ gaze but couldn’t see anything other than darkness and mist.

‘How can you see in this dark?’ Sui asked, words jingling to form a melody.

‘I don’t know,’ Aermes admitted. ‘But it’s been happening more and more recently.’

Ren saw his eyes suddenly widen. He turned swiftly and walked towards the captain’s cabin with big unsteady steps.

‘Hey!’ Aermes called out to the deckhand, stationed as the lookout in the crow’s nest above the captain’s cabin. ‘Hey!’ He screamed loud enough for everyone on the deck to turn towards him.

The deckhand poked out his head lazily from above the railing. ‘What?’ He groaned.

‘What’s that thing over there?’ Aermes asked loudly pointing with his hand.

The deckhand stood up, holding the railing, murmuring curses under his breath, as he brought the spyglass to his eye.

Ren turned her gaze in the direction too and could make out a faint mound like shape at a great distance. She looked back up at the deckhand when she heard what sounded like him stifling a gasp.

‘No, no, no, no, no...’ The deckhand began to mutter to himself before he dropped the spyglass and his body began to shake. He held the railing and leaned over, nearly kissing his knees.

‘Captain! Captain!’ The deckhand screamed on top of his lungs, loud enough to lose his voice.

Dressed in white, the captain rushed out of his cabin, unmistakable irritation dripping from his face.

‘What happened?’ He demanded.

The deckhand shuffled to his feet and pointing with a shaky finger, stammered. ‘Hi... Hi... Hilbalea!’

Ren saw as the captain’s eyes widened and his face turned whiter than his uniform. It took him a few breaths to compose himself, immediately after which he began shouting orders to the deck hands.

‘Ring the siren. Lower the boats. Begin evacuation.’

Ren exchanged looks of confusion with the others as a siren began wailing. Panicked passengers dashed across the deck and down the stairs.

With a sudden jerk, the deck quaked below their feet; nearly everyone lost their balance and slammed against the floor.

‘What’s happening?’ Auda turned around and gasped. Her voice was drowned by deafening screams and wails from the people on the deck.

Ren followed her sight to see a gigantic shape beside the ship, dwarfing the steamer.

The dark mound extended on both sides as far as her eyes could see. She saw flocks of cawing birds circling the mound’s high peak.

With another powerful jerk, the ship began to speed sideways towards the mound which got bigger every second and towered over the giant steamer like an infinitely tall dark wall.

The wailing of the siren and the screams of people filled the air when the ocean seemingly gave way and rushed under the mound. The Gold Falcon plunged with the water into darkness.

Ren saw the night sky over them disappear and turn pitch black. The screams grew louder and the ominous siren echoed as the steamer continued to free fall in the darkness.

CHAPTER TEN

The Council Caelum

The soldier rushed through long halls and large rooms, accidentally bumping into people; sometimes tripping himself on the folds of the carpets, but not slowing down.

Some called out to him in annoyed voices when he almost ran into them, some even tried to smack him with whatever they had in their hands, but he was already past them by then. The man made a final turn and began to slow down when he saw the great marble doors in front of him.

With the white doors in sight, the soldier came to a halt.

He put his hands on his knees and heaved, catching his breath. Once his breathing calmed down, he stood straight, fixed his hair and jacket, correcting his uniform and appearance.

He leaned against the giant doors and pushed with all his weight. The doors slowly and silently began to swing open.

The soldier entered the great hall and pushed the doors shut behind him. He marched briskly across the reflecting marble floor towards the room's center.

The great hall shone white all over: white marble walls, white marble floors and a white roof with giant glass chandeliers hanging from it.

The man stopped in front of the huge crescent-shaped table that sat in the center of the hall. Like everything else in the room the table too was made out of finely polished white marble.

The seven elderly men sitting around the table paused their discussion to eye the soldier that had just entered. The soldier marched in the space between the crescent and halted, performing a Peacekeeper salute he bowed.

‘Welcome, Captain Warrin,’ one of the men on the right greeted the soldier. The man’s long white hair fell over his shoulders and down his back; while his beard was long enough to coil over the table before disappearing below it. ‘I hear you have some news for us.’

‘Yes, Father,’ Warrin replied. ‘Lieutenant General’s Tauri called in and reported to us the following.’

Warrin reached into his pocket and brought out a piece of paper. He unfolded it and began.

‘The Wolf and the Ox attacked our camp, taking us by surprise. Every soldier in the camp was slaughtered except General Hvok. They retrieved the Bear and her sister from our possession. The three heads have aligned.’ He lowered the paper and gazed at the men around the table.

The men exchanged looks but didn’t show any signs of concern.

‘Connect me to Prince Epolus, Captain.’ The old man in the middle ordered.

He looked youngest of them all, with a thick head of gray hair and a smooth face that lacked many wrinkles. A scar ran across the man’s face. Starting over his right eyebrow, it ran across his forehead, down the nose and cheek, ending on his left jaw.

‘Yes, Father.’

Warrin rushed to the end of the crescent table and began tapping the panel on the table’s surface with swift fingers. He touched the glowing glyphs in the taught order and a thick, rectangular glass pane began to ascend from the floor in the middle of the crescent.

Warrin reached under the table and fetched a black case, placing it on the table in one smooth practiced motion. Without stopping, he unlatched the lid and lifted it off. Four crystal cubes, shining the colors of the rainbow, sat comfortably on pillows of black silk, inside the box.

Warrin took two cubes in each hand and marched towards the glass pane. He placed the cubes, snugly, into the spaces in the corners of the glass.

A bright flash of light lit the glass pane and within a few moments a face flickered on the glass, facing the man in the middle. The man in the glass with a fiery beard and short amber hair, had his tanned upper body exposed.

‘Are you always this indecent, Prince Epolus?’ The old man asked.

‘Not always,’ the man in the glass joked. ‘Any news?’

‘Yes!’ The old man replied. ‘The heads are on their way to the shrine. I assume you can do something about it.’

Epolus hummed, thinking for a moment, ‘I might be able to.’

‘We hear you have found a way into the shrine,’ the old man prodded.

‘Yes, that and...’ Epolus turned to scan the room. ‘Lorie! Get that blue scroll from my table.’

A petite girl with red curly hair appeared behind the prince. She pulled out the scroll, from a pile on the table, and brought it to him. Handing him the parchment she bowed and backed away.

‘The king has requested at least two Pillars from the shrine,’ Epolus said reading from the scroll. ‘And I’m sure the Master will comply.’ He said looking back up.

‘So it’s settled then,’ the old man leaned back in his chair. ‘We leave Vrinma and the Pillars to you.’



Chunesk

The Nightfall

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Caiar Lake, Smarnion

Dinso

The boy on guard duty woke up with a start upon hearing a low screech, followed by which a flock of squawking birds flew over him. He stood up groggily and squinted at the sky turning orange. Dawn was setting in.

The lake reflected the orange of above and shimmered in the faint light. A soft breeze blew across its surface to the shore, making the boy pull his wool cloak around him tighter.

He noticed the sparkles rolling on the wet grass around him signaling snow fall during the night. The cold froze the boy still in his place as shivers rose under his skin. Another breeze blew white ash over his dark boots, from the now quenched fire pit, a few feet to his right.

The boy turned and began to cross the clearing around the lake, heading for the trees.

Keeping his chest steady, he breathed deep, and directed blood to his legs, warming them slightly. He walked past the small green pavilion, where his friends slept in warmth and comfort. Wrapping his arms tightly around himself, he secured the wool cloak over his body.

He hated guard duty. Hate wasn't a worthy emotion for a herenuer, he knew, but neither was cold a bearable condition. Not in his human form. Not yet, at least.

Tall firs circled the clearing, protecting it from the chilly winds descending from the mountains. The boy plodded on the wet grass, leaving behind the green pavilion and the clearing, pulling freezing air deep in his lungs.

He stopped in front of the first tree that met his eye.

The fir towered to the sky, with tiny droplets on its green leaves glimmering reddish in the first light of the day. Mist and melting flakes of snow covered the forest before him.

Satisfied, the boy nodded to himself and stepped towards the tree, standing at a half arm's length from the trunk. He unwrapped his arms from the cloak and yanked the black doe skin glove off his right hand. With a slow, almost frozen motion, the boy placed his palm on the trunk.

The chill ran through him as a shudder when his flesh touched the cold bark, but he held his composure. He closed his eyes and continued taking steady, long breaths. The boy felt strong pulses emanating from his chest and pumping through his arm, into the tree's trunk.

Warmth slowly flowed in his body through the palm of his hand as the green drained from the leaves. Leaning his head back, the boy watched the now yellowing leaves above him begin to brown and shrivel. The dry, withered leaves fell one by one leaving the branches bare.

The boy brought his gaze to the trunk in front of him, which seemed to be thinning and crumpling under his palm. Beads of sweat ran down his face, and his cheeks reddened from the heat. He pulled his palm off the trunk when he felt his inner clothes begin to soak with sweat.

Wiping the sweat off his forehead, with the sleeve of his coat, the boy scanned the withered fir which stood in front of him. Another screech echoed from the forest, this time closer than before.

Taking off his other glove and shoving them in his slacks' pocket, he headed for the green canvas erected in the clearing.

With long swift steps, the boy approached the tent, his cloak flapping in the cold breeze, behind him. He circled it and stopped

to stand in front of the flap that covered its entrance; moving it to the side, he entered.

The inside of the pavilion was warm, like a pleasant tropical island. Not that he needed warmth anymore, he felt it sure would've been nicer to sleep in here than out in the cold. *Dwelling in the past is unworthy of a herenuer*, he reminded himself.

Morning light, entering from a screen on the tent's roof, made a square on the ground, in between the sleeping figures. The boy took two steps towards the form sleeping to his right. He bent down next to their head and shook them by the shoulder.

'Lady Kamillah,' he called in a low voice. 'My Lady, I think they're close.' The boy added, shaking her a bit harder.

With a muffled groan the girl turned over, resting on her back, and pushed away her long black hair from her face. 'How close?' She croaked without opening her eyes.

'A few miles, I reckon.'

Bernice opened her eyes with a start. Her dark green irises shone, drinking the faint light in the tent. She sat up and turned to look at the two people sleeping on her side, huddled in a thick fur blanket, snoring softly.

Frowning, she stared at them, the green of her irises growing brighter, her eyes focused, unwavering. Knowing what was coming the boy immediately shut his eyes and pressed his palms over them.

Even with his eyes covered, the boy saw a flash of light, bright enough to pierce through his palms and shut eyelids. He slowly opened his eyes to the groans and complaints of his fellows, who were just woken up by a blinding burst of light. His eyes adjusted to the faint light in the pavilion, which now seemed to him darker than a cave below ground.

'Why do you always have to do that?' Kolben sat up, rubbing his eyes. He noticed the boy kneeling beside Bernice. 'Fa, why can't *you* ever wake me?'

'Because...' Fa started but was cut off by a loud groan from the platinum haired boy, which might have been a yawn.

‘Because Lady Kamillah has to be woken up first.’ The boy shot Fa a squinted look which was a mix of annoyance and mockery.

‘Is that a problem, Cadmael?’ Fa asked the boy in a plain tone causing him to burst into a short laugh.

‘I know I have annoyed you when you call me Cadmael.’ The boy straightened up grinning. ‘It’s all good fun, Fa.’ Cadmael added, reaching out and patting Fa on his shoulders lightly.

‘If your clowning is done, we have to get moving.’ Bernice spoke, from across the pavilion, without lifting up her head from fastening her leather long-boots. ‘Fa says they’re close.’

The boys shot Fa a serious look.

‘How far?’ Cad asked, with a nearly cracking voice.

‘About four miles, I guess,’ Fa murmured, rolling his eyes to a side as if listening for something at a distance. ‘Cad, can you track that far. I don’t trust my senses too much during winters.’ He turned to the young boy.

‘I can try.’ The boy nodded determinedly. ‘I’m not certain though. My range is not that great yet.’

‘Don’t be a baby, kid,’ Bernice called out. With her back towards them, she wound her long black hair, forming a tight bun atop her head.

Cad shut his eyes and sat up straight. His silver brows moved and began to strain as his forehead wrinkled, akin to a man trying hard to concentrate.

‘Yes,’ Cad croaked after a few moments, face now twisted in what could have been called intense focus, but appeared like an expression of immense discomfort.

‘One of them is truly about four miles north-west of here.’ He declared with the voice and face of a person being pricked by a rather large needle.

‘And the other one?’ Bernice asked in a soft voice, as if trying to not break his concentration.

Turning to her, Fa and Kolben noticed she had finished dressing.

Bernice wore a tight white blouse with black leather pants, covered by a white long-coat with a thick golden border. The coat gave her a slim profile, resting snugly on her shoulders.

‘It’s further away, maybe five miles, and it’s moving.’ Cad whispered slowly. ‘It’s moving fast, but the other one seems to be stationary... it might be hurt.’

‘That seems unlikely, from what we were told,’ Bernice scoffed, walking across the tent. Her coat flapped against her heels. Lifting up the pavilion’s door she added. ‘That should be enough, Cad. You boys get ready, we’ll get moving.’ Her hair-bun bumped the canvas as she stepped out.

‘Fa can you join me?’ Bernice called from outside.

Fa shuffled to his feet and headed out. Behind him, Kolben began tying up the bed rolls while Cadmael went for the covers.

Fa noted that the sun had risen in the sky and from the looks of it, it was going to be a bright day despite the snowy Dinso winters. Bernice stood at a distance, with her arms on her waist and head tilting back with closed eyes; facing the sun, she seemed to be breathing in the sunlight.

‘It tastes like water to me,’ Bernice stated without opening her eyes. ‘Not tasteless, but nourishing.’

‘I understand, my Lady,’ Fa came to stand beside her. With his head bowed and hands folded behind him, he was the image of a perfect attendant.

Bernice relaxed, dropping her hands, looked at the boy and smiled. ‘I like you, Fa’. She gleamed, with an adoring tune.

‘I’m honored, my Lady,’ Fa bowed.

He wasn’t a noble or ever trained in the manners of the western court, but there was something about Bernice that brought out the chivalry in him. Unlike Kolben, he wasn’t courteous to her just because he had to.

‘So,’ Bernice started towards the lake, slowly. ‘How do you think we should go about it?’ She didn’t turn to see if Fa was following. ‘Should we split and surround them?’

‘That’s up to you, my Lady,’ Fa replied walking just beside, but always staying a step behind her. ‘We are at your behest.’

Bernice exhaled sharply. 'What. Do. *You*. Think?' She repeated, sounding out each word separately, similar to when one speaks to a child.

Fa flushed slightly with embarrassment, and stammered. 'My Lady, I think splitting in two groups would be wiser. Since we...' He suddenly stopped as if remembering something. 'My Lady, I believe Lord Arud will have a better judgment in this regard.'

Bernice stopped at the bank of the lake and stared across the glimmering waters.

'Kolben is a red-headed oaf good for all tasks muscular. He has no mind for strategy or planning.' Turning to Fa, who had come to stand beside her, she continued. 'Whereas you are the son a herenuer,' Fa turned to look at her as she added. 'So my Lord Kang, would you please share your strategy with me.'

Fa clearly flushed red this time, he averted his eyes fixing them to the ground; shuffling his feet he began.

'My Lady, since we know that the saguzars are not together, I think we should split in two groups and track one each.' He looked up at Bernice and continued.

'We should try to converge them, so that we can surround them. Then we might be able to capture them, rather than eradicating them. We should confront them together, so as to minimize any loss or injury on our side.'

Nodding to herself, Bernice hummed. 'So one group will get ahead and drive the saguzar south while the second group will drive the other one further north.' Bernice rubbed her chin, gazing over the water.

'Considering that saguzars are fast fliers, you and I should be in separate groups. And if we believe the reports, these are not your regular saguzars. According to Master Isies, eye-witnesses reported them being over ten feet, which I have never heard of.'

'Neither of saguzars being in Dinso,' Fa added. 'Do you think they flew across the ocean?'

Bernice shrugged, turning back to their camp. 'Well, we'll know once we capture them.' She stated, starting briskly towards the pavilion. Fa followed close behind.

Kolben and Cadmael were dressed and stepping outside the pavilion when Bernice approached them. Though Cadmael wore thick furred coat and boots, with a matching brown hat and gloves, he still rubbed his arms, shivering from the cold.

An entirely opposite sight was Kolben, in his usual long shirt open in the front baring his chest, with his carmine hair dancing on his shoulders. He wore tight trousers, similar to Bernice's, with python skin boots.

'If only he had a little brains,' Bernice sighed, turning to Fa, who smiled wide at her.

Kolben had a brown leather satchel hung across his shoulder. He stood facing the pavilion and raised his hands; then in a slow motion brought them down.

The pavilion followed his hands and started to descend, seemingly deflating, until it was a thick green sheet on the grass. Kolben bent to the ground and began to fold it, similar to how one might fold a large flag.

In the end, the pavilion folded into a pile small enough to fit in Kolben's hand, which he then began to stuff in the satchel.

'Are we ready, Lord Arud?'

Bernice stood with her hands behind her back, long-coat sleeves flapping in the chilly wind. The breeze blew at Kolben's shirt, exposing his taut fair abdomen. He nodded, lacing his satchel, unaware of the patronizing tone in Bernice's voice.

Bernice turned to Cadmael, who looked like a furry mouse with his nose and chin being the only visible skin among his fur clothing. 'And how are you planning to move in that clothing, dear Cad?' She shot him a penetrating smile, causing Fa to let out a soft laugh.

Cad looked up, with eyes exhibiting embarrassment. 'Kolben will warm me up.' His expression was of a dog ashamed of disobedience.

'And how will he do that when he's going with Fa?'

Cad gave her a confused look which caused her to sigh and continue. 'We are splitting. You are coming with me.'

Nodding between the shivers, Cad scrambled closer to Bernice. She gave him a small pat on his head. 'But don't worry little one, I can warm you up just fine.'

'You can?' Cad sounded more confused than surprised.

Bernice's face remained calm but her eyes betrayed the feeling of being underestimated. Only Fa seemed to notice that.

'I can pulverize mountains, little one.' Her voice dripped with honey and acid at the same time. 'I can warm up a fifteen year old just fine.'

Cad looked down again, like a beaten dog. 'Six-sixteen.' He managed to stammer.

Bernice shot him a look. Clearer this time.

'It doesn't matter,' Cad croaked.

Kolben clapped, getting everyone to look at him. 'What is our approach, my Lady?'

Bernice put a hand on her waist. 'You and Fa will track the closer one and drive it north. And we will go ahead and drive the other one south.' Turning to Cad she continued. 'You and Fa will make sure we converge at the same place, which is where we will try to capture or kill. Depending on the situation.' She turned back to Kolben and added. 'Remember, no deadly strikes. Your objective is to herd it, not kill it. We don't know the extent of their abilities.'

Kolben rolled his eyes slightly, showing disapproval, but at the same time trying not to offend Bernice. 'These are saguzars, my Lady. I have been hunting them with my old man since I was nine.'

The green in Bernice's eyes grew brighter as she clenched her jaw. 'No saguzars could've killed three of Master Vrinma's acolytes.' Her tone though calm had an underlying annoyance to it. 'Do you doubt the ability of our brothers? Or do you doubt the wisdom of our master?' Fa and Cad looked away, knowing better than to react.

Kolben flushed and turned his gaze to the ground, regret straining his voice. 'Forgive me, my Lady. That was immensely insensitive and immature of me.' He apologized in a sincere tone.

‘I am glad we agree,’ Bernice chirped happily, smiling at Kolben. ‘So let’s head out.’ She commanded.

‘Yes. My Lady.’ Cad and Kolben agreed in unison while Fa gave a swift nod.

‘Fa and Cad, you will both continuously listen for each other,’ she instructed the boys again. ‘Our success will depend on how well you two can coordinate. Is that clear?’ She left the question hanging.

‘Yes. My Lady.’ Both of them nodded with conviction before sharing a determined look.

‘Go ahead then,’ Bernice ordered Cadmael. ‘I’ll catch up.’ She winked.

Cad nodded stiffly and straightened his arms at his sides, with his palms facing the ground. Maintaining his position, he noticed that the others had pressed their palms against their ears as tight as they could.

With a sharp crack, loud enough to be distressing to plugged ears, Cad shot straight up into the sky. He glimpsed down at his friends growing smaller, with their palms still clamping their ears shut.

As he began to decelerate, Cad turned to face north-west, he closed his eyes and concentrated on locating the saguzar. Once he detected the beast’s screeches and in extension its position, he opened his eyes.

Cad slowly came to a stop, about a hundred feet off the ground. With his arms still on his side, he turned his palms to face behind. With a clamorous boom, Cad shot across the sky disappearing over the forest, leaving shock waves in his wake.

Bernice and the boys lowered their hands, when they saw Cad’s figure vanish over the canopy. Fa and Kolben turned to Bernice and noted that her left shoulder was emitting a bright golden glow.

The glow quickly spread across her body, till it seemed to be fashioned from sunlight. ‘See you kids soon,’ Bernice assured as the golden glow covered her face.

She waved with a luminescent hand before streaking behind Cad as a golden stream of light. Disappearing above the trees at the distance, she was gone before the boys could blink.

Kolben turned to Fa with an urgent expression. 'Are you transforming?'

Fa tilted his head back and stared above. 'The wind is good right now, my Lord... I can use it.'

'Fa how many times have I told you to call me by my name?' Kolben complained fidgeting in his satchel's front pocket. 'You are a friend, and friends call each other by name.'

'Yes, I'm sorry, Kolben,' Fa apologized, amidst a series of quick nods. 'Are we ready?'

'Just one moment...' Kolben brought out an oblong piece of black metal the size of his palm. He smiled at Fa before throwing the metal piece in the air.

Kolben did a swift gesture, similar to swatting away a fly, and the small piece of metal landed on the grass as a five foot long board. Stepping onto the oblong board's gleaming onyx surface Kolben smiled. 'Now, I'm ready.'

Fa smiled back and closed his eyes for a moment. Following a sharp inhale from the boy, the wind around them died down. The cold air became motionless and stationary, turning the surroundings hauntingly silent.

'I am ready too,' Fa declared.

'Do you have the saguzar's location?' Kolben inquired.

'Yes, for a while now,' Fa stated. This was the first time he had been alone with Kolben and he was nearly feeling excited.

'Let's go then,' Kolben exclaimed.

With a soft sizzling noise, his boots began to glow red like burning coal. Steam gushed out from under the black metal board, causing it to rise a couple feet off the ground with Kolben standing on it. He crouched, bending his knees and holding out his arms to the sides to keep balance.

Fa focused on the wind now moving inside him and drew upon it. In a moment, he was hovering beside Kolben. Both of them exchanged a determined look and nodded. Fa streaked into the forest at a high speed. Accompanied by a high pitched puff of steam from his board, Kolben followed him, close behind.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Crescent-Bow Vameej Ocean

Gerond stood by the giant glass window and peered outside. Below him, a white sea of clouds parted to reveal the ocean for a bit, only to hide it again. He stared off into the horizon and could nearly make out the curvature of DieTerra.

The scar under his eye began to itch, which happened more often than not these days. Turning away from the window, he noisily scratched his face and made his way down the corridor.

On his left, curving along the corridor, the glass window extended both ways. Outside, the sky was bright with the mid-noon sun.

His red hair flowed over his shoulders and his Peacekeeper long-coat bounced against his ankles as Gerond headed to the soldiers' sectors. He turned right and moved to the inner section of the craft, leaving the giant glass window behind him.

The interior of the craft was gleaming white with the Peacekeeper crests painted at regular intervals on walls, ceiling and floor.

Doors, wide enough for four men to enter abreast, passed on both his sides as he strode deeper into the sector. The corridor still extended about twenty yards in front of him, when he approached a large door on his left.

Captain Criff Warrin. Gerond gave the door a couple pounds with his open palm.

'Who is it?' A voice called from inside.

'It's me,' Gerond's voice was deep and commanding. He heard footsteps from inside, hurrying towards the door.

A click followed by a soft hum sounded as the door began to slide into the wall, to reveal a young man standing behind it.

Dressed sharply in the red-white Peacekeeper uniform, the man had his short brown hair combed back and affixed to his scalp. The gold insignia on his jacket indicated that he was a commanding officer.

The man performed a salute, thumping his right fist on his chest and stomping his foot. Gerond waved him dismissively and walked into the room.

The young man shambled to the side. 'P-please come in, General.'

Gerond walked to the middle of the room and stopped for a moment.

The walls of the cabin were white and the ceiling was more concave than flat. The Peacekeeper symbol was painted on the ceiling right above Gerond's head and below his feet, on the floor.

The room had minimal furniture: a large bed, a desk and chair, and a closet at the far end. Gerond strode across and plopped on the bed. He crossed his legs and turned his gaze to the young officer who still stood stiff beside the entrance, confused.

'Well, shut it and get over here,' Gerond mumbled loud enough for the man to hear.

The officer hastily turned and placed his hand on the rectangular panel on the wall beside the entrance, and with a low hum, the door began to emerge from the wall.

Gerond scanned the bed, which was strewn with a multitude of articles, two of which caught his eyes in particular. First, was a thick leather bound book, *The Histories and Myths of DieTerra by Aldis Andromeda*; the second was a small hand-held firearm that he had never seen before.

The young man marched over to the general and turned to him, standing at attention. Gerond eyed the officer and sighed. 'Pull up a chair, Captain.'

Criff hurried across the room to the table in long strides, lifted the chair and carried it to the bed. He sat in the chair facing his general, trying hard to hide his uneasiness and stress.

‘What is this, Captain Warrin?’ Gerond picked up the firearm and turned it in his hands.

The grip was snug and coarse while the barrel was long, flat and wide, with a switch at its rear end. He looked at the young man who appeared frozen, but jerked as if snapping awake when he met his eyes.

‘I-it’s a TG-31(i), sir.’ His voice cracked and pitch shifted when he spoke.

‘Why are you so nervous, Captain?’ Gerond laughed. ‘Weren’t you serving the Fathers, up till now...? Now, those are some fuckers that send a chill down even my spine. And I’ve seen things you won’t believe.’ He raised an eyebrow and smirked at Criff.

The captain laughed nervously. ‘I don’t doubt that, sir.’ He spoke, finally finding the courage to maintain eye-contact. ‘But you’re General Gerond Hvok, sir. I’ve heard stories about you since before I joined the Peacekeepers. You are a dangerous man, sir.’ Criff spoke with a slight twinkle in his eye.

‘That I am,’ Gerond chuckled nearly amused. ‘So Captain, why have I never seen these TG-31(i)s before?’

‘That, sir, would be because they are not yet in circulation,’ Criff answered, pointing to the firearm he added. ‘In fact, sir, that’s one of the first few prototypes.’

Gerond hummed to himself, turning the firearm in his hands, fingering the trigger. ‘What’s special about this?’

He eyed Criff, who after a seeming shock, started. ‘It is the first hand held weapon to use the same technology as the appeasers.’ Seeing Gerond continue to fiddle with the trigger, he added. ‘It is *plasma* powered, sir.’

Gerond stopped and looked up at the man, surprise plain on his face.

‘This is elemental?’ He asked in a voice thick with shock, before returning to scrutinizing the weapon.

‘Not this one, sir. But they’re working on that too.’ Excitement dripped from Criff’s face, similar to a child talking about his playthings. ‘This one fires high speed micro pellets, which explode on impact.’

Gerond frowned approvingly.

‘And they thought making naonos, duends and miatagarris work together was a bad idea.’ He kept the firearm to the side and regarded Criff sternly. ‘You are a fine kid Criff, so let me give you a little advice.’ Gerond looked at the firearm and back at the boy. ‘On a battlefield, only rely on tools you can do without.’

Criff nodded stiffly, the face of an obedient man. He watched as the general reached for the leather bound book on his side. *The Histories and Myths of DieTerra*.

‘You know, more than half of Aldis’ supposed history is just his speculations based on little to no facts, right?’ Gerond asked, rhetorically.

Criff stared at him confusion as if not understanding the meaning of his words.

‘I don’t know about that, sir. But when I told Riepel I like reading about history and such, he recommended I read Aldis.’ He finally replied. ‘Besides, Aldis covers a great range of topics from the Lost War to the Divine Tribe, along with hundreds of age old myths.’

‘Firstly, Riepel is an idiot,’ Gerond sighed softly to himself. ‘You know he shot himself twice during his training? Twice!’

‘Secondly, no one knows about the Lost War, hence the name.’ He shook his head. ‘I thought you were smarter than this, Captain. I didn’t expect you to be interested in these old wives tales.’ He sounded genuinely disappointed. ‘So what did you learn about the *Lost War*?’

Criff sensed the scorn in the question but replied nonetheless.

‘According to Aldis, the war went on for nearly three hundred years. He doesn’t seem to know who fought whom, but clearly states that the descendants of the Divine Tribe fought in the war and were the ones to influence the outcome.’

‘He says, the war altered DieTerra in such an extreme sense that the traces of the event had to be erased entirely for the future generations to live in harmony.’ Criff took a sharp breath and continued. ‘Aldis states that though everyone involved agreed that the war was to be erased from history, the descendants of the Divine Tribe did not. That was when they founded the Fiachori Shrine and created the Vision Crystals.’

The captain noted that despite his ridiculing tone, Gerond was listening intently and seemed to be mulling over his words.

‘Vision Crystals?’ He scoffed. ‘That is a story my nana used to tell me.’

Criff couldn’t help but feel offended.

‘In the book, sir, Aldis provides dates and locations of where some of these unexplainable crystals were unearthed by Council archaeologists, among others.’ He didn’t stop for Gerond to respond.

‘Aldis affirms that among the six excavated crystals the Council possesses three while the whereabouts of the rest are unknown. Interestingly, he also goes on to say that the most popular Fican myth states that Vivi’s son will return to reveal the world’s secrets to the inhabitants.’

Gerond let out a soft laugh, though this time it lacked any mockery.

‘The things you find interesting, Captain.’ He regarded Criff in a scrutinizing fashion. ‘What I find surprising is that I never thought you’d be a religious man.’

Criff shook his head vigorously.

‘No, sir. Don’t get me wrong I’m not religious myself. It’s just that religions have always fascinated me.’ He stared at the ceiling reminiscing to himself. ‘Especially Ficanism.’ He turned to Gerond, eyes reflecting his enthusiasm. ‘Did you know sir, Ficanism is the oldest religion? Some say as old as intelligent life itself.’

‘Intelligent life is a little older than it.’

Criff noticed what he thought was a hint of smile on Gerond’s face, but convinced himself he had imagined it.

‘So Aldis has written about Ficanism too?’ Gerond asked in the most dispassionate tone; it managed to get Criff galvanized, nevertheless.

‘Yes sir, that too in great detail.’ He began excitedly. ‘He mentions three of the most widely accepted versions of the birth of Ficanism. Are you a Fican sir?’ His eyes went big with anticipation.

Gerond could tell that he was just getting started and had begun to regret initiating this discussion.

‘I was born and brought up in the Ingens, Captain, and like the large majority there I was raised a Fican too.’ Gerond leaned forward, over the thick book on his lap.

‘So which version do you believe in, sir?’ Criff questioned excitedly. ‘I prefer the one in which Vivifica and Perdyr are the cosmic couple who visit DieTerra and at some point Perdyr in a fit of insanity slays his wife. I find the details of it more believable.’

Gerond found Criff goggling at him, expecting him to answer. He let out a soft sigh and held Criff’s gaze.

‘Vivifica was Perdyr’s sister not his wife, Captain. And he did not slay her, she willingly decimated herself.’

Criff was taken aback by the certainty in Gerond’s voice. ‘B-but...’ He began before being immediately cut off.

‘And I don’t *believe*, Captain,’ Gerond added as he set aside the book and uncrossed his legs. ‘I know.’

Criff sensed he wasn’t invited to continue the conversation.

Gerond stood up and met Criff’s gaze once more. ‘Do you know how I know that, Captain Warrin?’

Criff pushed back the chair silently and shuffled to his feet, bowing slightly. ‘N-no, sir.’

Gerond smiled wide at him, causing the scar across his eye to slant, and started towards the door. He placed his palm on the panel on the wall and accompanied by a soft hum the door began to slide open.

‘Good. Because I didn’t want to kill you,’ Gerond stepped out into the corridor and turned to see Criff standing in the middle

of the room with a baffled expression. 'And they excavated five crystals not six. The Council has two of them not three.'

He smiled once again at the bewildered captain before starting down the corridor.

Gerond strolled by numerous doors big and small once again as he marched back towards the giant glass wall.

He turned right at the end of the corridor and began to walk with the window extending on his left. The corridor curved in front of him as did the windowpane, which ran along the entire front of the craft, thus providing an overwhelming view to the passengers and crew during the flight.

Gerond stopped for a moment to peer out the window.

They were still flying well above the clouds and the sun had started its descent. The clouds grew thinner and parted to reveal the view beneath them. But instead of the blue ocean, this time it was the green canopy of a sprawling forest land.

Vameej. Gerond thought to himself before he turned to continue down the corridor. The window started to grow wider as he neared the center of the craft.

He noted a massive door approaching him at a distance as the corridor began to rapidly grow wider. The glass wall as well expanded to the ceiling, enabling him to gaze straight above his head. A light blue sky was all he could see.

Flying wasn't as fascinating as one might imagine, he thought.

Gerond came to a stop before the door and searched around. The corridor was nearly ten yards wide here, which was twice its previous width. He finally spotted the glass panel, on the wall beside the door.

Gerond walked over to the panel and placed his palm softly over it. The glass panel began to glow with a soft blue hue and accompanied by a low humming sound the massive door began to slide into the wall to the right.

The door moved in a smooth and swift motion despite its large size, which Gerond found impressive. He stepped into what was a large room in the middle of the craft.

Sounds of hushed orders being relayed and clanks and beeps poured into his ears. He started towards the middle of the room where, on a dais, the crew of the craft was seated.

The crew constituted of eighteen members including the captain, who sat on a slightly elevated podium in the middle of the dais, on a swiveling chair; so that he could command the crew seated around him.

The dais was right by the large glass window, which now extended over half the ceiling providing a panoramic view of the sky.

The crew, along with their captain, had wide glass panels in front of them, which they interacted with by touching the various colored shapes that appeared and disappeared across the glass.

Upon hearing footsteps, a few members of the crew perked up from their panels to notice Gerond approaching the dais.

They immediately stood at attention, followed by the rest of the crew and in turn the captain, who earlier had his back towards him, since he was looking out the window. Within half a moment, the entire crew was standing and saluting the approaching general.

Gerond made a hasty motion with his hands, signaling everyone to be seated. He stepped on the dais and strolled towards the captain who was still standing, holding his salute.

‘General!’ He exclaimed with a slight bow as he stepped down onto the dais to greet him.

Gerond smiled slightly and gave the captain a firm pat on his arm.

He stood easily a foot taller than the captain, who unlike the regular soldiers was dressed in white uniform under a red jacket of a lighter shade than those of the soldiers’. His uniform cap had the Peacekeeper emblem on the crown, with a bill of the same color as his jacket.

‘How are we doing, Captain Ytan?’ Gerond inquired, stepping towards the window.

The captain followed him. 'We should arrive at the capital in about a half hour, sir.'

Gerond nodded, gazing out of the window. He saw a blue sky above him, a sheet of cottony white clouds below and a sea of green trees under it. He noticed the craft was closer to the clouds than earlier, almost skimming them.

'Have we started the descent, Captain?'

Ytan beamed at him like a proud son. 'Yes, sir, we have.'

Gerond turned away from the window to face Ytan on his side.

'Tell me Captain, has the general ever ridden in this craft?'

There was a hint of derision in his question, which Ytan chose to ignore.

'Which one, sir?' He asked.

'Stoek.'

'No, sir.' He answered with all the sincerity he could muster. 'In fact, out of the three, only General Cahn has flown in the Crescent-Bow; once, eight years ago. That too on the insistence of the Fathers.'

Gerond hummed in an amused tone. His scar slanted on his face as he smiled. 'That's interesting, Captain. Our Generals *are* like spoiled kids. They do what *they* like.' Gerond bellowed loudly.

Ytan took a step back confused at the large, red haired man laughing at his own remark. Gerond's laughter echoed in the large chamber for a few moments after he stopped.

He took several slow breaths and wiped his scarred eye before turning to Ytan, who still held a wide eyed expression of utter disbelief considering he had never expected to see the demon called the Widowmaker burst into laughter over a rather trivial statement that he himself made.

Gerond smiled slightly at Ytan, giving him another pat on the arm. 'Keep up the good work, Captain. I would like to take a look at the appeaser before we ground at the capital.'

He had begun to part away when he turned to the man, remembering something. 'Is this your first time visiting the Vameej Empire, Captain?'

Ytan gave a series of swift nods. 'Yes, sir.' Putting off the unsurety, he took a moment to add. 'You too, sir?'

Gerond swayed his head sideways in slow motion. He stepped down from the captain's platform onto the crew's dais and continued forward.

'Not my first time, Captain.' He called out without turning as he continued across the dais. The crew sat around him tapping and swiping intently on the glass panels before them.

Gerond stepped off the dais and crossed the room with long urgent steps. He moved towards the door, opposite to the one he had entered from, which began to slide open when he neared it. The sunlight streaming through the glass wall cast a long shadow before him.

Gerond exited the room and paced down the corridor with the window on his left. He glanced out to note that the craft was but a few feet above the clouds, and was gradually descending. He increased his pace as he turned into a narrower corridor on his right.

Gerond walked past a couple doors before making a left turn. His long cloak flapped behind him along with his hair which were on the verge of breaking loose. He turned right once more and walked down the corridor till it ended at a curved pillar-like door.

The convex door was made of a thick translucent glass and appeared to be part of a long tube that extended from below the floor and continued into the ceiling. A square glass panel was placed on the wall beside the tube door about five feet off the ground.

Gerond pressed his palm gently on the panel. A bluish hue appeared below his hand.

Identity confirmed: Lieutenant General Gerond Hook. The toneless female voice sounded to be coming from the ceiling.

Gerond removed his palm when, followed by a soft click, the convex door began to revolve. The door opened with a hum, revealing a cylindrical chamber. Gerond stepped in the chamber and turned around to face the entrance as the door began to revolve shut.

State terminus. The voice demanded.

'Testing facility.' Gerond answered staring straight ahead.

Terminus confirmed. Estimated duration: One minute. Three seconds. The monotonous voice stated.

Gerond felt the tubular chamber begin to descend in a gentle motion.

He glanced around; the circular wall was glowing with parallel columns of small white lights that extended from the floor to the ceiling, making the chamber bright to a painful degree. He calculated that the area was big enough to accommodate at least twenty men.

The chamber slowed down and came to an eventual stop before accelerating sideways in a smooth manner. Gerond tapped his feet impatiently as the chamber begun to decelerate once again before coming to a halt.

Testing Facility. The voice declared before the door began to revolve open.

Gerond stepped outside the chamber, onto a balcony overlooking a massive hall. He noted two sets of stairs leading down, on either of his sides.

The hall was alive with mechanical noises of metal against metal, punctuated with electrical whizzing and whirring.

Gerond walked to the railing and bent over to get a good view.

Below him, people dressed in long white coats, wearing gloves and big transparent goggles, moved about in an urgent fashion. Groups of people stood around large glass panels and tables, talking intently, arguing and working.

He noted, most groups were working on firearms of one kind or another, while others worked on parts of the craft, body armors and various other apparatus. Gerond saw individuals bent over wide glass panels, tapping furiously, doing what he assumed was journaling. His eyes went back to the first thing he had noticed when he had looked down.

The twenty foot giant laid on a large work surface, with his four lengthy arms spread to its side.

People with glass squares in their hands argued near the Blue appeaser's head, as their colleagues worked on his arms and legs, standing on a large dais around the body. Tubes, thick as a small tree's trunk, extending down from the ceiling, were hooked to the appeaser's arms, torso, legs and head.

Gerond began down the stairs, his long coat swaying behind him.

He was not surprised to see the short-statured naonos walking around with their glass panels. Typically, over half the testers were naonos, while the other half were duends, miatagarris and humans.

Gerond made his way across the room as the testers rushed past him, stopping to perform hasty salutes before continuing on their way.

Nearing the dais in the center of the room, Gerond spotted a golden haired duend rushing towards him. She held a square glass panel in her hand like many others. The duend halted in front of him and performed a salute.

'Welcome, General. My name is Lieutenant Raila Kaeper, I am the head tester at this facility.' The girl asserted in a confident tone.

'*You* are the head tester?' Gerond raised an eyebrows not trying to hide his surprise.

The girl flushed, clearly embarrassed. 'There are plenty of women working in the testing facilities, General.' She stated, sounding offended.

'And are they all twelve-year-olds?' Gerond laughed as he resumed towards the dais.

Raila hurried behind him and caught up to him on the stairs to the dais.

Gerond glanced at the girl beside him. 'What's the Blue's status, Lieutenant?'

The duend hesitated a little at the sudden change in Gerond's tone.

'The plasma levels are optimal and all weapon systems are in ideal conditions.' She answered without looking up, tapping at

the square glass in her hand. 'We are finishing the final checks at the moment.' She added, stepping onto the dais after Gerond.

Nodding softly, Gerond walked over to the giant black body that laid in the middle of the dais.

Testers performed salutes before stepping out of his way. He noticed that the naonos were using elevated platforms to reach the appeaser's body. The tallest naono in the group barely reached Gerond's waist.

The work space was designed precisely for the Blue appeaser. His body laid on a long slab, while his four arms rested on slabs extending out from the main slab forming an X.

Walking between two of the appeaser's arms, tailed by Raila, Gerond approached its chest.

He stopped beside the abdomen and placed a hand over the appeaser's body, feeling the dense, leather-like skin under his palm. The sensation of the taut, warm hide made him cringe a little.

'We have instated you as his commander,' Raila informed stepping beside him. 'You can enlist more commanders to him if you like, but you will remain the prime.'

Gerond nodded inattentively, as he stared at the Blue's face.

Its eyes were two sunken holes in his black leathery skin. The toothless mouth gaped open in a terrifying grin, wide enough to fit a grown human's head.

Gerond turned to the duend girl. 'Tell me about the elementals.'

Raila gave a swift nod and accompanied by taps on the square glass, started.

'He has pyro, aero, aero and aqua in his right-top, right-bottom, left-bottom and left-top arms respectively. With pyrokinesis being the primary elemental ability.'

'Fire, huh?' Gerond mused to himself. 'Did you guys prepare its armor like I requested?'

Raila gave another swift nod. 'Yes, General,' she began. 'We tested it against shocks. We have made it strong enough to survive plasma blasts.'

‘That’s good.’ A satisfied Gerond nodded to himself, turning away from the appeaser he started towards the stairs.

The floor below them quivered, causing everyone to sway in response to keep their balance. Gerond stopped in his steps when he heard Ytan’s voice.

‘We have grounded at the Vameej royal palace. Disembarking will begin within ten minutes.’

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Silence Vameej Ocean

Shrill screams and wails of the siren echoed, as the steamer plummeted into the darkness. The diminishing noises marked the passengers who were being flung off the deck.

Aermes tightly gripped the railing with one hand, while Ren grabbed onto his other arm. He tried to plant his feet on the slanting deck to no avail.

Turning his head, he noted Auda had her arm around Sui, who clung to her like a baby monkey to its mother. He was surprised to see Auda standing on the deck with nearly no visible effort. He squinted to get a better look but failed.

Most of the gas lamps on the steamer had gone out during the fall. The few that remained, lit the deck with soft yellow light, giving it an ominous appearance.

Aermes' attention was caught by Ren, who was calling out to him. She was trying to be loud, but the unrelenting screams around them were drowning her out.

Aermes stared at her, trying to make out her words amongst the noise. He watched her wait for him to reply and then drop her head.

Ren suddenly tightened her grip on his arm.

A grunt escaped Aermes' lips when her fingernails began to dig in his flesh. Her grip grew tighter as the plunging steamer started to slow down.

Aermes noticed, in the faint yellow light, with her head lowered, Ren's body was strained stiff.

The steamer's fall continued to slow, which in turn quieted the passengers' screams to murmurs and loud pleas to cosmic entities.

Ren let out a short grunt, similar to a person lifting a heavy weight and the steamer came to a stop in mid-air.

Soft thuds denoted the passengers hitting the deck. The murmurs turned to sniffing and crying, over which a few men questioned the gods, peering over the railing to find the steamer floating in blackness.

Aermes, now on his feet, let go off the hand rails and turned to look at Auda and Sui.

The deck's wood was melting away from Auda's boots, while the railing unwrapped itself from around her hand.

'Auda!' Aermes screamed out of both urgency, and the pain caused by Ren's finger nails in his arm. 'Help her!'

Without wasting a breath, Auda gave a swift nod and let Sui down. The girl clung on to Auda's shirt. Terrified. Silent.

Auda clenched her fist and shut her eyes, before her body stiffened.

'Ren! I'm holding too.' She squeaked from a strained throat.

The wail of the siren and the noises were still enough to drown out her voice, but Ren lifted her head. She turned to Auda and gave a slight nod.

With her body still unmoving, she released Aermes' hand. His other hand immediately came to meet it, to feel what seemed like a mold for Ren's fingers on his forearm. It stung when Aermes touched it. He couldn't see his arm clearly in the faint light, though he knew what it looked like.

'Let's take it down,' Ren called over the noise to Auda, who was only a few feet away.

Aermes noticed Auda nod, with her eyes still shut. Beside him, with her head bowed, Ren took a sharp inhale, loud enough for him to hear.

A strong jerk threw the passengers' balance off as the steamer began to descend once again. Its movement slow and deliberate this time.

'What is happening?' A woman screamed. Not at anyone in particular.

Aermes looked around to see people holding onto each other. Terrified faces staring into the darkness.

The steamer accelerated for a while and then maintained a steady downward velocity. Aermes peered over the railing to survey the lower deck.

There were a lot fewer passengers than earlier.

He saw women on the floor with their men embracing, consoling them. Some hung over the railing gazing into the darkness below them.

Aermes noted no children on his deck or the deck below. When his eyes drifted back to the sobbing women, the realization hit him. He turned to Sui, who clung to Auda's shirt, as her gaze swayed between Auda and her sister.

Aermes watched her, waiting for her to look at him, which didn't take long. He caught fear in the girl's eyes and it made his heart sink. He gave her a wide reassuring smile and stepped towards her. Spreading his arms, Aermes motioned her to come to him.

Sui glanced up at Auda's face. Releasing her shirt, she dashed towards Aermes and jumped at him.

Auda opened her eyes when the girl unloosed her shirt. Seeing her clinging to Aermes, she smiled to herself before shutting her eyes again.

Aermes turned to the girl hugging him. She stared back at him with an expectant face.

'What is happening, Aermes?' She cheeped in a tiny voice.

'I'm afraid I don't know,' Aermes caressed her head soothingly. 'What I know is, we all will be safe, and we'll get to Dinso together.' He gave her another inspiring smile.

The answer seemed to convince her as she smiled back, content. They both turned to her sister and Auda, who had their eyes shut in concentration.

Aermes' smile faded as soon as he looked away, since he knew not about where he was, what was happening or how they would get to Dinso. The inside of his mind mirrored the outside. Dark and empty.

The steamer began to slow down as the air around them grew cold and damp.

In a few moments, the ship came to a stop, with a loud thud of metal crashing against a solid ground. The sudden impact knocked a few people down to the floor, while the others held the hand rails to keep their balance.

Passengers peered over the railing at the ground below. The faint lamp light from the decks barely reached the surface, which appeared to be dark and hard from first impressions.

Men and women hugged and kissed, congratulating each other for escaping the bizarre danger. Hoots and cheers quickly died down as confusion and uncertainty crept over the passengers once again.

Aermes walked over to Auda and Ren, who were both leaning on the hand rails from exhaustion. Sui walked beside him.

'Let us get our belongings and get off,' Aermes leaned in and whispered loud enough to be heard by them. Urgency was thick in his voice.

Auda straightened up and nodded. Ren, still leaning on the rails, heaved softly.

'Why should we get off? Shouldn't we stay on the ship and figure something out?' She asked without looking up, her head between her arms.

'No,' Aermes answered with confidence. 'We are getting off right now. You two go get your things. Only the essentials.' He commanded Ren and Auda. 'I'm going down with Sui.' Hearing her name, Sui looked up, who wasn't paying attention to the conversation till now.

Ren straightened herself and trudged behind Auda, towards the stairs leading down to the cabins. Aermes watched them disappear into the dark doorway before turning to the girl.

'Are we ready?' He asked Sui, who hummed in agreement along with a swift nod.

Smiling, Aermes knelt and spread his arms. The girl stepped up to him and wrapped her arms around his neck. With one arm supporting her legs, Aermes lifted her up without any effort.

'I'm going to jump now,' he cautioned the girl.

'All right,' Sui chirped, before digging her small face in Aermes' chest.

With a light kick to the deck, followed by the wood splintering under his feet, Aermes launched himself off the steamer. The few passengers who saw him gasped, while the others turned towards the noise.

Aermes held Sui tight, with one hand holding the back of her head and the other around her waist, as he sailed towards the ground. He landed in a crouch, accompanied by a loud thud, but to his surprise the ground didn't crack or dent.

Sui brought her head up to look at him.

'Fine?' He asked her and the girl nodded.

He could barely make out the shape of her head in the dark.

Sui unwrapped her arms from around his neck. Aermes held her hand and helped her step down to the ground.

He tried to survey the area, but the lights from the steamer barely illuminated the ship let alone the ground. Aermes glanced upwards, towards the decks as he stood up. He could make out a few people leaning over the rails.

'You alright, man?' Someone called out.

'I saw him jump.' Aermes heard a woman's voice. 'I've never seen anyone jump like so.'

'You alright there, man?' Someone called out again.

Aermes didn't answer.

For some reason, he was determined to dissociate himself from the steamer and the passengers. He felt a strong sense of knowing and confusion at the same time. To take his mind off his thoughts, he gazed out into the darkness.

It was too dark to see anything around him but Aermes noted that the surroundings had slowly begun to glow with a

bluish hue. He blinked as he looked around but the blue glow didn't vanish.

He could see the steamer's rusted hull beside him. He noticed the ground below him was covered in bumps and small patches of brown grass. He located what appeared to be a large entryway of a tunnel on the wall, a couple hundred yards from him.

Scanning the surroundings, Aermes concluded that they were in a large cavern.

He estimated the cavern was giant, as he could only see the part of the wall that was close to him. The rest of it disappeared into darkness on both the sides. When he tried to make out the ceiling, he couldn't; as the wall rose up, disappearing into darkness, again.

Turning towards Sui, Aermes saw she was gaping at him. He was surprised at how clearly he could see her face. Her features were prominent and lucid, as if lit by the sun.

'Aermes,' she spoke in a nervous voice. 'Why are your eyes glowing?'

A recent memory flushed his mind.

'I have no clue. I...'

Loud noises from the deck cut Aermes off. He looked up to discover there was a commotion on the steamer.

'Witch!' A woman screamed.

'Sorcerers. There are sorcerers on the steamer.' Another man declared, amidst loud gasps and curses.

'Perdyr worshipers.' One man cursed.

A disc of bright white light emerged from the bottom deck, accompanied by a shadow at its side.

Aermes pulled Sui closer as Auda and Ren descended from the steamer. The disc Ren rode on, emitted bright light from its rim and base. The light bathed the area, causing Sui to rub her eyes.

Aermes noted the blue hue had disappeared, same as the last time. Before he could blink, tailed by Ren, Auda was already on the ground.

Ren stepped off her glowing disc, which floated a dozen fingers above the surface. She made a gesture, and following the

upward motion of her hand, the disc shot up, and fixated itself high in the air above them. It spun as it showered the ground with light, like a small sun in the cave.

Aermes noticed that Auda had her long sword across her back and her armor bag hanging from her shoulders. Besides that and Ren's disc they didn't bring anything.

Satisfied, Aermes glanced once again at the bright disc above him and then at the girls looking at him expectantly.

'We will be heading in there,' with his outstretched hand Aermes pointed to the large tunnel entrance on the wall opposite to him.

Auda and Ren turned around and squinted in the direction. Auda stared at the dark entryway while Ren motioned Aermes to lead. He nodded and proceeded to hand Sui over to her.

'She can walk by herself,' Ren stated. 'Right?' She turned to Sui who pulled her hand from Aermes' hold, not ungracefully.

'Yes,' the girl stammered.

Aermes started towards the wall. He touched Auda on her shoulder, signaling her to walk with him. Ren and Sui followed them as Auda fell beside him.

'Can we establish where we are and what happened back there?' Aermes spoke only loud enough to be heard by Auda.

She thought for a while.

'We were in the ocean, then there was an island ahead of us and in the next moment we were falling under it.' Auda recounted in a near whisper. 'My guess would be we are in some underground cave.'

'In the middle of the ocean?' Aermes doubted.

Auda didn't answer. She shrugged lightly.

The sounds from the steamer grew softer as they walked away. Aermes could hear a few loud curses from time to time but the rest was growing incomprehensible.

'What is *hilibalea*?' Aermes asked Auda.

'*Hilibalea*?' Auda repeated.

'Yes. A deckhand shouted *hilibalea*, before the steamer started to fall.'

Auda shrugged again.

‘Never heard it before.’ She admitted. ‘It could be some native expression. Like a curse, probably? Do you think it means something?’

‘I am not sure,’ Aermes mumbled, tilting his head back to glimpse at the disc floating above them.

The light from the disc illuminated a large area under it. Aermes could see clearly for a couple yards in all directions. He made a mental note to ask Ren how the disc worked, later.

Aermes smiled to himself, hearing Ren and Sui have an amusing argument behind him.

When they approached the mouth of the tunnel, the disc was lighting the insides already. Aermes sighed, when he saw a path leading inside the entryway; relieved that it wasn’t another bottomless pit.

He glanced back and over Ren’s head, to see the steamer’s dim light at the distance. They had walked not less than two hundred yards, he estimated.

Aermes perked up when he heard a hum afar, steadily getting louder. He glanced at Auda to see if she noticed the sound, but she walked briskly, unperturbed. The dialogues from behind indicated the sisters were too engaged in their conversation to notice the soft sound.

Plugging his ear reflexively, Aermes gazed above his head. The loud hum echoed down from the darkness, along the walls and slammed into his ears.

Screaming, Aermes crashed to the ground, palms pressed up tight against his ears, holding them shut. Auda, startled, knelt beside him and held his shoulder.

‘Aermes.’ She called over him as he writhed, face twisting in pain.

Sui and Ren stood frozen a few feet away, unable to react.

When the hum died out, Aermes’ head was filled with an eerie silence. For a moment, he believed he had gone deaf. But then he heard a familiar voice at a distance.

‘Aermes.’

He opened his eyes and slowly sat up, with Auda supporting his back. Ren and Sui stood by his feet, silently glancing back and forth between him and Auda.

Groaning, Aermes held his head as it threatened to split open.

‘Are you alright?’ Auda’s face was barely a foot away from him, but to him it sounded like she was whispering from across a field. ‘What happened?’

Aermes breathed long, sharp breaths, in an attempt to calm the nerves throbbing in his head. Noticing him pressing on his scalp, Auda extended her hand, hovering her palm beside his temple.

Aermes blinked rapidly as the pain drained away, returning his senses. He turned to face Auda and ended up looking into her palm, which she immediately withdrew.

‘How did you do that?’ Aermes’ voice felt adequately regular in his head. Something he never thought would make him glad.

‘R-restored proper blood circulation,’ Auda stammered.

‘What was that?’

Aermes turned to find Ren leaning on her knees, staring at him with a mixed expression, of part curiosity and part annoyance.

Unsure himself, Aermes rubbed his forehead. ‘Didn’t you people hear it?’

‘Hear what?’ Auda spoke, glancing from Aermes to Ren, who eyed her uncertainly.

‘The hum. The bellow?’ Aermes murmured, doubt clear in his voice. ‘You didn’t hear it?’ He looked up at Ren, holding her gaze, then at Sui and Auda respectively; and he had his answer.

Auda shook her head sideways.

‘I hope you are not going crazy.’ Ren remarked as she and Auda held his arms, helping him stand.

Aermes shuffled to his feet, reason and supposition warring in his head. ‘You didn’t hear it?’ He mumbled to himself in disbelief. ‘It was so loud.’

‘No.’ Auda replied. ‘Could it be, that you perhaps imagined it?’ She asked, doubtfully.

Aermes chuckled and regarded Ren with a nod. 'Well then she might be right.' With a serious expression, he turned to Auda. 'But I heard it. Clear as a bell,' he stated. 'It came from above.' He added pointing to the darkness above them.

'Wouldn't be the first peculiar event of the day,' Ren scoffed. 'Shall we continue, my Lord?' She gestured towards the entrance.

Giving one more glance at the dimly lit steamer at the distance, Aermes nodded. 'Yes, let us proceed.' He turned and began walking towards the tunnel.

Auda peeked at Ren and Sui, and then fell beside him, while the sisters once again followed.

'I have had this strange urge for a while,' Aermes noted gazing straight ahead. Above their heads, the disc hovered along them, further lighting the path in the tunnel.

'What do you mean?' Auda asked as they approached the mouth of the tunnel.

The ceiling stood at a height of over twenty feet, according to Aermes' estimate. He smiled to himself when he heard a fascinated Sui cooing behind him.

'I cannot entirely put it in words,' Aermes mused. He turned to Auda, who regarded him with anxious eyes and a curious expression. He sighed and hung his head, before turning back towards the tunnel. 'It's like that feeling when-.'

Auda cut him off when she slapped her palm against his chest, halting his pace at once. Her eyes went wide before she perked her head to scan the dark tunnel.

'Everyone. Get behind me. Now.' She commanded in a scream as she pushed Aermes behind herself.

Without a moment's hesitation, Ren pulled Sui by her hand and stepped behind Aermes.

'Ren, pull down your disk if you don't want to lose it.' Auda ordered.

Ren gave a brief look of uneasiness to Aermes, before the disk flew down and began to hover between her and Aermes, centered, like a shield.

The light from the disc grew dim, which Aermes assumed Ren did, so that the brightness didn't impair their vision. The disc cast long shadows of Aermes and Auda on the path leading into the tunnel.

Both Ren and Aermes gazed into the darkness as a noise rushed towards them from inside the tunnel, growing louder every second. Aermes' eyes went wide and mind numb when he recognized the noise.

It was the sound of a gushing river. An angry waterfall.

'Don't move.'

Auda fell into a crouch and brought her hands forward like getting ready to grapple an invisible opponent. Everyone waited, though not knowing for what. Except for Auda; who stood there, poised and ready.

The light from the disc, now dimmed, still lit at least thirty yards inside the tunnel. Aermes shot an involuntary glance backwards to the ship sitting in the darkness, as the noise grew deafening.

Ren stifled a gasp and clutched Sui, pressing the girl's face against her chest. Aermes stared ahead, wide-eyed unable to breathe.

A wall of murky water, twenty feet high, charged towards them.

Auda flexed her muscles and stiffened in her crouch. Within a second, the wall of water loomed over them casting an ominous shadow upon meeting the light.

Aermes instinctively raised his hand over his head and shut his eyes, when he saw the water come down upon them. The water met the ground with a thundering splash and a force strong enough to create a small tremor.

Anticipating to be swept away in the flood, Aermes slowly opened his eyes to find himself dry and unharmed. He lowered his hand and gawked when he looked around.

The water flooded around and over them without coming in their contact. They stood in an invisible sphere, surrounded by murky water.

Aermes watched Auda, who held both her hands forward with feet planted firm on the ground, as she took on a flood, large enough to drown a city.

At that moment, he realized the extent of the duend woman's abilities. Aermes, Ren and Sui stood there, unmoving, enclosed in Auda's protective sphere.

The force and quantity of water flowing out of the tunnel began to diminish as rapidly as it had appeared.

Soon the flooding stopped and the water drained away, seeping into the ground. The ordeal that lasted not more than a dozen seconds felt like an hour to Aermes.

Auda went down on her knees, heaving loudly, with her palms flat to the ground. The disc flew up and assumed its position over their heads.

Ren and Sui rushed to her side, but it didn't take her more than a moment to recover.

By the time they knelt by Auda, she was already shuffling to her feet. Ren helped her up, though she seemed to be doing fine by herself. Much better than Aermes was a few moments ago.

'What was that?' Ren pleaded to no one in particular. 'What is this place?'

Aermes walked over to Auda and stood beside Ren. He peered over her head and saw no lights across the field indicating the steamer's presence. Noticing his gaze Auda stated softly.

'They are gone,' she glanced at Sui who was clutching Ren's leg and leaned in between Ren and Aermes. 'Dead.' She whispered.

'What?' Ren choked, unlike herself, terrified.

'Some might have survived,' Aermes suggested in a hushed voice. A fretful Sui stared at the three adults whispering.

'No.' Auda spoke immediately. 'The liquid that just gushed out of that tunnel was a highly corrosive acid. In that volume, it would've melted the steamer and the passengers in half a minute.' She added in hurried whisper.

'What is happening, Ren?' Sui creaked softly.

'Don't worry, sweet,' Auda cooed, saving Ren from answering. 'We were in danger but now we are safe.'

She rubbed Sui's back, who seemed to know she won't be getting a detailed explanation.

'What are we doing now?' Ren turned to Aermes with an all but accusatory tone.

Aermes, caught off guard by the question, recovered instantly. 'We are going into that tunnel.' He replied, pointing to the entrance behind him.

'Into the tunnel which almost killed us a few moments ago,' Ren scoffed. 'It's not amusing in the least.'

Aermes, annoyed, glanced at Auda who stared at the ground. Her not interrupting Ren was indicative of her agreeing with her, he realized.

'I do not speak to amuse you, Ren,' Aermes snapped. 'Follow me at your will. Or do you wish you were on the ship, leaving which you thought was a bad decision.' He added glaring at her.

A shamed and cowed Ren lowered her eyes. Aermes didn't wait for her to answer. He turned around and walked briskly into the tunnel.

'Auda,' he called out without turning back. 'With me.'

The duend rushed after Aermes and fell beside him, her head bowed.

'Remember what we were talking about before the acid flood?' His voice was amiable with no trace of annoyance or anger.

'Y-yes,' Auda stammered, apparently still reeling from Aermes' abrupt outburst. 'You said you were having a strange urge.'

'Right,' Aermes responded, appreciatively. 'It's more of an instinct than an urge, though. I feel like I have been here before. Mind you, I have never traveled outside the Ingens. But somehow I know this place.'

Auda nodded to herself mulling over his words.

'So you know where we are?' She finally asked.

'No.' Disappointment was thick in his tone. 'But I know where to go.' Aermes smiled a weak smile at Auda.

The disc hovered just below the tunnel's ceiling and bathed the area around them with bright white light. The ceiling was over thirty feet high now and the path was wide enough for twenty

men to walk abreast. The path grew wider and the ceiling higher as they ventured deeper into the tunnel.

‘Do you know where we are going then?’ Auda queried.

‘Not entirely,’ Aermes mused. ‘But I know if we want to get out, this is where we need to go.’

Aermes turned to look at Ren and Sui behind him, both of whom lowered their eyes upon meeting his gaze. The path sloped and curved and rose, as they walked deeper into the tunnel.

‘How long can you keep that running?’ Aermes wondered pointing at the disc.

Ren looked up at him with an uneasy expression. ‘As long as I’m awake,’ she answered plainly. ‘It doesn’t take much energy.’

‘Fascinating,’ Aermes exclaimed, admiring the disc. ‘A valuable ability indeed.’ He complimented Ren; who, he suspected, smiled before bowing her head.

‘Thank you,’ she muttered under her breath.

Aermes turned to Sui who was staring at him. Catching her eye he winked at her, which she reciprocated with a toothy smile.

The tunnel’s height and width had now grown twice compared to its entrance. The ground revealed a complete cover of brown grass, rather than the small patches from before. Auda stepped sideways towards Aermes. Leaning in, she spoke in a hushed voice.

‘Aermes something about this place has been bothering me.’

‘Which is?’ Aermes turned to face her.

Auda hesitated at this immediacy, but continued. ‘Since the time we grounded the ship, I haven’t sensed enough minerals or sediments in the ground. This surface we are walking on, the walls around us, are organic; covered with thin layers of soil.’

‘And that means?’ Aermes inquired.

‘I don’t know with certainty,’ Auda murmured. ‘This is not an ordinary place from any measures, is all I am certain about.’ She added, sighing.

Aermes gave a nervous chuckle but was cut off immediately by Ren shushing him. He and Auda turned around to face Ren, who was holding Sui still with one hand, and had her neck perked, like trying to listen for something.

Aermes exchanged a look with Auda and concentrated on his hearing, and then he heard it too. Soft clapping sounds coming from a distance were getting closer.

Footsteps. Aermes thought. He turned to Ren and noted she had realized the same thing.

‘What do we do?’ She demanded.

‘We keep walking ahead,’ Aermes replied, firmly holding her gaze. Ren nodded stiffly.

He resumed walking and Auda fell beside him. ‘Can you sense them?’ He prompted Auda.

She nodded but took a moment before answering. ‘They are none of the five high species,’ Auda claimed in disbelief. ‘Nor any low species I know.’

Her words seemed to slow her down. But once she realized that, she increased her pace and flanked Aermes once again.

Followed by a sharp inhale, Ren exclaimed from behind. ‘Should we be ready to fight?’

Sui stifled a gasp as she clutched her sister’s hand harder.

‘There will be no conflict,’ Aermes declared, causing Auda to stare blankly at him. He glanced back at her and smiled.

‘Are you certain?’ Ren appealed from behind.

‘No,’ Aermes replied confidently, without turning back or slowing his pace.

Auda, after a moment of thought, wondered. ‘Should I put on my armor?’

Aermes held up a hand. ‘No need.’ He responded in a casual tone.

The grass on the ground had become thicker and taller, reaching up to their ankles now. Aermes noticed patches of shrubbery, which grew more frequent the further they walked.

The footsteps grew louder as the group saw numerous lights approaching at the distance. Aermes exchanged looks with the others, and gave them a reassuring nod.

Uncertain about their approach, Ren nudged Auda, who gestured her to follow Aermes’ lead.

Trees began to appear, first smaller, then ones as tall as twenty feet. The side walls and ceiling hadn't been visible for a while so Aermes assumed they had exited into a clearing.

The footsteps grew louder as the floating lights neared them.

Aermes noted the sound to be that of marching and had an idea of what to expect. He turned to the girls once again, who had slowed down from uncertainty and doubt.

Sui sniffled from fear, causing Aermes to turn to her.

'It's going to be fine.' He assured her. 'Trust me.'

Sui looked up at Ren who smiled and nodded, giving his words her approval.

Aermes turned back around and saw the lights grow closer.

He could make out the shapes of the creatures carrying them. From the distance, he could see the profiles of the creatures were similar to that of the high species; in that their body structure was similar to humans.

He decided to stand his ground and wait for them to approach them. He motioned others, with his hand, to stop and stay behind him.

Auda took a step back but stayed on his side, while Ren hid Sui behind her.

As the creatures got closer, Aermes could make out their facial features.

Their skin appeared to be lustrous as it reflected the light. They had large beady eyes and wide frill like ears, on the side of a nearly round head. Their bodies were sized like an average human.

Sui stifled a scream when the creatures entered the white light of the disc. They hesitated to step into the light at first, but a loud grunting from one of the faces seemed to command them forward.

Auda and Ren gasped at the sight of the beings and reflexively stepped back.

Aermes noted that the creatures had green-blue scales for skin which shone in the light. Their noses were flat except for a small mound.

Most of them were bald while a few had crown-like frills on their heads. Their thick lips, in shades of pink and red, stretched along the width of their face giving them a fiendish look.

The creatures, about twenty in number, spread around Aermes and the girls, surrounding them in a semi-circle. They wore silver and golden rough spun tunics, and held spears with jagged blades.

The creatures closed in on the group, till they were only a few feet away.

Ren and Auda stood back to back, facing Aermes' sides, with Sui between them.

A creature, tallest in the group, approached Aermes. He wore a fine golden tunic, with a thick silver belt on his waist and a black sash, bedazzled with red jewels. From his appearance, Aermes took him to be their leader.

The leader stepped up to him and leaned his spear head towards Aermes' throat. Auda began to move, but Aermes gestured her to stay with his hand, behind his back.

In a guttural voice the leader spoke. '*Human. Duend. Ninfa. Ninfa.*' His voice was so coarse that it was barely coherent.

'Yes,' Aermes replied without flinching.

The leader leaned to face him. '*How live. Sorcery.*'

Aermes assumed that he was being asked a question. 'No. We are not sorcerers.' He replied.

The leader, still leaning in Aermes' face, gave him a toothy smile, displaying a row of filthy yellowing teeth. His breath smelled like rotting fish, causing Aermes to use all his will to not cringe. He brought his spearhead closer to Aermes' throat nearly touching it.

'*Liar.*'

'No I am not-' Aermes dropped to his knees as the deafening hum once again filled his head. He felt Auda drop by him and put an arm around his shoulder.

'Aermes.' Her voice sounded far away.

'*What wrong. He ill.*' The leader's guttural voice was soft at a distance.

Aermes groaned as the sound in his head began to tune into a loud booming voice.

'Grounokk.' The voice was a thousand moans in unison.

'What?' Aermes screamed with his eyes shut and face twisting in pain.

'I am Grounokk.' The moans were deafening in Aermes' head. Tears began running down from his shut eyes.

'Grounokk?' Aermes gritted through clenched teeth.

The leader dropped to the ground as if pushed by an invisible hand. Auda noticed the creatures suddenly got restless and began grunting fervently among each other.

'Yes. I am Grounokk. You?' The voice boomed in Aermes' head threatening to crack out.

'Aermes. Dakians.' Aermes managed to squeak, his face twisting in pain.

The grunts between the creatures grew louder and more frequent. The leader shook his head violently.

'Dakians.' He muttered under his guttural breath.

'Welcome.' The voice bellowed in Aermes' head before vanishing in silence.

Aermes crashed to the ground and rolled on his back, panting. He opened his eyes to see Auda's face staring back at him.

'Can you get up?'

He nodded, before Auda helped him to his feet, his ears still ringing. Aermes groggily turned to face the leader, who stood slightly farther away than before.

He pointed his spear at Aermes, then Auda and then Ren.

'Dakians. Skirri. Doi.' He grunted what Aermes assumed was a question.

'Yes,' Aermes declared, his voice sounding weird in his ringing ears.

The leader dropped to one knee, followed by all the other creatures around him.

'Thousand apologies. Lord Dakians.' The leader croaked. *'I Githe. Welcome. Roun Kingdom.'*

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Varenruth Royal Palace Complex, Seruris

Vameej

‘This is the first time,’ Epolus murmured, absentmindedly staring off into space. Smiling to himself he repeated, ‘first time in over a thousand years.’

He took a long sip from his jeweled chalice, before going back to the book in his lap, which he was having a hard time concentrating on reading.

Lorie gazed at the patterns dancing on the floor, formed by the sunlight streaming through the curtains on the carriage window. The sound of horses pattering on the cobblestone provided a rhythm that seemed to go along with it. Her eyes wandered to the book in the prince’s lap.

Perdyr: A Forbidden Story, the title read in cursive red letters.

Lorie sat beside the carriage door, across from the wide window and the prince; who today was dressed in a loose peach tunic, with intricate golden embroidery on its collar and shoulders.

Around his neck, he wore a wide gold choker embedded with small fine cut pink diamonds, a lariat necklace of rose pearls that fell in his lap, accompanied by rose pearl earrings, and rings of crystals and stones, big and small.

His characteristic black opal amulet hung from his neck, slapping against his chest whenever the carriage bumped. The white headdress was held firmly in place with a diamond pin, hiding his amber hair under it.

Epolus Varenruth had a widely known love for rare jewelry, hence he was constantly presented with extravagant gems and stones in the court, which he tried to wear frequently, to show gratitude towards the gifters.

Lorie spotted a familiar emerald ring on his finger and strong feelings of distress began to creep up her throat, which she swallowed and pushed away.

Next to the prince sat his newly appointed royal protector, Drereth. A duend mercenary from western Canem, Drereth, on first glance, would have appeared fearsome to men and women alike.

She had the hardened body of a soldier, with wide shoulders and thick arms. Her dark complexion, despite being a duend, suggested that she had spent most of her life under the sun. Though she was clearly the furthest thing from one, beneath the scars on her face one could make out the sharp features, akin to those of a western noble.

The fourth and final person in the carriage was, the prince's closest friend and trusted advisor, Sofelan Remurian. He sat in front of the carriage, beside the small window behind the coach-man, with his hands crossed in his lap and head bowed under his cowl.

Sofelan, over his silks, wore a black cloak and black gloves, with the hood pulled over his head. Rumor was that he got burnt badly during one of the prince's recent hunting trip. Lorie could think of a way that could've happened and it tied a knot in her stomach.

The royal carriage was big enough to seat a group of twenty people. It moved around on eight large wheels, pulled by four Vameej quarter horses.

Designed by a naono company especially for the Varenruths, these carriages were made with seven-fold taltar steel making them able to withstand impacts from catapults, bullets and even canon fire.

Their gear system amplified their speed allowing the horses to pull the carriage at full capacity, hence enabling them to cover great distances at a short amount of time.

The clamoring of horse shoes against the pavement poured into the cabin when Sofelan slid open the window beside him to

speaking with the coach-man. He nodded after a brief conversation and slid the window shut.

‘We are here, my Prince,’ Sofelan called out in a low hush.

Epolus blinked and twitched, like waking up from a trance.

‘Yes, very well,’ shaking his head, he smiled to himself. He picked up the book from his lap and stacked it away under the center table.

The carriage jerked and came to a halt, preceded by the nickering of the horses. Lorie checked with the hooded Sofelan who gave her a sharp nod. Without a breath’s hesitation, she pulled the hatch and threw the carriage door open.

Deafening screams, cheers and claps washed over her, before Lorie spotted the sizable crowd that had gathered.

She climbed out in a swift motion, and held the door from swinging back shut. With her head bowed, eyes affixed on her feet, hand firmly gripping the door’s metal handle; she waited. Lorie noted that she was standing on an embroidered carpet, which extended to both her sides.

Epolus stepped out with his fiery beard reflecting the sun, head held high like an animal sniffing at the wind. A wide smile spread across his face as the cheers of his name got louder and prayers for his long life sounded in thousands.

Lorie watched the large crowd of young men and women, clapping and waving at the sight of Epolus. They threw bouquets of all colors at their prince’s feet. The girls shrieked marriage proposals at both the prince and his hooded advisor, while the men praised their greatness.

Epolus waved and blew plenty kisses in all directions, over the deafening sounds of cheering and clapping.

Drereth stepped out behind Epolus, followed by Sofelan, who took a few quick steps to get beside the prince. Lorie let go of the door which, in a controlled motion, swung shut.

She once again bowed her head as she fell behind Epolus and Sofelan, with Drereth beside her. Her eyes followed the intricate patterns swirl and twiddle along the length of the carpet, which was easily over fifty feet in width.

Soldiers of the royal army lined, shoulder to shoulder, on both sides of the carpet, holding the crowd behind them, keeping the carpeted path clear of any civilians.

Sun gleamed off their red and gold helms and armor, while they stood in attention with ripple spears in their hands and curved swords hanging from their hips.

Lorie looked up when the noise from the crowd grew louder and gasped at the sight in front of her.

Several dozen yards ahead, stood a giant structure unlike anything she had ever seen or heard about. From this distance, it appeared to her like a crescent made of smooth silvery marble.

It stood on four slanting pillars, at a height of over a hundred feet, with a width thrice of that. She noted that soldiers had the large structure surrounded, preventing the crowd from getting near it.

Lorie found out what was causing the uproar in the gathered crowd when they stepped into the crescent's massive shadow.

A wide ramp, nearly the width of the carpet they were walking on, was extending slowly to the ground from the bottom of the structure. Sofelan had been whispering in the prince's ear all this time and Epolus had been swiftly nodding throughout the instructions.

Lorie glimpsed at Drereth beside her who stared straight ahead; her hard face was expressionless. The shiny ramp touched the floor with a soft thump when two figures appeared at its top end.

Epolus and Sofelan halted a few yards before the ramp, their hands folded behind them. Lorie glimpsed above and watched the two shadows march down.

The taller one had his long hair swaying about his head, mimicking the motion of his long coat. His movements were almost leisurely; while the shorter one moved with a stiffer and more measured pace.

By the time they had descended half the ramp's height, Lorie could make out their features.

The long haired man was obviously the one in command, since the other one made it a point to stay at least a foot behind him. His red hair fell over his shoulders and his white coat flapped against his ankles.

The shorter soldier was dressed in a similar but much more formal looking uniform, completed by a white hat with a red visor.

Epolus stepped ahead to greet the two soldiers at the bottom of the ramp.

‘General Hvok.’ He greeted the taller man. ‘Welcome.’ He said raising his hand slightly in front of him.

The man performed a deep sincere bow.

‘It’s an honor to be in your presence, Your Grace.’ He said before gently holding Epolus’ hand and kissing the big ruby on one of his rings. ‘This is my subordinate, Captain Criff Warrin,’ Hvok gestured to the short young man beside him.

‘Welcome, Captain,’ Epolus nodded and offered the man his hand. Criff swiftly caught the prince’s hand and placed a nervous kiss on his ring.

Epolus smiled to himself. ‘Shall we?’ He asked, motioning towards the carriage behind him.

‘Yes, my Prince,’ Hvok said, falling beside him and Sofelan.

Lorie ran ahead of the group to open the carriage door for Epolus, who waved to the crowd one last time before entering the carriage. She thought she saw Hvok scan her for a moment, before he too got on after the prince, followed by the rest.

Everyone, led by Epolus proceeded to the back of the carriage, which was lined with plush cushioned couches and an oval mahogany table in the middle.

As the group made themselves comfortable, Sofelan retrieved a crystal bottle from a small cabinet under the couch.

‘Some blue spirit, General?’ Epolus offered the red haired man.

‘Forgive me, my Prince, but I don’t partake when the sun is out,’ Hvok replied in a casual tone.

‘A fine rule, that is,’ the prince laughed. ‘Put it back.’ He commanded his advisor.

‘Let’s get moving,’ Epolus called out to Lorie, softly.

Lorie immediately hurried to the window in front of the carriage and slid it open. ‘To the palace.’ She told the coach-man, who reigned the horses in turn, to get them moving.

Lorie came back and sat beside the door, her eyes affixed to the floor.

‘This is Drereth, she is my personal protector,’ she heard Epolus state. ‘And this is my childhood friend and advisor, Lord Sofelan Remurian.’

‘Pleasure to make your acquaintance, my Lord. My Lady,’ the captain greeted, whereas Hvok silently nodded at them.

‘So General, can we count on the Peacekeepers’ support in the upcoming endeavor?’ Epolus asked with impatience thick in his voice.

‘Yes, my Prince,’ Hvok replied calmly. ‘As soon as Vameej accepts the sovereignty of the Council.’

Epolus chortled. ‘You would not be here if they didn’t, now would you?’

‘Well that is true, I suppose,’ Hvok observed with an infliction of amusement in his voice. ‘What a historic day!’

‘Indeed!’ the prince agreed with excitement. ‘That is why, today, we are having the biggest feast this city has seen in centuries.’ He added, nearly giddy.

‘Something to look forward to then,’ Hvok laughed, clapping the prince on his shoulder.

Soon, the carriage came to a slow halt, and Lorie didn’t need a command to swing open the door. She stepped outside holding the door open, her chin pressing against her chest.

Footsteps marked the exit of everyone and to her surprise, Epolus was the last of them.

‘Bring father’s medicine to him and tell him I’d be coming to take him to the feast soon.’

Epolus’ whisper sent a chill down her spine. The voice was just as cold as it was the night her village was burnt to the ground.

High palace walls towered in front of the party. The prince made a joke, eliciting laughter from the Peacekeeper commanders, as he walked them towards the wide steps leading into the massive arched entryway of the palace.

With clenched teeth, hidden under a shadowed face, Lorie broke off from the group and headed into the palace, where she swiftly made her way towards the king's chambers.

Since he had difficulty moving about, on account of his weak knees, King Enisyus preferred to live on the lowest level of the palace.

On her way to his chambers, Lorie picked up his vial of medicine from the royal healer. The ageing man, dressed in a white embroidered tunic, was tinkering over his worktable when she walked in.

His scraggly hair bounced wildly on the side of his head when he crossed the room to fetch the medicine from one of his high shelves. The glass vial was the size of her palm and had a glimmering blue liquid sloshing in it.

Lorie hurried to the royal chambers where the guards at the entrance frowned at her arrival.

Most of the palace guards and servants, other than the prince's household, seemed to despise her; and she never cared enough to find out why.

'It's the majesty's medicine,' she declared, holding up the vial for one of the guards to see.

He gave a stiff nod and pushed open the massive door, just enough for Lorie to slide in, which she awkwardly did.

Lorie paced across the sprawling courtyard, making her way to the king's bed chambers. Afternoon sun poured in from the sky light, high above her head. In the courtyard's center, a naked river ninfa statue poured water into a small pond from her marble breasts.

Lorie found the doors to the bed chamber wide open and unguarded. Walking through massive teak doors, she scoped King Enisyus sitting by a window gazing out onto the gardens, sunlight gleaming on his old face.

'Your Majesty!' She called out from the chamber's entrance.

The king, like waking up from a dream, jerked and turned to look at her. His twisted face lit up with a tired smile upon recognizing Lorie.

She remembered that when she had come to the palace, the king had not been aware of her existence; even though she brought him his medicine every day. That was until one day she went to see him with Epolus, after which he had become quite fond of her.

‘Lorie!’ The old man exclaimed in a frail voice. ‘Come in child,’ he waved her over.

Lorie briskly walked to the window. She stood beside the round high table across from the king. After overturning a silver chalice, she poured the liquid from the vial in it.

‘Today’s medicine, Your Majesty,’ she held out the chalice for the old man.

With shaking hands the king received the chalice and sent the medicine down in one loud gulp. His face cringed at the taste of the viscous liquid. Sighing, he put down the empty chalice before him; his unsteady hand almost knocking it over. Lorie was about to take her leave when the king spoke.

‘So, the Peacekeepers are here.’

‘Yes, Your Majesty.’ Lorie squeaked.

‘Our ancestors kept them out for a millennia. I failed,’ the old king sighed again, deeper this time. ‘Did you know we were the only nation free from the Council’s trade and military laws?’

‘No, Your Majesty,’ Lorie stammered.

‘Well, now we are just like the rest of them,’ Enisyus mused. ‘Pawns of the Council.’ He trailed off in to silence.

Lorie stood there quietly as the king sat on the cushioned chair watching kids run about in the gardens, seemingly lost in his thoughts. He looked up after a few moments remembering the girl’s presence.

‘If there is nothing else...’

She bowed. ‘Your Majesty, Prince Epolus will be arriving to escort you to the feast.’

Enisyus nodded and waved her away.

Lorie promptly bowed once again and strode out of the doors. Upon exiting the bed chamber, she entered the courtyard, where she saw a small group of women approaching from the distance.

Dressed extravagantly, the princess walked in the middle, commanding her maidens around her, who carried large trays, their contents covered with netted cloths.

The princess wore her pale orange hair with azure highlights, in a high bun, decorated with diamond pins carved into small flowers. Her white dress hugged her ample figure and shone silver like a fish's scales, in the afternoon light. On her right arm, from the shoulder to elbow, the princess wore a gold armlet in the shape of a three-headed hooded snake; its golden heads resting on her fair shoulder.

Upon noticing Lorie in front of her, she motioned her maidens to go ahead.

'Ah, my brother's whore.' The princess jeered from the distance. 'A sight to sore eyes!'

Lorie immediately froze in her place at the sound of the woman's voice, terrified, staring at the ground.

'Have you poisoned my father yet? No? Still waiting for an auspicious time, I see.'

The princess taunted as she got closer, her heels clicking against the stone walkway, making her approach more ominous.

She walked up to Lorie and began circling her slowly. Scanning her, she tsked and shook her head in disapproval. Her handmaidens stood a few feet away, leering at the girl, whispering to each other and laughing from time to time.

'Tell me, was being the prince's whore your ambition or was it something you came by on accident?' The tall woman demanded. 'I mean, you must be good because Epolus doesn't stick with one whore for so long, let alone letting her in his council.'

Tears ran down Lorie's face, which had begun to redden and turn warm.

'You're not carrying his child, are you?' The princess bent down to palm Lorie's abdomen, and glared into her wet eyes, 'if I knew you were at Harroug that day...' she grinded her teeth and straightened up.

'Run along, before I get you executed.' The princess snapped with a sharp exhale.

Without hesitation Lorie sprinted across the courtyard, head ducked and tears streaming down her cheeks. She didn't dare to look back or slow down before she was halfway across the palace.

Muffled weeps sounded from her mouth as Lorie walked along the palace lobby and up the giant flight of spiraling stairs to the prince's quarters. She had her eyes shut, trying to keep the tears in, while she silently wept to herself.

The guards at the door pushed it open when they saw Lorie approach.

'G-greetings, my Lady.' One guard stammered, noting her wet eyes and reddened face. She walked straight in without replying and heard the door slam shut behind her.

Lorie crossed the massive courtyard to get to the prince's private kitchens; the soft sounds and smells of sizzling meats reached her before she sighted the doorway. The chatter of the cook-maids echoed in the smoky corridor as Lorie made her way to the cookhouse.

Coughing softly, she entered the large room where four cook-maids worked side by side on woks, pans and pots lined on high stoves along the wall. Not noticing her come in, with their backs toward her, the cook-maids continued their conversation.

'... why the prince won't be eating at the feast?' one of them asked.

'Probably,' the one on the far right replied without looking up from stirring her pot. 'But irazurras sneaking into the feast to poison the prince sounds absurd. Even a dumb beast would realize that strategy would fail ten out of ten times.'

'Yes. But I don't think the prince is taking any chances after the hunting incident last month.' Another one added in a tone of slight confidence.

'I still don't know the entire details of that,' the shortest one spoke up, 'what really happened?'

'So the prince, Lord Sofelan and fifteen royal guards were camped in the northern parts of Krinn woodlands after a day of hunt,' the one on the far right began without waiting a moment. 'In the middle of the night, the prince woke up to screams and

the choking smell of smoke. Upon exiting his pavilion, he crashed to the ground in disbelief when he saw two giant irazurras breathing fire over the surrounding tents. The royal guards, with their long spears and taltar steel shields, were barely able to keep the beasts at bay.

‘The next moment, the prince saw a flaming man run out a tent. Recognizing the man from his stature and screams, the prince jumped towards him; he wrapped the burning man in his robes and pushed him into the dewed grass. Lord Sofelan immediately passed out from the pain, and when the prince saw his friend’s charred, melting skin, his mind went numb and he froze in place.

‘The head of the guard party broke off from the defense, along with a couple other soldiers, and rushed towards the prince and the fallen lord. He helped the prince to his feet while the other guards scooped up, an unconscious, Lord Sofelan from his arms. They circled the prince’s pavilion, to the royal carriage parked behind it.

‘The smart coach-man had already readied the horses and the carriage for a swift escape. Without a moment’s wait, the prince and lord were secured in the carriage and the soldiers took off to help their comrades. The prince kept staring at the orange glow in the dark forest as they distanced from the encampment, expecting the irazurras to come after them at any time.’

The lady took a loud deep breath. ‘But they didn’t. That is why the king believes it was a bold declaration for an upcoming attack. He thinks they wanted the prince to witness, firsthand, what an all-out war with those ungodly creations would be like.’

‘Did any of the guards survive?’ The short woman asked after a long silence.

The cook-maid shook her head in negation. ‘Half of the guards were cooked alive in their armors even before the prince escaped the camp. The rest probably met the same fate, unless it was something worse. That is why the prince immediately called for that duend warrior as soon as he arrived in the capital. The attack had left him shaken and scared.

‘Ah, Lori! How long have you been sitting there?’ She noticed the girl crouched on a stool beside the door. ‘Didn’t want to interrupt the story, did you?’

Lorie chuckled nervously in reply, which the lady seemed to accept as a response.

All the prince’s personnel had been kind to her since her arrival. Was it due to fear or something else, she couldn’t say for sure but she could’ve guessed.

‘The first course is ready,’ another cook called out, ‘you carry it away, while I start plating the next.’

With a swift nod Lorie rushed to the cooking station and grabbed the large oval tray and started out of the kitchen.

Lorie approached the bed chamber but halted when she heard hushed voices coming from the creaked door.

‘Vrinma promises two Pillars to be here before full moon,’ Epolus stated.

‘When do we do it then?’ Drereth mused.

‘The day they arrive,’ Sofelan suggested. ‘No reason to wait.’

Epolus hummed loudly. ‘So we march on the full moon.’

After a moment of silence, Sofelan wondered. ‘Do you think He’d still be there?’

‘If He isn’t, we will still have the Council backing us and an entire empire to rule,’ Epolus assured, happily. ‘And if He *is*, then we will have the entire DieTerra to rule.’

Sofelan and Drereth laughed in agreement.

‘I have felt His presence grow stronger over the past decade,’ Epolus continued. ‘He is getting ready to be woken up by His loyal children. Trust me... The forbidden god will walk the lands once again,’ he declared.

The room fell silent for a moment before Epolus called out, ‘You can come in now, Lorie.’

A biting chill ran down her spine as she started towards the door, the oval tray shaking in her trembling hands.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

North Smarnion

Dinso

Fa blazed past the tree tops as he followed the saguzar in front of him. He had never known a beast to move at such speeds.

With a single flap of its twenty feet wide wings, the saguzar increased the distance between them by a quarter mile. Fa was nearing exhaustion since he was running low on potential and there was no energy around him worth borrowing. Even the wind was weak today.

Kolben zipped between the trees on his steam board, barely being able to keep up with Fa, whose speed was in turn being tested by the saguzar. With every flap of its wings, the black beast distanced itself from its pursuers.

Kolben had never seen a saguzar of this size and was still reeling from the existence of the beast.

Since he was a little over six, Kolben had hunted saguzars back home and had never heard of a beast this large.

Back home, the tallest saguzars were no taller than five feet when they stood, but this giant was over twice that; not counting its foot long pointed ears.

Being descendants of bats, saguzars were fur covered mammals possessing a similar anatomy. The main difference being the evolution of their arms and legs.

Unlike a bat, a saguzar walked and at times ran using their short muscular legs. They used their strong talons to grab onto prey mid-flight. Also dissimilar to bats, saguzars had evolved arms, which were independent from the wings. Though their arms were similar in proportion to that of their cousins, the separation from wings allowed them to perform numerous hunting and flying maneuvers.

Kolben gazed at the black shape moving further away in the sky. He turned to Fa flying above him, who seemed to be falling back.

He met Fa's gaze and sensing urgency, he pressed down on the board's tail with his foot. The gleaming board tilted upward and Kolben scaled the height, followed by the high pitched whizzing of steam.

He fell beside Fa, who was clearly exhausted. It looked like he might fall out of the sky any moment.

'How far are Cad and Lady Kamillah?' Kolben asked, flying alongside Fa.

'About seven miles north,' Fa panted, his eyes focused straight ahead, on the diminishing saguzar.

'I am all out, Kolben,' he confessed, concern heavy in his voice. 'We will lose it in a few seconds.'

Kolben scoped for the saguzar who was easily over two miles ahead and distancing drastically with every moment. Soon that dark shape would be a dot and sooner still it will disappear in the blue sky, Kolben thought.

'I might be able to catch up.' He suggested.

'No. That will be reckless,' Fa declared. 'I will transform.'

Slightly stunned, Kolben gave him a swift nod and glided to the side. The forest's green canopy zipped below them; leaves rustling from their movements, tree tops swaying from the winds they left behind.

Fa took a steady deep breath, before closing his eyes shut. He stopped in mid-air and floated high above the canopy.

With his eyes closed, Fa reached into himself and pulled on the beast sleeping inside him. He tapped the being and it came forth.

Loud and soft cracks and scrunches sounded; Fa's bones began to snap and mold.

His skull elongated into a narrow snout as fangs burst forth from his gums. His muscles swelled, led by the enlarging of the skeleton beneath. Kolben stared frozen, witnessing the transformation.

He watched Fa's skin give way to scales, which shone with a bluish green hue. They tore through the boy's skin, covering it in its entirety.

Pained screams escaped his mouth when Fa's spine burgeoned out of his bottom, elongating into a bony tail behind him; muscles and scales racing to cover it. Kolben cringed at the loud sounds of Fa's bones snapping and cracking.

Fa hunched over as his body enlarged, tearing his clothes to shreds, which swayed leisurely to the ground.

Another scream escaped his lips as two massive bones broke out from his shoulder blades. The bones hinged open, revealing vast green wings in between.

The scales ran across his body, glinting in the sunlight.

Horns protruded above his eyes, steadily curling to the sky. The beast's shiny body elongated and expanded till it was over twice the size of the boy's.

Claws sprouted out of his hands and talons out his feet. He rose his snout to the sky and inhaled sharply, slowly opening his big spherical eyes.

Kolben stared in awe at the mythical creature facing him.

The mighty herenuer shone where the sunlight hit its scale. His massive wings flapped, nearly throwing Kolben off balance. The canopy below them covered, at the force of the wind the wings created.

The tail as long as his body whipped behind him. He turned to Kolben who found himself lost in the creature's iris-less blue eyes.

Fa gestured with his snout to Kolben to go ahead. The saguzar was a mere dot on the horizon by this point.

The herenuer grunted to get the still mesmerized Kolben's attention and moved his snout to the disappearing saguzar once again, directing him to go ahead.

Kolben finally nodded, breaking off the stare and faced the horizon. He crouched on his board and with a high pitched whoosh of the steam, shot ahead, leaving a thin white trail in his wake.

Fa watched him speed towards the vanishing creature.

Angling his wings, Fa gave them a strong flap and zoomed behind him. He placed his long arms under his chest as he narrowed his frame to gain higher speed. By the second flap, Fa had already over taken Kolben.

The shape of the saguzar grew bigger as Fa accelerated continuously towards it. He noted the saguzar turn to look at him and increase its speed by frantically flapping its giant wings.

Since Fa could see much further and wider in his herenuer form, he saw the black beast in front of him, the empty blue skies on his sides and top, and part of his scaly legs trailing his body.

When his skull molded, the eyes moved higher and to the side, increasing his field of vision, making him able to see everything except things right behind him.

Fa rippled his massive tail, as he sailed through the air, similar to how a steamer might use its rudder.

Within half a minute, Fa had traveled over two miles and was only a few yards behind the saguzar, who had begun to panic at the sight of this fearsome creature. In this form, Fa was nearly the same size as the saguzar if not larger.

It desperately tried to move farther away from the herenuer in a frantic flight full of terror.

Fa raised his snout to the sky and sniffed the air. He smelled the other saguzar before he heard it; Cad and Bernice were herding it towards them.

The herenuer roared, frightening the saguzar, who beat its wings wildly, trying hard to distance itself from him. Fa smiled on the inside, since in this form he wasn't physically capable of doing so. He heard a soft whizzing sound from behind, slowly increasing, indicating that Kolben was catching up.

Fa readied himself when he heard Bernice and Cad closing towards him. He noticed the trees below begin to thin and

disappear. The mountains of Ugwu rose afar, implying that they were approaching the foothills.

At the distance, Fa heard what he thought sounded like a galloping horse. He shook his head and focused on the other saguzar nearing him from north. Slowing himself, he turned his body in way that he would appear to be standing in the sky.

Eventually, coming to a complete stop, Fa was hovering in mid-air when Bernice burst in his view, chasing a saguzar towards him.

Her body, shone, made of bright golden light. Bright enough to illuminate the night but not enough to make one wince.

The two saguzars slowed their flight before they almost crashed into each other. They flew in circles with their backs to one another.

Realizing they were trapped, the panicked beasts tried to break away from their pursuers but were kept in check by Fa and Bernice

Cadmael appeared beside Bernice at nearly the same time as when Kolben arrived at Fa's side.

Fa moved to his left, circling the already flustered saguzars, while Bernice mirrored his movement on the opposite end, surrounding the beasts, slowly closing in on them.

With the saguzars in the center, the four hovered around them, over a large clearing. Fa's attention drifted to the rising mountains behind Bernice before he brought his focus back to the beasts between them.

The rabid saguzars, still circling in the center, eyed the four surrounding them, ready to attack. Without warning, Fa saw Bernice beam towards the saguzars.

The girl-shaped light transformed into a golden shaft and shot at the beasts.

The saguzars had covered themselves in a dense, black cloud right before that instant, seemingly sensing her attack before she made it. The beasts unhinged their jaws and out gushed thick, black smoke that swirled around them, almost instantly covering their surroundings.

Fa glimpsed the bright yellow beam penetrate the massive cloud in the center. The view was not unlike a ray of light escaping an overcast, black sky.

Everyone was still for a heartbeat and just the next moment, Bernice's limp body exited the bottom of the cloud and began to plummet towards the ground.

Fa was about to lunge after her when he saw Kolben zooming towards the free falling Bernice.

Crouched on his metal board, with his chest touching his knees, Kolben shot towards the ground with a sense of urgency. The board whizzed below him, creating a long trail of light-gray smoke behind it.

A large figure silently darted out from the bottom of the slowly fading, dark cloud, towards a falling Bernice.

Kolben intercepted the girl a few feet above the ground, scooping her mid-fall. She lay in his arms, her head hung to the side, unconscious.

He hovered along the ground, circling it, gradually deaccelerating his board.

Kolben stepped off the board and knelt, laying Bernice down in the grass. He patted her head trying to bring back her consciousness, unaware of the saguzar nosediving towards them.

Fa noting this, flipped his body, facing towards the ground, and streamlined himself, before he fell in hot pursuit.

Kolben didn't look up until it was too late. The saguzar hung a few feet above his head, its talons wide open, ready to deliver a skull crushing grip.

Before Kolben blinked, a great shadow cloaked the saguzar who froze in mid-air.

The herenuer's arms tore through the saguzar's wings and caught hold of its hands on the opposite side; while his strong talons held the creature's legs. Kolben stared with equal parts horror and awe for his friend as the ten foot saguzar seemed dwarfed by the herenuer hovering above him.

With a tug, Fa effortlessly pulled the saguzar's arms off its body. Blood gushed out, in blue streams, from the gaping stumps on the beast's shoulders.

The creature's deafening screeches echoed among the foothills and the trees, filling the clearing in between with wails of pain and death. Fa swung the writhing saguzar across the field from its legs.

Drops of the creature's blue blood splashed on Kolben and Bernice before its body got hurled away.

Fa stepped on all fours to the ground beside Bernice, who moved her head to one side ostensibly becoming conscious once again. He noticed Kolben's gaze fixated on him.

A movement in the air above his head made Fa look up.

The smoke cloud had cleared out and the other saguzar, taking advantage of the situation darted towards a distracted Cadmael, who hovered a few yards from him. Fa spread his wings to take flight but was stunted in position when a blinding light from the ground forced his eyes shut.

Cad barely registered the event before a wide pillar of golden light shot through the saguzar a few feet in front of him.

The saguzar's lifeless body dove to the ground with a foot wide hole in its chest, the skin around which charred and sizzled.

Bernice's golden body materialized from the light about fifty yards above Cadmael. She was about to give him a scolding for not being aware of his surroundings when she saw a shape moving on a cliff at the closest foot hills.

The girl on the cliff turned away from the clearing and began to walk towards the mountains.

In an eye blink, Bernice beamed from the sky to the cliff and stood facing the girl's back, who sensing her presence stopped, but didn't turn around.

The short girl had straight purple hair that hung just above her shoulders. On her shoulders, she had, what looked like, an old cloth doll with its arms tied around her neck and its limp cloth body hanging down her back.

The girl wore a white frock hugging her body till the waist, from where layered frills circled down its length. Golden strips bordered the frills and the shoulders of the dress, giving it a noble appearance.

‘Who are you?’ Bernice demanded. ‘What are you doing here?’ The girl stood still with her back towards Bernice.

‘You don’t want to know right now.’ Her calm voice was sweet, soothing and young. It had a little melody to it. ‘Now, go back to your friends.’ She chimed without turning to Bernice and continued towards the mountains. ‘You saw nothing.’ She called out in her jingling voice.

Bernice stood there, her eyes wide and mind numb, watching the girl walk away for a moment, before dematerializing into a yellow light and beaming to the clearing.

She appeared in front of a herenuer Fa and Kolben, who were examining the arm-less saguzar corpse. Another corpse with a gaping hole in its chest lay a few yards away.

Cad stood at a distance silently eyeing the herenuer, apparently uncomfortable.

Bernice took off her long coat and held it out to Fa.

‘You want to change back?’ She whispered, holding out the garment to him. ‘I think you might be scaring, Cad.’ She added, tilting her head towards the boy.

Hearing that, Cad looked away shuffling nervously on his feet.

The scaled creature gazed at him then stood on his hind legs and took the long coat off Bernice’s hands with surprising dexterity.

Both, Kolben and Bernice instinctively stepped back as the herenuer towered over them.

Fa turned around and took a few steps away, before spreading his wings and taking off towards the forest. Bernice watched the mythical beast fly away with wonderment then turned back to face Kolben.

‘What was on the cliff?’ Kolben asked as soon as she looked at him.

‘What?’ Bernice asked, almost reflexively.

‘On the cliff,’ Kolben repeated, outstretching his hand to point to the cliff on the foothills across the field.

‘Oh! Nothing.’ Bernice shook her head. ‘I thought I saw something. But I didn’t.’

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Roun, Grounokk

North Dinso Sea

‘We are where?’ Ren whispered to Aermes.

‘In a *hilibalea*,’ Aermes disbelieved the words as they were coming out of his mouth. ‘When we fell down, what we thought was a cave or tunnel was in truth the gullet of this creature called Grounokk.’

‘We are in a fish,’ Ren stated to herself at a lack of words.

‘Hilibaleas are not fish,’ Sui’s voice was as tiny as her, ‘they just live in the sea.’ Ren shot her a look that made the girl look away.

‘And you talked to it?’ Auda whispered over his other shoulder.

‘Yes,’ Aermes felt uncertain. ‘It *welcomed* me.’ He mused softly.

‘I don’t know how to explain it but I can feel him in the back of my head, listening.’

Auda nodded, looking at him with concern. ‘So the being is telepathic.’

‘Yes,’ Aermes agreed.

The light from Ren’s disc shone down on them as they walked through a wild field of luminescent vines and bushes.

The trees around them were towering glowing structures, like a stag’s giant antlers with a thousand prongs, big and small. They bore no leaves, and shone with the colors of the sea: indigo, blue and green.

The shrubberies constituted of a multitude of peculiar looking plants. Some had leaves shaped and colored like butterflies, while others had flowers that looked like fuzzy oranges.

Tall, saw-shaped weeds swayed in the gentle breeze and large algae clusters, glowing with a soft white light similar to the electric lamps in the west, hung from the vines, like fruits. Ren's disc flew down and placed itself against her back.

'It is bright enough,' she said to Sui who gave her a confused look. The girl nodded.

Mushrooms rose among the trees in the forest, with thick vines wrapped around their wide stems. The scales on the mushrooms, wide, glowed with hues of blue, pink, green and red, coloring the vegetation in their vicinity. The ground didn't grow any grass but was carpeted with thick, soft moss.

Aermes noted that the forest was beginning to thin out as the vegetation got brighter. He glanced at their escorts who walked beside and behind them, while Githe the leader led them to this city they called Roun.

'So these creatures live inside a fish,' Aermes heard Ren murmur to no one. She clearly was not comfortable, uneasy and possibly scared.

Aermes scoped a large dark shape beginning to rise at the distance. Upon getting closer, he saw the forest's light glinting off the shiny surface of the gates built into the moss covered wall. The giant silvery gate was arched at the top and seemed to be made entirely out of metal.

Two identical engravings of beings, with their open palmed arms to their sides and heads facing upwards, had been carved on both halves of the solid doorway.

Other than appearing to be feminine, the beings bore a resemblance to Githe and the others, in that they were of the same species. The wall as high as the gates, stretching on either sides and disappearing into the darkness, marked the limits of the city.

'Uh, Githe,' Aermes called over to the urgizon.

'Yes, Lord.' Githe replied in a guttural tone, turning back to look at him.

‘If you are the only ones who live here, why do you need gates and walls?’ Aermes questioned.

‘Keep out *gllehkrtt*,’ the urgizon replied in a deep croak.

‘What is that?’ Aermes asked, unable to repeat the word.

‘Small animal. Clean Grounokk. Kill easy but.’ Githe answered pointing to himself. ‘Lucky today. We not meet *gllehkrtt*.’

Aermes nodded despite not fully understanding.

‘Githe, I also have a question,’ Auda called from Aermes’ side. ‘How do you know Terran speech?’

‘Empire own slaves human. Us leave. Human come with.’ Githe growled with the most grace he could muster. ‘Us free human. Us live all. Human teach.’ He finished and gazed at Auda waiting for her reply.

‘So humans live in here too,’ Auda finally spoke after comprehending Githe’s meaning.

‘Yes.’ Githe moved his head in a motion which Aermes assumed to be a nod.

The giant gates began to slowly creep open as the group approached them.

The engraved urgizon women hinged aside as if welcoming the party with their open palms and outstretched hands. Sui clutched Ren’s arm and quietly walked beside her, making Aermes feel bad for the scared girl.

The partially opened gates revealed a group of urgizons in fine tunics waiting for them. As they walked inside the gates, Aermes gazed upwards to see light shining down on them, like the day sky.

The gates slowly hinged close behind them, once the last person had stepped in. Githe led Aermes and others to the small group waiting not far from the gates.

Aermes, Auda, Ren and Sui gawked at the sprawling city around them.

Towers rose higher than any Aermes had ever seen, surrounded by buildings of all shapes and sizes imaginable. Some had dome tops while others were giant cubes with doors and windows.

Paved roads snaked around the city with urgizons, dressed in long robes and dresses, bustling about them.

Every passing urgizon seemed to Ren as alien as she seemed to them; both observing the other with the same curiosity and uneasiness. Sui hid behind her sister's leg as they walked towards the robed group.

Giant tube shaped pumps rose and fell over the skyline in the east. The cranks rotated steadily, pulling and pushing the massive glass pistons. Aermes wondered what was being mined before his attention went to the group of urgizons who were marching towards them.

A small hooded figure walked gingerly in the front, followed by considerably taller figures in similar hooded tunics.

Long, loose and shiny, the garments were colored in single bold shades of vibrant colors, which, to Aermes, looked like sheets of metal gliding in the breeze. The short figure wore gold, while the one on his left wore copper, the one beside him wore jade and the tallest one wore pearl.

Upon coming face to face to these urgizons, the Pillars were greeted by the older looking, short creature.

'Greetings, Lord Dakians and welcome to Roun. It's an honor to be in your presence.'

His voice had no trace of Githe's guttural tone. His words were impeccable like any native Terran speaker. Aermes thought he saw a human face among the robed figures.

'Along with yours, Lady Skirri and Lady Doi. Also the little Lady Doi,' he tried to make a playful face at Sui but ended up scaring her; making her hide behind Ren.

The old urgizon laughed innocently. 'I apologize, my Lady.'

He bowed apologetically, to which Ren give him a wave of forgiveness.

'I am Reketth Hurlkdr the council head of Roun. And I must insist that we get going, since we are expected.'

'Expected?' Auda was surprised.

'Yes, my Lady.' Reketth replied. 'The Elder wishes to greet you all personally.'

'The *Elder*?' Ren muttered.

'My Lord and Ladies, if you will please follow me, you will understand all,' Reketth impatiently turned and began walking. 'Also, we had already set a course to Dinso when we were informed of your arrival. We have crossed Na'ala and should be approaching the eastern coast any moment.'

Auda and Ren exchanged confused looks before quickly falling behind Aermes, who had started beside the old urgizon without hesitation.

'How did you know?' Aermes asked from behind.

'We were alerted by the Elder, my Lord,' Reketth stated. When Aermes raised an eyebrow, he added. 'You will understand soon enough.'

After walking silently, for what Aermes assumed was about a mile, the structures of the city gave way to a large square. Surrounded by wide pavements, in the middle of the square, rose an ivory tower.

Smooth and polished, the structure was perfectly cylindrical, with a top that, Aermes found, was difficult to spot, as it disappeared into a bright sky. He also wondered about the lack of any windows, though a small carved door marked the entrance.

Auda noticed that nearly all the urgizons entering the plaza, went to the ivory tower on their way out. Some grazed the smooth wall with their finger-tips, some bowed their heads at the structure as they walked by, while a few stopped to face the ivory and press their foreheads against it.

Led by the waddling old urgizon, the Pillars entered the giant tower from the small doorway and surprisingly, none of them had to duck.

The entrance was just the right height for Auda who was the tallest in the group, slightly taller than Aermes. She craned her neck to look up and saw that the tower's insides extended upwards infinitely, before disappearing into a white light.

In the middle of the tower stood a pillar, running along the height of the circular walls.

The pillar, much brighter than the ivory on the tower's outsides, seemed to pulsate with a faint whiteness. Reketth walked up to the pillar and stopped a few feet from it. He gestured Aermes and the others to step up beside him.

They obliged the old urgizon and stood facing the pillar.

Slowly the surface of the pillar began to ripple and swell outwards. The swell began to take the shape of a face. The flowing ivory further melted and dripped itself into shapes of chest and shoulders.

Aermes and Ren exchanged concerned looks, while Auda stared at the ivory body emerging from the pillar.

'Ah!' The glossy lips exclaimed, smacking with strands of gooey ivory sticking between them. *'Good to see you again Dakians, Skirri and Doi.'*

Ren and Aermes looked at each other.

'Do we know you?' Auda asked.

'You don't. But you do.' The face replied.

The three exchanged the same looks.

'Tell me Dakians are you seeing it yet?' The face questioned curiously.

'Seeing what?' Aermes asked.

'Ah!' The face exclaimed, disappointed. *'You will.'*

'The first time we had terran guests was nine hundred years ago, when I built this place with you three.' The face mused.

'Who are you?' Ren asked making sure her voice didn't crack.

'An old friend, an old soldier... an old man,' the face whispered the last part in an exhausted voice. *'I am Grouhd nolln Pokk, former head of the Last Empire's forces. Your blood fought on our side, my Lords and for that we stay indebted.'* The face now of an old man looked tired.

'Are you a- ,' the ivory man cut off Auda before she could finish her question.

'Remember Dakians. Before looking know what you wish to find.'

The face, now of a young man with a square jaw and small eyes, ordered with authority.

'Y-yes,' Aermes managed to stammer stunned by the sudden urgency in the man's voice.

'And Skirri, loss is inevitable.'

'Y-yes,' Auda replied, though it sounded closer to a question.

'Doi, you know it already.'

'I do?' Ren exclaimed, a slight tinge of mock in her voice.

'The little one,' the face stated. *'I will come for you, if you come for me, 'o Pillars. We shall meet again.'*

With a sharp bow to the figure, now dissolving back into the pillar's gleaming ivory, Reketh immediately escorted the four out of the tower. The doorway slammed shut behind them, disappearing into the tower's wall, hiding away any evidence of its presence.

'What was that?' Ren tugged Auda's sleeve, whispering loudly, who shrugged in reply. Aermes still matched the old urgizon's slow pace as they began skirting the pale tower.

'Reketh,' Ren called out to the urgizon. 'What just happened?'

The old urgizon turned to face her. 'That was the Elder, my Lady,' he said. 'He ordered us to bring you to him as soon as you arrived.'

'Why?' Auda raised an eyebrow.

'Clearly he had something to say,' Reketh gave a short laugh.

'Could've said it clearer at least then,' Ren rolled her eyes.

'I understand, my Lady,' the old urgizon sighed, 'the Elder cannot maintain a physical form for more than a couple seconds. Though, I apologize if you felt rushed.'

Ren almost regretted saying what she had.

'It's alright,' she sighed.

'How far are we from Dinso?' Aermes spoke up, diverting the urgizon and Ren's attention.

'Almost there, my Lord. If you will follow me.'

Reketh started circling the ivory structure once again. With the group behind him, he came to a stop over a carpeted platform, which Aermes assumed was on the exact opposite side of the tower's entryway.

'Mind your footing, my Lord and Ladies.'

The platform below them shook in a slow sideways motion and then gradually began to rise along the ivory tower as the city of Roun shrunk beneath them.

Tall pistons rose and fell over the eastern districts, towers and buildings appeared to be shaped weirder than they had seemed from the ground and people in the streets became small moving dots; they could see the city limits at the distance and the darkness beyond it.

The platform climbed till the glowing ceiling was not but a few feet above them. Aermes felt a sense of odd satisfaction to find the smooth tower walls joining into the ceiling.

The platform rose into a dark hole, in the luminescent surface, which had seemed to appear all of a sudden. They entered a dark shaft with a faint light above them.

The platform steadily ascended the shaft as the light above them grew wider.

When they entered the light, the sound of the waves hit Aermes' ears before his eyes could adjust to the sunlight; and when they did, he could not believe what he was seeing.

A long sandy coast stretched in front of him, extending to both sides as far as he could see. The sun was moving down the horizon, signaling they still had several hours before sunset.

'Some refreshments for the way,' Reketth seemed to have produced, what looked like, a jute bag and a large earthen flask, out of thin air. He handed the bag to Auda and the flask to Ren.

'Farewell, my Lord and Ladies. May our paths cross again,' the old urgizon sunk in a deep bow.

'F-farewell to you to,' Aermes hesitated at the immediacy of the situation.

'And thank you,' Auda added.

'Yes, thank you,' Ren agreed, with Sui chiming in with a small voice.

Aermes glanced at Reketth and upon receiving a slight nod jumped off the hilbalea and kicked the air under him, making himself arc towards the beach. Auda, and Ren with Sui, were right behind him.

After landing on the beach, they looked back, one by one but found no trace of the giant creature.

The sea slapped in waves, softly, against the sand as they gazed into the horizon expecting to catch one last glimpse of the hilbalea. After several minutes had passed, they turned to the land in front of them.

Behind the slowly darkening forest, the white peaks of the Uguwu Mountains could be seen from the coast itself.

‘We can make it to the foot hills before nightfall,’ Aermes estimated. ‘We will set up camp there.’

‘Yes, they don’t seem too far from here,’ Auda agreed. ‘What do you think Ren?’

‘Yes, I’m fine with that,’ Ren nodded, gazing at the white peaks poking through the clouds.

‘I’ll go with Auda,’ Sui demanded, holding out her arm.

‘Well, all right,’ Auda laughed and took hold of her hand before they began to levitate.

Ren threw her disc down but it stopped a few inches above the ground. She stepped on the hovering disc and glanced at Aermes.

He gave her a swift nod and kicked the ground, launching himself several yards straight up in the air. He turned his body, leaning forward, and kicked the air behind him, starting towards the mountains, with the girls below him.

‘It’s right here,’ Ren swore as they stood near the summit of one of the mountains.

‘But there is nothing here,’ Aermes scanned the white, pulling the cloak around him tighter, shivering from the cold. He had given his coat to Sui, whose teeth had begun to chatter a few miles ago.

Whiteness in the form of snow and storm swirled around them, blurring their vision. Auda put a hand over her eyes, shielding them from the wind to get a better look.

‘Do you think we might have to still walk some more,’ she asked staring into the snow.

‘No... I swear this is it,’ Ren replied, hesitating for a bit.

Just then, a thin crack appeared in the air in front of them.

The crack in space shot into the sky and began to expand. Aermes took a step back as the crack widened to reveal an old brick wall.

The snowy view they had been seeing, slowly peeled away and brought forth an old, stone fortress. In a few moments, a giant building stood on the summit that was vacant a moment ago.

‘Is this...’ Auda began.

‘Yes!’ Ren exclaimed. ‘The Fiachori Shrine.’



Urgizon (Male)

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Fiachori Shrine, Ugwu Mountains

Dinso

Towering stone walls sprawled where there was nothing but white snow till a moment ago.

The ancient building appeared closer to a castle than a shrine, Aermes thought. A tall oak gate, bearing writings carved into its wood, stood a yard from them. Two towers, twice the height of the curtain wall, marked the front ends of the castle.

Auda thought, she saw a tall shadow in one of the tower windows, just when the large wooden gate slowly began to creak open.

Aermes and Auda exchanged looks, while Ren pulled Sui closer. Aermes gave Auda a nod before starting towards the opening gate. She, along with Ren, shuffled after him.

At the gate, wearing a gray threadbare robe, stood an old man with his hands folded behind him. He smiled wide as he watched them approach.

‘Welcome!’ He declared, throwing out his arms over his head.

‘Master Vrinma?’ Aermes asked.

The old man stood a head taller than Aermes, his long wispy hair blown to one side.

‘Indeed, son,’ he said. ‘And you must be Aermes Dakians, the lord of lords.’ He slapped Aermes on his back, motioning him to walk inside the gate.

‘And these beautiful ladies are Auda Skirri and Ren Doi.’ The old man exclaimed.

‘Master.’ Auda and Ren bowed deeply, while Sui stared at the old man’s face.

Vrinma bent to the ground, facing the girl and dabbed her cheeks.

‘Welcome to the Fiachori, Lady Sui.’ He turned and motioned for the others to follow.

Stepping inside the walls, Aermes saw a large courtyard with the stone structure rising around it. The gates began to hinge close behind the group, in a slow, controlled motion.

Auda stared at the giant gates moving by themselves. Turning to Ren, she felt relieved to see that she too shared her confusion.

They entered a stone corridor, which appeared to encircle the courtyard that lay ahead.

The inside of the shrine was not unlike a small castle or a lord’s keep, Auda noticed. From the circular lobby around the courtyard, corridors branched outwards; leading to the living quarters, granary, dining hall and armory. Two towers rose at the corners of the front wall and one at the center of the back one.

At the far end of the courtyard, over a spacious platform, a small man with two curved swords sparred with two other men; one of whom wielded a round shield and a short sword, while the other spun a two headed trident in his hands.

A small group sat on the grass near them, watching intently.

After watching them for a while, Aermes realized that the short man wasn’t fighting against two men but each man was fighting the other two, at the same time. Their movements were fluid, like that of trained dancers practicing their perfected routine.

Hearing the gates bolt shut, the people sitting on the grass noticed Aermes and the others enter the courtyard. They got up and began towards them.

One of the women said something to the sparring men who, with immediate and smooth motions, broke off from their sparring session and trailed behind the others.

Vrinma led them to the middle of the courtyard where they were met by the group.

‘Girdon.’ Sui broke off from Ren and ran towards the muscular man with a massive double-axe at his back. She jumped at the man’s legs, tightly wrapping herself around them. The man bent down and scooped up the girl in his arms, nuzzling her stomach, making her giggle.

Aermes looked at the old master.

‘Girdon, here, is Electrolig’s Keeper,’ Vrinma explained, ‘he stayed with the Doi sisters for, how long Ren?’

‘Just over a year,’ Ren smiled at the man and gave him a slight nod. The man in turn sunk into a deep bow; Sui still in his arms, laughed at the swinging motion.

Aermes noticed that the man wore light armor similar to that of Olin, though he didn’t wear the complete set and his was more grayish than black. More people poured out from different parts of the stone corridors onto the courtyard gardens.

Vrinma stepped forward and began introducing the shrine residents to Aermes and the girls.

The petite miatarri girl with her hair tied in a long thick braid was Bernice Kamillah, the Elephant. The stone she bore, the Jariq, gave her the ability to control, create and manipulate light.

The Falcon, was a handsome looking redhead duend-human, named Kolben Arud. He wielded the powers of the Termokaliq, enabling him to bring rapid changes in temperatures of anything in his surroundings, including his body.

Kang Fa, the Stag from the island of Viyn, was the most peculiar person they met.

‘Would you like to tell them, Fa?’ Vrinma asked the boy.

With a shy nod, the pale boy stepped forward, ‘I am a herenuer, my Lord.’

Aermes cocked his head and with a soft grunt, cracked a wide smile. When the boy with the sea-green eyes and dark matted hair didn’t laugh, he asked, ‘you are not jesting?’

‘No, my Lord.’

Auda, Aermes and Ren exchanged glances while Sui still in Girdon's arm stared at them in confusion.

'I have never seen a herenuer before,' Auda gave the boy, who was clearly nervous, a calming smile.

Fa smiled in return and performed a deep bow before stepping back with the other residents.

'Fa holds the Kinetikaliq,' the master continued.

The stone allowed the boy to drain any being or thing of its energy and tendency, and store it within himself to use later. According to Vrinma, Fa was the perfect candidate for the stone since it required the bearer to have a strong moral code.

The last Pillar was a boy of merely sixteen, Cadmael Nachen Can. He looked even younger because of his miatagarri heritage; while the duend side gave him the platinum hair and a fair complexion. Dibiliq, the stone he wielded, gave him dominion over the world of sound.

Vrinma told them that the boy could create terrifying sonar blasts while still being able to detect the faintest sound from miles away. Though the master pressed, the boy was still untrained and reckless, causing Cadmael to shrink in embarrassment.

'You know, this is a historic occasion,' Vrinma smiled a bearded smile, 'for the seven Pillars stand in the Fiachori together, united, after over three centuries.' He patted Aermes on the shoulder before getting back to the introductions.

Apart from Girdon, there were four other Keepers currently residing in the shrine.

The duend woman who broke off the sparring men earlier was Alleli and she was the Keeper of the Jariq. Vrinma told them, she had developed strong telekinetic abilities over time and had trained in fighting with disc-blades of various shapes and sizes.

The Keeper of the Termokaliq, was one of the three sparring men; the short one with the two curved swords, named Reuth.

The other two were Nyaz, tall and lean, who still held onto his short sword and shield; and Kaeb, a big duend leaning on his even bigger double trident. They were the Keepers of the Kinetikaliq and the Dibiliq.

All the Keepers wore light armor similar to that of Olin in different shades of black and gray.

The younger residents, dressed in long beige and peach woolen robes were, Vrinma said, the trainees or acolytes. The oldest was a boy named Byren; Haldren the miatagarri gent was younger than him.

The girl Terrea, Vrinma stated, was the first ninfa to have been born as a Forever in over seven hundred years.

Conforming to her ninfa appearance, despite having the face of a young girl, she had the full-bosomed body of a grown woman. The youngest of the acolytes was Pikkid, a shy duend girl dressed in a peach robe clearly too big for her.

As Vrinma talked, a big man with a heavy belly walked to the front.

‘Ah,’ the master exclaimed, ‘Harkon here is the cook for the shrine. He is who keeps us fed and warm. I might say, he is the most valuable individual among us.’

The man’s laugh boomed in the courtyard.

‘An honor to meet you, my Lord and Ladies.’ Harkon sunk in a bow, which Aermes thought was an impossible feat, considering his huge paunch.

A little far from them, Aermes spotted a group of five people, standing in front of the massive cypress tree in the middle of the garden. They were dressed in white, hooded, silken robes lined with golden and ruby strips. They held their crossed hands in front of their abdomen; their robes’ long sleeves hanging before them. Vrinma gestured the group to move forward and they stepped closer.

‘These, my Lord and Ladies,’ Vrinma started, ‘are the Seers of Fiachori.’

Riha and her younger sister Iirinin, Deynl, Mararanon and Laenuk; all gave slight nods when their names were called. None of them removed their hoods, none of them said a word. Not even when Auda greeted them.

Nodding at Vrinma’s gesture, they walked across the flower garden to the white cypress tree that stood a few yards from

them. The master then motioned Aermes towards the tree and fell beside him; the others followed.

Aermes stood under the giant white cypress in the middle of the courtyard. The tree stood as high as the four-storey structure that rose around it, with circular stone balconies looking over the large courtyard.

Following the gaze of the master, Aermes spotted a crystal, the size of a man's fist, protruding from the tree's trunk.

'Would you like to take a look?' Vrinma asked him.

Aermes glanced at the old man then back at the stone.

Auda stepped beside him to see the smoky white crystal in the tree. Aermes stood there staring at the viscous smoke in the crystal, mesmerized by its motion.

'Go ahead. Take a look.' Vrinma insisted.

Aermes slowly brought his hand to the stone and gently pressed his fingertips against it.

A scream escaped his lips as he got tugged by his hand and his body followed with a hard jerk. He zoomed forward, screaming, while the world around him turned to a blur. His clothes flapped against his body, along with his hair, that whipped wildly around his head.

Aermes spun in the blurry tunnel of light as voices and faces flew past him. *Before looking know what you wish to find.*

Scenes and images passed him before he could register them. He tried hard to focus on the blurs around him.

There was a great fire, large crowds were running across a field, a giant golden cube spun in the air, casting shadows on a circle of people below it; then everything got too bright and Aermes had to press his arm over his eyes.

A soft thump sounded in his ears and he noticed the feel of ground under his knees.

Screams and cries rose around him as his eyes adjusted to the light. Aermes pushed himself to his feet and looked around.

Long lines of people advanced towards him from both sides. Men riding horses, elephants, camels, wielding swords, spears and bows, began to appear on the horizon.

Aermes noted the ground on which he stood.

The sand was sticky and dark and warm. He watched the sky, which shone red with thick clouds of dust and smoke.

The smells of burning bodies reached his nose and then he saw them. Piles upon piles of dead men were strewn over the battlefield, like some sort of horrific decoration.

As the two armies got closer, the ground beneath Aermes began to tremble.

Mounted horses, followed by camels and elephants, pattered in the front lines of the approaching armies; in turn accompanied by large troops of soldiers and their bloodcurdling war cries. Aermes stood his ground as around him the soldiers crashed into one another.

He spotted a hulking man push to the front lines.

Even the man's fellow soldiers cowered under his shadow and immediately cleared his path. He stopped after taking few steps away from the crowd and pressed his feet hard to the ground.

The man clenched his fists and let out a bellow.

The soldiers backed further away. A few of the enemy soldiers decided to take advantage of the moment and hurled head long towards the screaming man, their glinting spearheads pointed at their target.

Aermes stared at the air beginning to ripple around the man as thick steam appeared to rise from his body. The attacking soldiers froze a few feet from him and slumped to the ground.

The man, with his body strained in a tight squat, let out another scream when his limbs began to inflame.

Aermes stood unmoving as the man's clothes tore off and his body gained rapid size by every passing second. His skin turned red and wrinkled, looking like old leather, and his hair began to grow down his hastily enlarging body.

Aermes watched the man rise to over fifty feet in height. At certain places, the man's skin tore from the strain, revealing the gigantic pink muscles underneath.

Soldiers of both armies began receding from the red skinned giant whose bellows shook the ground.

Aermes noted something strange about the giant's face but the distance, sunlight and the dust made it hard for him to see clearly. It took him several moments to realize that the face wasn't that of a human.

The red giant had sprouted multiple eyes like a spider and fangs longer than a grown man's arm. He bellowed again and two arms tore out of his waist.

Soldiers had cleared the area around him but the war continued not far from the giant.

Grunting, he looked around, scanning the field below him. Locking on an enemy battalion to his south, he began sprinting towards them.

In less than three leaps, he was in the middle of the battalion, flinging soldiers like pebbles. He crushed some soldiers in his palms and stomped on the others. The nauseating cracking of bones was only drowned by the screams of the dying men.

Within a few eye blinks, he had massacred hundreds of soldiers. The giant continued a ceaseless assault on the enemy army until, out of thin air, a man appeared right in front of his face.

Hovering fifty feet in the air, the man was dressed in all black, complete with a long coat that flapped in the wind. The giant froze, and all his eyes focused on the man floating in front of them.

The man's black hair reflected the faint light filtering through the clouds.

With a quick motion, the giant clapped his hands, swatting the floating man.

He parted his hands to confirm his kill but found the man still hovering between his palms, visibly unharmed. The man brought up his finger, pointing it at the giant's face, and with a

thunderous blast the fifty foot giant got thrown off his feet, into his own army.

The giant dredged across the field for hundreds of yards from the momentum of the blast, killing umpteen of his own soldiers upon impact.

Without a moment of hesitation, the man shot towards the shuffling giant across the field. Aermes looked at the man as he flew past him and noticed golden eyes and a familiar face.

Aermes pulled in a sharp breath when a tug hurled him off his feet and he began to lift towards the sky.

He saw the ground below him speckled with people in all directions. The screams and cries slowly diminished and once again the world around him began to blur.

He zoomed in the bright tunnel, incomprehensible voices and faces flooding his senses. Soon, he began to slow down and followed by a hard thud, felt the grassy ground beneath his body.

Aermes slowly opened his eyes and saw Vrinma's bearded face leaning over him. Behind it he saw numerous faces staring down at him. Three, he recognized.

Aermes grunted trying to push himself up but his arms wouldn't respond. Vrinma held him by the shoulders and helped him sit up against the white cypress.

'What did you see?' Vrinma asked.

Aermes stared with unfocused eyes, confusion clear on his face. He rubbed his forehead and his face twisted with pain.

'Try to remember,' Vrinma's voice echoed in his head.

'There was a war,' Aermes recalled. 'Thousands of people... A man transformed into a giant with red skin and four arms... There was another man. In black... He blew the giant away.'

Aermes massaged his head and slowly his thoughts and rationale began to trickle back to him.

'Was that me, Master?' He asked. 'Did I see the future?'

Vrinma laughed as he helped him to his feet. He still held Aermes by his shoulder, long after he was standing.

‘The opposite, young Dakians,’ the master said. ‘That was an ancestor from a distant past. A forgotten one at that.’

Vrinma began to walk, shouldering a shuffling Aermes alongside him.

‘The Lost War took place over a thousand years ago.’

The Keepers and the acolytes started to leave their separate ways, while the Seers stayed by the tree, talking under their hoods in hushed voices. The Pillars tailed the master across the courtyard.

‘Yes,’ Aermes said. ‘Father told me about it.’

Vrinma nodded. ‘For three hundred years, DieTerra burned. Generations lived and died, never knowing a reality other than the war. It was the event that ripples through our world till today.

‘What do you know about the Lost War, Auda?’ He called out over his shoulder without turning to look at her.

‘Nothing, Master.’ Auda replied. ‘No one does. All the traces and accounts of the war were erased right after, hence the name.’

‘Precisely,’ Vrinma said. ‘All the people who could talk about the events were silenced by intimidation or death, and no details of the three hundred years long war were allowed to trickle through the populous. This suppression of information went on for over a hundred year after the end of the war and was carried out by none other than the Council of DieTerra.’

Vrinma turned to Aermes to gauge his response but upon seeing confusion on his face sighed.

‘Aasim never told you about the Council. Did he?’

‘No,’ Aermes replied. ‘But I know about it... A little.’

‘The Council of DieTerra is the most powerful organization in the world,’ Vrinma said. ‘It was created after the end of the Lost War, in the name of a mutual peace, to rule DieTerra through governments and monarchs. They govern the entire world, other than a few *anarchic* regions. The only country to have successfully opposed the Council, as a whole, was the Vameej Empire... That was true, until yesterday.’

‘What?’ A girl shouted from behind.

Aermes turned around to look at her. It was the thin miatarri; the Elephant.

‘Yes, Bernice,’ Vrinma said. ‘Yesterday, a battalion of Peacekeepers led by a Lieutenant General known as the Widowmaker, arrived at their capital.’

Aermes heard disgruntled groans and sighs behind him. Vrinma walked him to a bench on the edge of the courtyard.

Bernice followed the two up to the bench and settled in the grass in front of it. Without hesitation, everyone else followed suit. Aermes awkwardly eyed them from his stone seat beside the master.

‘We met him,’ Ren stated in a plain voice.

‘Met who?’ Vrinma asked.

‘The Widowmaker,’ Aermes said. He thought he saw a moment of shock on the old man’s face before it returned to its placid state.

The master nodded to himself and hummed for a while before speaking.

‘So that’s where you disappeared,’ he glanced at Ren, ‘how did you manage to get her?’ He turned to Aermes.

‘We fought him,’ Aermes replied, incurring audible gasps from the other four, ‘but the Widowmaker didn’t fight us. It was like... he was playing with us.’

‘Why would he do that?’ Vrinma cocked his head.

‘I asked him the same thing,’ Aermes looked at Auda, who nodded in corroboration, ‘but he told us to ask Olin... Does Olin know the Widowmaker?’

Vrinma sat with his eyes closed for a while before replying, ‘it would be better if you asked him yourself. It wouldn’t be right if I said something he doesn’t want to be known.’

‘He implied that he knew my father and fought Auda’s mother too,’ Aermes said as Auda agreed with a hum.

‘The Pillars have been involved in various... call it scuffles, with the Peacekeepers over the past.’ The old man spoke, ‘all your parents were involved in some... But the questions you ask, young Dakians, are unfortunately not mine to answer.’ He placed

a hand on Aermes' shoulder, 'it'd be better if you brought it up with Olin once he is back.'

'I understand, Master,' he said, though he didn't.

'Ah,' Bernice called out, 'where is Master Isies?' She craned her neck and scanned the area, 'he didn't come to welcome the Lord and Ladies...'

'Isies left last night on a personal assignment, after examining the saguzar corpses you brought in,' Vrinma said. 'He should be back in a day or two.'

Bernice nodded while Auda and Ren exchanged confused glances but none spoke. Aermes shuffled on the stone bench beside the master.

'Now before we start,' Vrinma spoke, 'I think we all would like to hear about your journey across the Vameej Ocean. Something remarkable happened, didn't it?'

Aermes and Auda shared a smile, Ren too looked up but apparently wasn't as happy about the experience.

'Yes,' Auda replied and then she began to recite their journey to Dinso, after rescuing Ren, in as much details as she could. The story was punctuated with laughs, claps and constant noises of bewilderment and awe from the other four, while Vrinma listened quietly cracking a small smile every now and then.

'So, they dropped you off at the coast,' Bernice said.

'Wow!' Cad said. 'I have never seen an urgizon in my life.' The boy's eyes were still wide and his mouth still gawking.

'Have you, Master,' Bernice asked, 'met an urgizon?'

'No, I haven't,' Vrinma said, 'but knowing that the Pillars have begun to walk the path of their ancestors, brings me joy and DieTerra hope.' The master turned his head skywards, gazing at the thin gray clouds before he was interrupted by Kolben.

'I had a question about the vision.' He said. 'Who were the people Lord Aermes saw?'

Aermes immediately shook his head. 'Just Aermes is fine.' To which Kolben gave an apologetic nod.

'And what is that stone in the tree?' Ren added.

‘Yes,’ Vrinma started, ‘you see Ren when the people began to be prosecuted for mentioning the war, some of them took steps. The seven Pillars, after the war ended, performed a form of projection magic that hasn’t been done since; not that it hasn’t been tried. They acquired a large geode of haze quartz, one of the most receptive crystals, from a sacred site, and projected memories of the war into it. Then they broke it into nine parts and scattered them around the world, after securing it with an ancient magic.

‘This magic was like a biological lock, meaning only a person with a specific ancestral combination would be able to access it. Lord Dakians here is merely the sixth person to be able to look into it in the past thousand years. These stones are called the Vision Crystals and the Council has been trying very hard to acquire them since they learned about their existence, which was over seven hundred years ago; during which time they have managed to unearth two of them.’

Vrinma took a long breath and glanced at the young faces watching him. ‘As for Kolben your question, I don’t think we have talked about all the lost stones. Have we?’ Kolben, Bernice, Cad and Fa shook their heads while the others stared at the old master.

‘Alright,’ Vrinma spoke. ‘One thing we know for certain is that during the war, the Pillars fought united on one side. To counter the immense strength of these god like men, the opposing armies had to do something. Using the magic of the best mages and sorcerers of the land, and the skills and intellect of the most brilliant naonos and duends, they created artificial stones, today known as *Faux* stones, which were similar in power to the *Vivi* stones. Thousands were created at the time but to this day only fifteen of the strongest remain.

‘Five elemental stones, five psychic stones and five lost stones. The giant in Aermes’ vision was the user of the lost Stone of *Bind*. The user of that stone can bind hosts, giving them magical abilities and demonic tendencies.’

Vrinma gazed at his students as they took in the information. 'So these fifteen faux stones, though only a thousand years old, have sizeable strength, considering they were the only surviving ones among their companions. Now, out of the five lost stones, which are considered to be the strongest, sometimes at par with the stones you possess, four are wielded by the four highest ranks of the Peacekeepers, which are their Marshall and the three Generals.'

'Where is the fifth one?' Aermes asked.

Vrinma smiled at Aermes and pointed at a decorative boulder in the courtyard. When he turned to look at it, it began to shake. Tendrils of thick black smoke rose out from the boulder's shadow and began to wrap themselves around it.

Soon, fully covered in the dark, streaming smoke, the boulder shook vigorously before disappearing altogether along with the black smoke; with no trace left behind.

The next moment, several feet up in the air where the boulder was, a disc of viscous liquid, the same color as the smoke, appeared. The boulder dropped out of the disc, like from hole in the floor, and with a loud thump landed on the grass.

'The Gate Stone, which later came to be known as the Great Stone or the Black Cloud,' Vrinma said. 'This stone was one of the most important tools of the Council as it allowed the user to open gateways across space, allowing immediate transportation and concealment of men, objects or even buildings.' The old man waved his hand at the stone structure around them.

Auda, Aermes and Ren let out an audible *Ahh*, while the others sat there, seemingly having had this lesson before.

'This was stolen from the Council a little over nine hundred years ago, a few years before this shrine was established,' Vrinma said.

'You wield a stone too, Master?' Ren asked, surprise clear in her tone.

Vrinma nodded. 'I have been practicing with it for over two hundred years now. It is not easy to keep a shrine, of this size, hidden forever. For the first few years, till I perfected myself, I just moved the shrine underground.' He laughed.

Aermes and Auda glanced at each other at the casual tone of the master. 'That reminds me. Kolben, Fa. You'll be leaving for Vameej tomorrow.'

The two exchanged looks that were a mix of confusion and determination and then replied in unison. 'Yes, Master.'

'The Seers have had some visions which are cause for concern,' Vrinma said. 'Or rather have not had some visions.'

'What does that mean, Master?' Bernice asked.

'Vameej is somehow full of blind spots at the moment,' Vrinma said. 'We are not able to see anything beyond Fa and Kolben's arrival there. Now for that reason, I need you two to be more than careful. You two are going there under the pretense to protect the king, but your real objective is to investigate what is happening there. Vameej is our only and oldest ally.' The two boys nodded.

'What are blind spots, Master?' Ren asked.

Vrinma hummed to himself.

'When the Seers are trying to look into an individual's future, sometimes their visions are obstructed by something similar to a dark opaque cloud. In most instances, this is due to the residual uncertainty of the surrounding time but we have had incidents where deliberate magic was used to block us out.

'For instance, we couldn't see your journey after your steamer disappeared from the ocean surface. Though that was because the hilbalea had blocked us out unintentionally. But when the Widowmaker had captured Ren, he must have used *tigwyn* to bind her. *Tigwyn* obscures a Seer's vision. That is why we couldn't anticipate your capture or initiate a rescue.' The old man sunk his head in apology.

'It's all right,' Ren said. 'Luckily, Auda and Aermes were nearby.' She glanced at Aermes and gave him a slight nod.

The master cracked a wide smile and clapped his hands, 'so if there are no more questions, you all should go rest before supper,' he said.

'I have one last question, Master,' Bernice said. 'What are the psychic stones?'

Vrinma scratched his beard. 'There are five of them,' he said. 'The Stone of Force, Projection, Truth, Harmony and Communication. As the name suggests the stones endow the bearer with psychic powers.'

The master watched the students' slow nods. 'The Stone of Force is wielded by one of the biggest warlords of DieTerra. Kolben and Auda would know him.'

'The Overlord of Canem.' They both said.

'Yes.' Vrinma said. 'That stone allows him to move objects with his mind. If you believe some people, he's known to have the strength to uproot entire towns and send them flying to the sky.'

'The Stone of Projection is a tricky one, since it lets the wielder drive someone's mind to their will. It is bore by the daughter of the Overlord of ChowMos and is considered to be the most dangerous stone in the world. The rest three, Stone of Truth, Harmony and Communication have changed their owners in the past two years and the new owners haven't made themselves known yet.'

'We'll talk more about the stones over supper, let's adjourn for now,' he added.

Everyone bowed when Vrinma got off the bench. He bent to hold Aermes and supported his shoulder, helping him get up.

'I think, I can walk now, Master,' Aermes said as he pushed himself to his feet.

'Yes, sure.' Vrinma smiled letting go of his arm. 'I will walk you to your room.'

'Thank you, Master,' Aermes bowed.

Accompanied by Vrinma, he started towards the stone corridor around the courtyard, while Bernice led the others in the opposite direction; Aermes wondered where.

'Tell me, Aermes,' Vrinma spoke. 'If you give a person a hammer who has never seen, used or heard of it before, what would he do with it?'

Aermes was taken aback by the sudden question. He thought for a long moment.

'Break things?' He asked.

‘Precisely,’ Vrinma said. ‘A hammer’s first obvious use appears to be to destroy. But when you spend some more time using it, you realize it can be used to maintain things, and after a while of maintaining, you realize it can be used to create as well. Which is the toughest out of the three?’

‘The stones you wield are similar to the hammer. There are three, let’s call them, levels of their powers. The first and easiest is destruction, which comes to one naturally. The second is preservation; the level which Auda and Bernice are presently nearing. And the third and most difficult is creation.’

‘That is the level where you need to be at, if you wish to serve the world.’

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Fiachori Shrine, Ugwu Mountains

Dinso

Aermes woke up with his face lit from the light of the rising sun. Or so he thought.

He looked out of his window and glimpsed the dark night sky. Turning his gaze down, he noted the light was coming from a figure in the courtyard.

Squinting his eyes, he recognized the shape of a girl sitting cross-legged in the grass.

Aermes turned from the window and headed to his dresser, his blinded vision slowly adjusting to the dark room. He put on his long coat and wrapping it around himself, headed out of the room. The stone corridor outside, bathed in the yellow light from the courtyard below.

Aermes walked down the spiral staircase with soft steps, to not make any sound. He stepped on to the grass and began to pad to the other end of the courtyard garden, where Bernice sat with her eyes closed, her palms folded in her lap.

Aermes noted a bright yellow glow emanating outwards from the air around her while she, herself, sat in the dark.

He crept to a stone bench a few yards from the meditating Bernice and lowered himself on it; while she sat there in a thin black robe, defying the cold mountain winds.

Aermes observed the girl, whose serene expression appeared to him no less than that of a divine being in contemplation. Her long black hair, untied, fell down her back all the way to the ground.

Aermes watched as her chest rose and fell, following her quiet breaths, which turned into small fog clouds near her nose, upon exhales. Her breath was uniform, measured, like clockwork. Bernice took a long breath and held it.

‘Can I get you something?’

Aermes jumped out of his skin as the bright light died drowning the night back into darkness.

‘N-no.’ He stammered. ‘I was just watching.’

Bernice opened her eyes and turned to him. ‘Not a lordly thing to spy on a girl.’

Blood flushed Aermes’ cheeks, warming them against the cold winter breeze.

Laughing, Bernice stood up. She swung her hair in front and rolled them up, tying them in a tight bun on her head. She walked up to Aermes, who looked away, embarrassed to meet her eyes, and plopped on the bench beside him.

‘Why are you awake at this hour, my Lord?’ Her voice was playful, just about taunting.

‘The light woke me up,’ Aermes said, staring ahead.

‘Amazing,’ Bernice exclaimed. ‘We can’t expect anything less from our lord.’

Aermes turned to her to find her appreciation to be sincere and not a jeer. ‘What do you mean?’ He asked.

Bernice stared at Aermes. ‘You... don’t know?’ She sounded genuinely surprised.

Aermes shook his head. ‘What do I not know?’

Bernice exhaled in disbelief. ‘I was not giving forth any light,’ she said. ‘Well, not any light a regular person can see.’

Aermes stared at her in confusion. ‘You would have to explain a little more than that.’ He laughed.

‘Of course,’ Bernice admitted. ‘What I was doing was an awakening meditation, created by Master Vrinma. He would

teach it to you three today. Let me ask you this my Lord, do you know what is the source of our powers?’

‘The Vivi stones,’ Aermes replied.

‘Yes,’ Bernice nodded, ‘but where do the stones get their powers from?’

Aermes shrugged. He wanted to say *magic* but knew not only would he be wrong, he would look foolish too.

‘The Vivi stones,’ Bernice said, ‘like their name, draw their powers from what is known as Vivifica’s high plane or Vivien. It is believed to exist at a frequency higher than our plane. Now, Vivien overlaps with our plane but since it exists at a different frequency it is completely non-existent to us.

‘We who bear the stones of Vivi have been given an innate, physical connection to this high plane and can get in touch with said plane, hence enhancing our powers to exponential levels. So, the light that woke you up, my Lord, was not shining in truth; just that you could see it.’

‘So there was no light,’ Aermes mused.

‘Precisely,’ Bernice said. ‘What you saw was my projection in Vivi’s high plane.’

Aermes hummed, nodding his head and digesting this new information he had received.

‘I know it is a little much to take,’ Bernice said. ‘Master Vrinma had to explain the same thing to us for days before we started to get it. And I am nowhere near being able to elaborate on subjects as well as Master Vrinma.’

‘Don’t underestimate yourself,’ Aermes and Bernice turned to spot the old master crossing the grass barefoot. His peach robe flapped around him in the cold winds mimicking the motion of his wispy white hair. ‘You are as good as any other master here. A little impatient, I’d admit.’ Vrinma laughed.

Aermes and Bernice sprang from the bench and performed a deep bow. The master patted them on the shoulders and sunk down in the stone bench while they both plopped on the grass in front of him.

Vrinma scratched his white beard smiling. 'Aermes you have to forgive me, I heard your conversation get interesting and couldn't help myself.' His eyes glistened in the glint of the moon.

'Were you around, Master?' Aermes asked.

'No,' Vrinma said, 'I was in my room upstairs.'

Aermes glanced at Bernice then back at the master.

'So Aermes, did you understand what Bernice explained about the stone you bear.'

'Yes, Master,' Aermes said, 'I have one question though.'

'Go ahead.'

'Yesterday,' Aermes said, 'you told us about the fifteen stones other than our stones. If our stones are drawing their energies from the high plane, where do those stones get their energy from, being equally powerful?'

Vrinma smiled wide and looked at Bernice, whose face lit up at Aermes' question.

'I was expecting *you* to ask me that, Bernice,' he said. 'But you seemed preoccupied yesterday.'

'Coming to your question, Aermes,' he continued. 'Just like Vivi's plane exists above ours, there is another plane which exists below ours. It is known as Perdyr's plane or Perien. Described as a dark and desolate world, the low plane brims with energies and beings at par with Vivi's plane, but twisted and tortured by the reality of their world. The man you saw turning into the red skinned giant was using the Stone of Bind, which allowed him to bind beings or energies from the low plane to the beings in our plane. So, instead of using someone else, he used himself as a host and got possessed by a daemon known as Lozhal, hence taking on his form and abilities. Now, while the energies of the high plane are enchanting, energies of the low plane are considered corrupting. Though, more than a few have used them and kept a good heart.'

Aermes and Bernice both listened to their master with complete attention. Vrinma glanced at them, then turned his gaze to the sky. 'That is another reason why since the inception of

our world there have been two factions of beings called the high beings and low beings.'

'Does that mean...?' Bernice trailed off mid-sentence.

'Yes,' Vrinma said, 'back in our ancient past when magic and sorcery were as common as breathing, the world was still divided among high and low beings. Humans, miatagarris and duends considered themselves the elites of the world. The miatagarris brought the ninfas in with them and the humans brought in the naonos and gigans; both with the intention to exploit these races. Hence, the six came to be known as the high beings. Any other conscious race on DieTerra was considered to be the low beings and were shunned from the civilized world. To this day a great number of tupuas, irazurras and izarands hold a grudge against the civilization but are afraid to act on it, considering the scale and strength of their armies.'

Aermes and Bernice gaped and nodded. 'So, Master,' Bernice said, 'if the magic was so common... how did it die? There are no more than a handful of mages today and even they can't do anything more than lighting a candle at the other end of the room or making an apple fly.'

Vrinma laughed. 'That's what we hope Lord Dakians here will be able to tell us.' He looked at a confused Aermes. 'The Vision Crystals,' Vrinma said, 'tell the forgotten story of our world, my son. And until we can know our past we cannot hope to improve our future.'

The old man caught Aermes' gaze. 'Tomorrow,' he said 'you also will be leaving for a short travel.'

'A travel, Master?' Aermes asked.

'Yes,' Vrinma said. 'I would have liked to give you some time to rest but the Seers advised me that it has to be done immediately.'

Aermes nodded. 'Where am I going, Master?'

'You are going south to the forest of Itolk.' Vrinma said. 'There, where the Trest Canal begins, you are to seek the one known as Belyore of Itolk.'

'The basoama?' Bernice exclaimed.

'Yes,' the old man said. 'She holds the closest Vision Crystal.'

Aermes glanced from Vrinma to Bernice and back to Vrinma. 'What is a basoama?'

'What?' Bernice shrieked.

'Bernice,' Vrinma said, 'Aermes wasn't raised in the same world as you were.'

Though his tone was soft and affectionate, Bernice looked down like she had been slapped across the face.

'Basoama, Aermes,' Vrinma said, 'is another name for a forest goddess. Some of the most ancient forests house these beings, which act as their guardians and rulers. Basoamas are immortal in a way, like trees; meaning they live for a very long time.'

Aermes nodded his head and thought for a few breaths, before speaking. 'So, Master,' he said, 'shouldn't a basoama be able to reveal the events of the Lost War?'

Vrinma laughed loud. 'Yes,' he said. 'Yes, they could. But will they? No. Keep in mind Aermes, these beings are more trees than they are anything else. They despise most people and exclude themselves from their world. Belyore of Itolk keeps the crystal safe, only because of an oath she took hundreds of years ago.'

Vrinma looked up at the sky again. The horizon had begun to turn orange at the edge.

'The sun will be up soon,' he said turning to Aermes and Bernice. 'Rest for a few hours before the others get up. It wouldn't look good if you yawed throughout the farewells.'

Both the students gave a stiff nod and got to their feet. They bowed and began towards the corridor leaving the old master on the bench, gazing at the sky.

Fa got up a few hours after dawn. He looked out his window and peeked at the sun slowly climbing the sky.

In the distance, he saw the white jagged peaks of the Ugwu Mountains, glimmering in the morning light with a tinge of red. He got out of his bed and straightened up after himself. Putting on a warm wolf skin cloak, Fa stepped outside his room.

He walked to the other side of the corridor when he heard noises coming from the courtyard. Looking below Fa saw that Bernice, Kolben, Ren and Auda were sitting at one of the round stone tables, while Sui and Cadmael ran circles, seemingly playing tag.

‘Kolben,’ Fa cupped his mouth and called out. ‘Are you packed?’

Kolben looked up, followed by Auda and Ren, and nodded. Fa gave him a wave and turned back to his room. He didn’t know how long he was to spend in Vameej, so he wasn’t sure how big a luggage to make.

Fa dragged out his leather case from under his bed.

Coughing, he fetched a wet rag and wiped the dust off it. Then, from his cupboard he took out all the clothes he had, which weren’t many: five tunics, three robes, five shirts, seven trousers, six breeches and a large towel.

Fa unlatched the case and dumped the contents in it, which the case swallowed up with ease. After closing the suitcase and securing the latch, he proceeded out of his room once again. He made his way down the corridors and then began to descend the two flights of spiral stairs.

Upon arriving in the courtyard, Fa noted that Aermes and Master Vrinma had joined the others, and the acolytes were setting up breakfast on the round stone table. Fa made his way across the grass to where the group was sitting in a crescent facing the master, who sat on a bench not far from the table.

‘Why are we going there again?’ He heard Kolben speak.

Fa greeted his fellows and bowed to the master upon approaching them. Vrinma motioned him to sit down with his usual wide smile.

‘Master?’ Kolben asked.

‘Yes, yes,’ Vrinma said, ‘there are more than one reason in truth. Firstly, when the Pillars were being hunted after the war, several generations of them took refuge with the Varenruth royal family in Vameej. King Nyrin Varenruth, the second, built this shrine for us, which after seven hundred years we are still using. So, we are indebted to them.

‘Secondly, his ancestor,’ Vrinma pointed at Aermes, ‘swore to help Varenruth family, whenever they are in need, till the end of times. Since Aermes is your lord, this, in extension, is your oath too. So when the king demands I send two Pillars to Seruris that is what I have to do.

‘And thirdly. The most important reason is the visions that the Seers have been seeing. There are blind spots all over Vameej and one of them, the one over the capital, is too big. Now, since the Seers don’t know when the visions will take place, other than in the future, I am not sure what to make of it. But in the four hundred years I have lived, I have never seen so many blind spots shrouding one place for so long. I see storm clouds brewing in Vameej and I need you two there.’

Kolben nodded, showing his excitement for all to see.

‘Master,’ Fa said. ‘Can I ask why us? I mean Bernice is far more capable and I bet Aermes, Auda and Ren might be as well.’

Vrinma laughed at Fa’s honest tone. ‘While that might be true or not, I have my reasons to choose you two,’ he said. ‘I already told you that your purpose of going there is to find out what is happening in the country. Being a monarchy, Vameej holds regular courts and councils so I needed someone trained in noble mannerisms. Now, I could have sent Bernice or Auda but women do not talk politics in Vameej, such is their culture. Hence, my obvious choice was Kolben.

‘As for you, there will be a lot of things that people might not say to or near Kolben. The kind of things that they whisper; for that I have you there.’ Vrinma said. ‘I could’ve sent Cadmael but that would’ve been too obvious. However, no one will suspect that one of the Pillars they are hosting in the palace is a herenuer in disguise.’ The old man gave a wide, sly smile. His glinting eyes showed that he felt proud of himself.

‘When do we leave then, Master?’ Kolben asked.

Vrinma scratched his short beard mulling. ‘How would you feel about leaving after breakfast?’ He raised an eyebrow looking between Fa and Kolben.

The boys looked at each other and nodded.

'Very well then,' Vrinma clapped as he got up from the bench. 'Let's have some food.'

Aermes watched from atop the tower as the figures of Kolben and Fa disappeared over the southern horizon. Ren and Sui stood to his right and Auda, Bernice and Cad to his left.

While turning back, Aermes noted what he thought was a hint of tear on Bernice's cheek. He didn't confront her or even act like he saw anything, in fear of infuriating her quick temper he had heard about from Cad. He headed into the staircase, followed by the others.

The staircase spiraled along the length of the tower, which was over sixty feet tall. On the bottom of the stairs, Aermes was greeted by Vrinma who had his hands folded, hidden in the long sleeves of his robe.

'Are you ready too?' He asked.

'Yes, Master,' Aermes answered exiting the hallway with Auda, with the others close behind him.

'Come walk with me,' he motioned Aermes to fall beside him, 'you all can do what you wish. Aermes and I are going to have a chat.' Vrinma called out over his shoulder.

They walked in silence for a while before the master spoke.

'Now Aermes,' Vrinma said 'finding Belyore of Itolk is not an easy task, for most people in Itolk believe her to be a children's tale or an old mythos. But I think it wouldn't be too difficult for you.'

Aermes gave Vrinma a confused look.

'You see,' Vrinma said 'there is an old saying: *Basoama is the forest, the forest is Basoama*. Meaning, not a leaf falls on the forest floor without the basoama knowing about it. So, as soon as you set foot in the forests of Itolk she would know, and I believe she would *welcome* you immediately.'

Aermes gave him another look. 'Why did you say welcome, like that?'

Vrinma laughed loud. 'From my previous experiences with Belyore of Itolk, I know that she likes to test the worthiness of a being before she reveals herself to them. So, be prepared for anything... Anything.' He repeated.

Aermes nodded with firm determination, though not knowing what that might mean.

'Also', Vrinma said. 'The Vision Crystal she holds is a tricky one. The previous Wolves who have tried to access its memories, have been thrown out before they even began to see anything.'

'I don't understand, Master.' Aermes said.

'The vision in that crystal has been laced with a powerful magic similar to a double locking door,' Vrinma said. 'Minds of previous viewers have extracted themselves out of it, without them realizing that, when they are unable to provide the precise *combination* or are unable work around it. Now, I can tell you how you can find the second lock, but I don't think I need to. You should be able to make it in without my help.'

'I understand, Master.' Aermes said, 'I will figure it out by myself and I won't falter.'

Vrinma laughed and patted Aermes' back. 'I wouldn't expect any less from Aasim's son.'

Hearing the master say his father's name tied a knot in Aermes' throat. 'About my father, Master...'

'We'll talk about him as soon as you return,' Vrinma said. 'Now go finish your preparations to leave.'

'Yes, Master,' Aermes croaked. He turned and ran to his room before anyone saw that his eyes had begun to water with a new found hope.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Trest Canal Basin, Itolk

Dinso

Aermes glided over the tall firs, keeping the twisting and turning river in sight. He had left from Fiachori over ten hours ago and estimated that he had covered about three hundred miles since then. Flying, or elongated jumping in his case, was coming more naturally to him. He felt less exhaustion and barely noticed the effort it took him to glide through the sky.

The trees in the distance parted to reveal a clearing beneath him. Aermes looked down to discover exactly what he was expecting. The clearing had a small lake in the middle, formed at a bend of the river. Clear water entered from one side and left from the other.

Aermes turned his body straight, with feet facing to the ground and let himself fall. He landed in a crouch with a loud bang and a small crater appeared around him.

I have to stop doing that.

Aermes realized how loud a noise he had made when a flock of cawing birds escaped from the trees into the sky. Facing northward from the lake, he began towards the forest. He walked across the clearing and into the thick woods.

Aermes soon noted what Vrinma had told him. The trees here looked much older than any he had seen before. They all rose

over fifty feet, with roots as thick as trunks of the trees in the rest of the forest.

Various species of vines and molds covered the barks making it difficult to judge their true thickness. The leaves, big enough to provide cover for a sleeping man, filtered the sunlight allowing only a faint glow on the forest floor.

The air began to cool as Aermes treaded further, and the critters and sounds of the forest seemed to quiet down. He went on for a while before stopping in his steps.

The hair on the back of his neck rose when a feeling of being watched crept over him. Without making any sudden movements, Aermes noted bushes around him rustling despite the lack of wind.

A dark shape jumped out of a bush on his left. Aermes ducked to the side and noticed long shadowy snakes reaching out to clasp his ankles.

Crawling up to him, rough roots wrapped around his feet and tugged him to the ground. The roots pulled a struggling Aermes across the dirt, dragging him into the bushes.

That was when he saw the creature attacking him. With the features of a young boy, the being appeared to Aermes as nothing other than a tree.

Brown bark-like skin, leaves and twigs covering its body; the being looked like a tree stump, three feet high, with limbs formed from branches sprouting in place of its arms and legs, and a carved wooden head over its shoulders.

Its arms extended to form the long roots wrapping themselves around Aermes.

Similar creatures began to appear from the bushes. Some dropped down from the trees while others were spat out by the forest floor itself.

Aermes had been expecting this.

With a loud puff of dirt under his back, he propped himself up. He punched the creature tugging on his legs and the wood blew to smithereens. Followed by the sound of his punch, nearly ten creatures jumped on him from all the sides.

Clutching onto him tightly with their sharp wooden claws, they began to slowly grow a timber cocoon around him, starting with his arms and legs. It didn't take long for the creatures to cover his entire body.

Aermes' vision went dark when a screen of thick elk-wood covered his head. He tried to break free with all his strength but was unable to move a muscle. Soon he began to suffocate, when he remembered something he had done during his encounter with the Peacekeepers in Entral.

Aermes reached inside himself and felt the Yadroliq thumping in his chest. He touched upon the stone and pulled its pulses to the surface, emanating them from his skin.

With a loud bang the wood blew off him and Aermes crashed to the ground. Looking around, he noticed he wasn't in the same place as before.

'Not too bad, boy,' the booming voice from behind made Aermes jump.

He turned around to see a wood statue in the likeness of a tall slender woman growing out of the ground. Her long hair were green leaves on thorny vines, sprinkled with flowers of all colors and more. Her arms were thick spiraling branches and her fingers were vines intertwining. Her face was small and beautiful with deep sunken amber eyes and small pursed lips.

Aermes stood there, lost at the sight of the forest goddess towering over him. In immediate realization, he sunk to his knee and with a bowed head and a respectful voice, spoke.

'O' fine lady, Belyore of Itolk. I, Aermes Dakians, come here bearing the Yadroliq under Master Vrinma's command.'

Cracking and twisting of wood sounded as the goddess bent to face a kneeling Aermes. Small for her body, her face was twice the size of his. Aermes once again found himself looking into the deep ember eyes on the timber face.

'You're here for this.'

The wood of her abdomen parted to reveal a bright shining crystal held within an entanglement of thick green vines. The

vines slowly began to peel away, releasing the crystal from their grasp.

Aermes noticed that this crystal was different than the one he had seen in Fiachori.

Tetragonal in shape, it was twice the size and finely cut. The thick smoke that swirled inside it emanated a faint reddish hue.

Nodding, Aermes stepped up to the basoama, his fear overcome by curiosity and reaching out his fingers into the figure's stomach, touched the crystal. A similar pulling sensation overtook him as the world blurred around him and Aermes was drawn into the vision.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Varenruth Royal Palace Complex, Seruris

Vameej

In the pale moonlight, the green world slowly turned brown around them. The trees and grass shriveled up and died under Fa's touch. The leaves crumpled before separating from their dried up branches. Fruits shrunk and dehydrated to wrinkled resins.

Kolben watched Fa, who knelt beside a tree clutching its thick root, breathing heavily. He pulled his hand back with a start as if he got pricked by a thorn.

'What happened?' Kolben asked.

Surrounded by the grim silence of the forest, Fa looked at him with both guilt and fear in his eyes. He got up and brushed off the grass from his pants, adjusted the strap of his bag and cracked his neck.

'You full?' Kolben asked. He fell beside his friend, who had begun to walk down the moonlit road leading to the capital.

'I don't know,' Fa replied, 'but I do have more than enough.'

Kolben couldn't see the expressions on his shadowed face, but his voice was heavy, sad. With his head hung, Fa trudged along the path, crossing the forest wilted at his hand.

Kolben noticed a pale glow in the night sky over the trees at a distance and his face lit up.

'Look,' he pointed out, 'that must be it.'

Fa followed his gaze and glimpsed a faint radiance, and turned to Kolben.

‘Are you certain?’ He asked, examining the sky once again, with his eyes squinted this time.

‘Yes,’ Kolben replied, ‘that glow is certainly from the city’s night towers.’

‘Night towers?’

‘They are high structures built to illuminate large parts of town,’ Kolben explained.

‘With electricity?’

‘Yes,’ Kolben replied, ‘large glass bulbs filled with gases are placed on top of the towers with electric wires running to them. When the electricity flows through the gasses the bulbs emit a bright glow; bright enough to light the streets at night.’

‘Ah!’ Fa didn’t understand, but he knew asking further questions would just confuse him more.

Growing up in a fishing village on the eastern coast of Viyn, electricity was a thing he had only heard stories about. Since he was young, he had imagined how an electric city would look like and in his head it was always a magical city of the gods. Being able to finally see one, made Fa anxious and excited.

The forest began to thin out as the dirt trail turned into a cobblestone road. Faint silence of the sleeping city was blown with the wind towards them. Small cottages lined along the road and sprawled up the hill.

The city was a shadowed shape of tall towers and large buildings sprinkled among smaller houses and shops. Night towers hung higher than the tallest structures and flooded the city below them with bright yellow light.

To a gaping Fa, they appeared nothing less than small suns hovering above the ground. The strong light prevented Kolben from looking too far but he could make out a tall walled structure, on the peak of the hill, in the middle of the city.

‘There are no gates,’ Kolben exclaimed in disbelief.

To him a capital without walls or gates was a foreign idea. A city as such would allow anyone to enter and leave at will and that couldn't be safe, he thought.

As they walked further into the city, the houses on either sides turned from wooden cottages to brick houses; from small to multileveled structures. The paved roads were empty and quiet, other than a couple of stray dogs and passed out drunks.

Kolben couldn't read the big names of the storefront, but then he noticed a smaller script below the Fican script.

Holer's Fish and Meat. The name read in Terran. *Dynun's Tools,* another one read. *Canemese Herbs and Medicines.*

He looked over to Fa, walking beside him, who stared at the closest night tower, unblinking, like a moth flying around a flame.

'How is it made?' Fa asked, without looking away from the bright lights.

'What?'

'Electricity.'

'Ah,' *Vivi Bless Clothing and Tailors.* 'Well it's not dissimilar to what you do.'

Fa turned from the night tower and stared at the dark blurry shape walking beside him with a raised eyebrow.

'Back home,' Kolben started, 'and I believe here too they burn coal, and turn the resulting heat into electricity using a machine.'

'Machine?'

'A mechanical instrument.'

Fa nodded and went back to staring at the bright lights; this time a tower towards the east. As the paved road grew wider, Kolben noted the slight incline leading up to the tall walls on the hill.

The palace walls towered over the structures around it like a tall tree looking over a shrub. Small yellow lights flickered atop the wall along its length. Dark shapes moved back and forth behind the lights.

Patrol, Kolben thought.

'It's weird,' Fa said, not staring at the lights anymore.

‘What is?’ Kolben asked.

‘These night towers make a great part of the city as bright as the day, but the areas that are in the shadows, the alleys and passages, are darker than the darkest moonless night.’

Kolben looked around and noticed Fa’s observation to be true. The passage ways between the buildings were pitch black, unseeable. He nodded at Fa who was waiting for his response.

‘Darkness never creates light,’ Fa spoke almost to himself, ‘but light always births darkness.’

Kolben walked silently, dwelling on the herenuer’s words as the road forked at the distance. He nudged Fa to take the wider road leading on their right, which according to the sign led to the palace’s *Noble Gate*.

‘The prince has been alerted of your arrival, my Lords,’ the young soldier said with a bowed head, as he led them into the palatial complex.

They walked in through a doorway carved in the large stone of the Noble Gate.

Made out of two towering slabs of, what Kolben assumed was, black granite, the gate had imageries of vines, flowers, animals and women, filled with gold and silver, etched in it; giving it an exorbitant appearance.

Lights over the wall and gate washed down, coloring the ground and the surroundings in a faint yellowish glow. Fa and Kolben followed the young soldier as the small granite doorway was slowly pushed shut behind them, disappearing into the stone of the massive gate.

‘The Prince is waiting for you in his chambers, my Lord.’ Fa heard the soldier telling Kolben who marched beside him.

Fa had fallen behind as he kept slowing down to look at the giant mansions on the sides of the tiled road; all painted in the same yellow glow from the lights.

Some had sloping roofs, while others had ivory pillars, some had large gardens in front, while others had tall towers. High poles with spiraling bulbs lined the sides of the path, pouring light over the tiled road and the lawns of the mansions.

They must have walked for a mile when Fa realized that they were still about only half way through, what he now assumed was a residential area.

The mansions got bigger in size the closer they got to the palace. Fa nearly gawked at the few imposing mansions that might have been bigger than the castle like shrine he'd been living in till now.

But even those stood timidly in the shadow of the gigantic palace that rose before them.

Another thing Fa noticed was that none of the houses had anything marking the limits of their property, other than an occasional narrow path that ran between the gardens of two mansions.

Fa tilted his head, turning his ear slightly towards the two men walking ahead him, when he saw Kolben's face turn to the soldier.

'Who are these houses for?' Kolben asked.

'My Lord, the houses belong to the country nobles,' the soldier answered not breaking from his stiff military walk. 'The gate you arrived at is called the Noble Gate, since it's the entryway to the Noble district. People of the court, high ranking officers of the army, royal traders and bankers, all own houses here; though not all of them are currently occupied.'

'That is why none of them are fenced,' Kolben said almost to himself.

'Yes, my Lord,' the young boy replied, 'still, there is a canal separating this area from the servant quarters in the north east of the district, but that too has several bridges over it.'

Kolben pointed at a tall structure in the north west of the palace which, on closer inspection, appeared to be made of several buildings and towers connected to each other by wide

stone bridges. Fa noted occasional shadows moving on these dimly lit bridges and deduced them to be guards on patrol.

‘And what is that,’ Kolben asked the soldier beside him.

Without looking in the direction of his finger, the boy answered. ‘The Bureau Hive consists of buildings such as the royal court, the council chamber, various offices for the ministers and council members, high ranking officials of the army and royal merchants, the Great Hall and the Blessed Crypt.’

The Varenruth palace now stood yards away from them, kissing the night sky.

Kolben nodded to the soldier who, after an immediate bow, quickened his pace to meet his fellow soldiers that stood on either sides of an open arched doorway leading into the palace.

Two marble, long-tailed phoenix adorned the doorway, their beaks touching on top of the arch, with their tails falling to the sides.

With a few quick strides, Fa fell beside Kolben and they exchanged slightly anxious looks. Both the guards bowed deeply when the Pillars approached their station.

The young boy pointed to one of the guards, ‘my Lord, Pat here will escort you to the prince’s chambers,’ before performing a similar deep bow.

Fa and Kolben gave a small nod to the guard, signaling him to start ahead. Pat made a swift turn and began a stiff march down the wide hallway with the Pillars right behind him.

Two guards dressed in light alloy armor sunk in a bow before pushing on the tall teak doors behind them. The seemingly heavy doors moved silently, pouring out yellow light over the dim gallery and the men standing in it.

Pat, the young guard, shuffled forward, nodding to his comrades as he passed them. Fa and Kolben followed him into a carpeted corridor. Lined with buzzing yellow lamps along the walls, the hall was wide enough for thirty men to walk abreast.

On their way to the prince's chambers, Fa and Kolben walked through the enormous royal quarters of the Epolus Varenruth.

It contained sprawling flower gardens, a gleaming stream with a bamboo bridge over it, a fairly large pond with a twenty foot waterfall silently pouring water in it, the largest door Fa has ever seen, which according to Pat was where the prince stored his private collection... of what, he didn't know.

Fa couldn't believe they were inside a palace, until once in a while when he'd spot a tall marble wall in the distance and he'd remember how foreign this place felt to him.

Now, walking down the hall to the man's sleeping chambers, he wondered for the first time what kind of person lived in a place like this.

They found themselves in front of a pair of arched wooden doors, which Pat pulled open. Facing away from them, he sunk in a small bow and invited them to follow him inside.

A man dressed in a platinum robe paced back and forth in the middle of the room, which, Kolben thought, was an unnecessarily large lounging area.

'Ah!' The amber haired man exclaimed in relief while his face managed to look worried at the same time.

Now that he was walking towards them and Kolben had a better look at him, he knew the man's name.

Epolus Varenruth wore a flat-collar silk robe, held in place by a wide cummerbund. Along the length of his neck, he wore a hexagonal net made of fine platinum chains that ended just below his finely trimmed fiery beard. A black onyx amulet slapped against his chest and a massive emerald ring shone on his hand, as the prince made his way towards them.

All the men bowed at the same time. 'I am honored to be in your presence, my Lords,' the prince spoke, straightening up.

'We are honored to be here, my Prince,' Kolben replied.

Epolus smiled wide and gestured towards the wide couches arranged in the center of the room.

On the opposite end of the sitting area, Fa noticed, was a large balcony, veiled by tall netted drapes. Cool gusts of winds blew in from time to time, filling the room with the sweet scent of dirt and flowers. He turned back to find that Pat had already left, closing the door behind him.

Servants carrying several bowls of whole and diced fruits, nuts and blocks of cheese, along with tall chalices and taller decanters, seemed to materialize out of thin air as soon as the men settled on the couches. Fa and Kolben sat on a red couch in the middle cluster across from the prince, who sat on an appropriately ornate sandalwood chair.

One by one, the servants placed the fruits and wines on the round table between the men. In a practiced motion, they arranged three servings of several fruits, nuts and cheese.

One server lifted a glass decanter containing a deep red liquid and in a soft voice asked Kolben, 'Mosan wine, my Lord.'

Kolben nodded his approval and gestured with his hand towards the empty chalice in front of Fa, signaling the server to pour the same for the boy. Fa glanced at Kolben who gave him a reassuring blink.

The servants bowed out and excused themselves to a far wall, ready to rush back to the table to serve a helping or pour a chalice when needed.

'You must be tired from the travel, my Lords,' Epolus spoke after a long sip from his cup, 'please renew your vitality while I brief you on the situation here.'

'That is kind of you, my Prince,' Kolben gave a slight nod in way of the western nobles while Fa just performed a respectful bow in return. They both began to pick on the fruits with the small golden skewers on their plates, occasionally sipping the thick wine.

'My Lords, I'm sure you know the contents of father's letter to the master,' the prince started, 'let me tell you what led to his paranoia.'

‘You might know that the Vameej Empire has a large population of low beings residing in some of its densest forests. For the past several decades, there have been few to none incidents of conflict between these beasts and the populous, thanks to the army, but mostly to the beasts keeping to themselves.

‘But that was until a small village was attacked by a pack of irazurras about six months ago. After that reports of villages being attacked and sightings of irazurras around the limits of several towns grew more and more frequent. In the past ten days, two villages in the western country have turned to ashes overnight with no survivors.’

The prince paused for a few breaths and took a long sip of wine, giving the two Pillars a few moments to absorb the information.

‘We had deployed over five thousand of the capital’s troops to support the regional battalions in patrolling the surrounding areas of the attacks, in hopes that we will be able to nip this uprising in the bud. But before the soldiers could track down the aggressors, another attack happened... this time on me.’

Fa inhaled in a sharp breath as soon as Epolus finished his sentence, eliciting an involuntary titter from the prince. But the grim expression returned to his shadowed face almost immediately.

‘My closest friend,’ he stared at the ground, ‘my brother, Sofelan, I nearly lost him that day.’ Fa thought he saw the prince tremble under his metallic robe. ‘I rode back to the capital with him in my lap. He was barely clinging to life, fading in and out of consciousness, too hurt to even whimper in pain.’

Epolus stared at them and Fa peeked a caged man behind vacant eyes. ‘Every night, I can smell his charred flesh, hear the hissing of his sizzling skin over the patter of hooves against the forest floor.’

A chill ran up Fa’s spine making him shudder. ‘Did he live?’ He asked. ‘Your friend. Did he live?’

The prince jerked as if breaking out of a trance and turned to Fa with a soft gaze. ‘Yes,’ he smiled, ‘he does.

‘Sofelan took over a month to recover. His body was horribly burnt; blackened and wrinkled. The damage was irreversible, said the surgeons. He lost an eye along with most of his face, but his life was spared.’

Kolben let out a soft exhale. ‘That it good, my Prince.’ He smiled at Epolus.

‘Yes, it is,’ Epolus said, returning a sad smile, ‘now as you can imagine, an attack on the Prince and his Great Advisor got the royal council in an uproar and they unanimously came upon the decision to call upon the Pillars for aid.’

The prince seemed to be a lot more relaxed than before, Fa noticed. Though, he didn’t know if it was not just the wine.

‘That night father penned a letter to Fiachori, invoking the *pact*,’ Epolus said. ‘That was a month ago and three more villages have burnt to the ground since then. Large troops have been on patrols and pursuits throughout the western and southern Vameej but not one of them have come across an irazurra or any signs of it.

‘Father, along with the council, want a coordinated preemptive strike on known irazurra settlements across Vameej.’

‘That would violate the Zoic Accord,’ Kolben blurted out unwittingly. ‘Forgive me, my Prince.’

‘It’s quite alright, my Lord,’ Epolus smiled, ‘and yes, it would. That is the reason why we had no other choice but to let the Council station a Peacekeeper battalion in the capital. The presence of a Lieutenant General legitimizes our assault in the eyes of the Council but more importantly the world.’

With his arms crossed and eyes shut, Kolben nodded. His eyebrows furrowed as he tried to analyze the situation laid in front of him. The three men sat in silence for a while before Kolben spoke to no one in particular.

‘The Zoic Accord hasn’t been broken in over a thousand years, right?’

‘That is correct,’ the prince replied.

Another long silence followed.

‘And you want us to join you in battle?’ Kolben asked. Fa turned to him while Epolus stared in his chalice.

‘Yes,’ he replied.

‘Very well,’ Kolben took a long sip of his wine, emptying the cup, ‘the *Falcon* and the *Stag* shall fight by your side.’ Fa gave a determined nod in agreement with his lord.

‘That is great to hear, my Lord,’ the prince pushed himself to his feet, with Fa and Kolben following suit. Epolus reached out and smiling, shook both the Pillars’ hands.

‘My Lords, I propose you retire for the night,’ he said, ‘Lorie here will show you to your chambers.’ Epolus motioned with his hand and a girl rushed forward from the group of servants lining the far wall. Her curly hair were not dissimilar to Kolben’s in color, Fa thought to himself.

‘My Lords,’ the girl sunk deep a bow, before she turned and began towards the door. The Pillars wished the prince well, who in return wished they have a sweet sleep. Kolben and Fa fell behind the frail red-headed girl as they exited the large hall.

Sunlight streamed in through the stained glass window coloring the room in shades of red, blue and green. Fa rose from his sleep a few hours after sunrise but laid in the soft bed for a couple more hours, unable to give up on this new-found comfort.

By, what he thought now was, late morning, Fa stepped out of the covers and crossed the bedchamber into the open bath area overlooking the gardens. He was soaking in hot soap-water when a knock on the door broke him out of a relaxing trance.

Kolben’s familiar voice sounded across the wood, ‘the court will start in an hour... Epolus wants us to be there.’ He paused, ‘are you ready?’

‘In the bath,’ Fa shouted from the tub.

‘Alright,’ Kolben’s muffled voice replied, ‘come to my chamber when you are ready.’

‘Alright,’ Fa shouted back.

He stepped out of the tub and looked around for the mechanism to drain the soapy water. It took him a while but he figured out the chain plunging into the water was linked to a cork sealing the drain. A hard tug on the chain freed the cork and the bubbly water began to spiral into the drain making deep gurgling sounds.

Fa dried and dressed himself, his relaxed pace hastened by Kolben's earlier inquiry.

He wore a deep blue silk shirt with golden cuffs and collar, over a pair of straight black trousers. He combed his hair back and applied what he thought was oil, from one of the many vials kept in the bath chamber.

He made a mental note to check out what was in the numerous bottles and boxes, once he got back to the room tonight.

Fa took a final look at himself in the large mirror before heading out to see Kolben, who was having tea in his chamber's stone balcony, impeccably dressed in a long silver-green robe.

'Shall we go?' Kolben got up from his chair when he heard Fa come in.

'Yes.' Fa answered, nervously shuffling in his spot.

'Don't worry,' Kolben playfully patted the boy on his back, 'you look great.'

The royal court was held in a hall bigger than any Kolben had ever seen. Big enough to seat a thousand people comfortably, according to his estimation, Kolben gawked at the enormity of the room.

Giant marble pillars rose to the high roof, which housed numerous wide skylights. The morning sun filtered through the stained glass, lighting the massive hall in faint colors.

The court session kept both Kolben and Fa busy for a good three hours. They were seated, not far away from the royal dais, among the ministers.

The king was absent from his exorbitant throne in the middle of the dais, so the prince presided over the court, from his jeweled seat beside the throne. An identical seat was left empty on the other side of the throne, which according to one of the ministers was meant for the princess and had been empty for several days.

Before the court had begun, Kolben had expressed his concern regarding the presence of Peacekeepers inside the palace. The prince had assured him that their identities would be kept a secret and hence, to the court they were introduced as brothers and royal emissaries from Handgur, a small Canem country.

Sitting among the ministers, the Pillars were politely questioned about their homeland and the political climate. While Fa broke into a cold sweat every time he was asked a question, Kolben smoothly lied on both his and Fa's behalf. Fa was surprised at his lord's geo-political knowledge and ability to have continuous, polite, untruthful conversations.

While Kolben mingled among the ministers and royal merchants, Fa sat in his seat, eyes closed and arms crossed, scanning through the stream of quiet conversations in the giant hall.

He heard talks about irazurras being sighted here and there but none of them seemed more than gossip. He heard the Peacekeepers planning their lunches and the merchants discussing their trade. The one conversation that stood out to Fa was between the royal advisor Sofelan Remurian and the prince's duend guard.

During a discussion regarding trade tariffs between the prince, his royal merchants and some foreign traders, the duend leaned over to the hooded figure and whispered, 'the preparations have been made.'

Sofelan nodded under his hood in reply and the woman stepped back to her station. Fa made a mental note to let Kolben know of this exchange that he found irregular, as soon as they were alone.

The rest of the session was uneventful to Fa's ears. Men and women came pleading their cases and hurling accusations one

after the other, while the prince tried to solve the disputes or delegate the work to someone else.

Servants carrying food and drinks, continuously weaved among the rows of seated advisors, ministers and merchants. Kolben plucked an apple from a server girl's plate as the session began to conclude.

The announcer got in front of the dais and announced the departure of the prince and his party just as Epolus stood up from his seat. Following his motion, the multiple rows of ministers and merchants seated below the dais stood in their places when the prince began to climb down.

'The Prince would like you to accompany him, my Lords,' the red-headed girl, from the previous night, bowed in front of Kolben and Fa.

'Yes, of course,' Kolben smiled at her, taking the final bite of his apple.

The girl performed another bow and received the apple core from him before disappearing into the dispersing crowd. Kolben turned to Fa who had a confused look on his face and with a raised eyebrow questioned the same.

'I didn't hear the prince or anyone send her,' Fa claimed.

'That so?' Kolben hummed, 'let's just go talk to Epolus.' He started walking towards the prince and his party crossing the hall, surrounded by his royal guards.

'Lord Arud!' Epolus waved them over to him with a beaming smile.

The soldiers parted to let Fa and Kolben into the circle. Besides the two new entrants, the party consisted of Epolus' advisor, the hooded Sofelan Remurian, his duend guard, introduced as Drereth and a tall Peacekeepers officer, who introduced himself as Lieutenant General Gerond Hvok.

Fa quietly walked beside the group while Kolben handled the talking.

'Are we headed somewhere, my Prince?' Kolben asked.

‘Yes,’ Epolus looked straight ahead, ‘there is something I wanted to show you yesterday, but since you arrived quite late, I thought it could wait till today.’

Kolben smiled enthusiastically at the prince and looked at Fa whose face was now more tense than confused. Fa turned to see the faces of the members of the party.

Drereth, the duend woman, stared straight ahead as if avoiding meeting his eyes and from the position of his hood, Fa could tell Sofelan was staring at the ground. Only the Peacekeeper General met the boy’s eyes and gave him a bone chilling smile that Fa assumed was meant to be friendly.

Their group was the first to exit the grand court hall, followed by an influx of talkative ministers and merchants. Fa and Kolben quietly walked with the others, surrounded by tall men in ruby-gold armor.

The silence had begun to make Fa more uncomfortable than he already was, before the Peacekeeper General started telling them the story of a lewd encounter he had with a certain queen of a Canem country who, he kept reiterating, he was not allowed to name.

Fa would’ve been fine without the explicit details but the prince seemed to be enjoying them since he laughed throughout the story and asked excited questions. The halls grew wide and narrow, rose up and inclined down, as the group made their way through the massive maze-like palace of the Varenruths.

After a long walk and an even longer story, Fa and Kolben found themselves standing before a giant stone archway, similar to the one they had seen last night when they entered Epolus’ quarters.

The guards at the gate sunk in a deep bow before pushing the tall teak doors open.

‘You wait here,’ Epolus ordered his armored guards in a thick voice. The armors clinked in acceptance and lined outside the gate as the party entered the courtyard.

‘Follow me,’ the prince smiled at Kolben and Fa and walked inside with a quick pace.

Fa narrowed his eyes as he fell behind Kolben, who was trying to keep up with the prince. The Peacekeeper General, Sofelan and the duend guard strolled after Fa with the tall doors being creaked shut behind them.

Epolus led the Pillars and the others through a courtyard to another giant doorway, which was open, except for the white netted drapes that flowed down its length. Pulling aside the light cloth, Epolus entered the room with Kolben and Fa right behind him and the rest following them.

Fa saw a man, frail with old age, sitting on a chair by a window across the massive room. Beside him stood a tall woman, with hair like long strips of lustrous copper, who whispered soft words in the old man’s ear.

‘Ah! You are here too, sister,’ Epolus exclaimed in a rough voice. ‘Well that won’t be a problem.’

The woman turned around at his voice and said without skipping a breath. ‘I can leave if you require a private audience,’ she then turned her eyes to the Pillars and the others behind Epolus. ‘But since you already have these faces with you, I doubt me being here would be a hindrance.’

‘That, it won’t be,’ Epolus stopped a few feet before the king and his sister and waited for the old man to turn to him. When he kept staring out of the window, seemingly unaware of the conversation around him, Epolus began to look irritated.

‘Father!’ He nearly shouted, ‘could you come here for a moment?’

The king jerked at Epolus’ voice and then with the slow motions of an old man, lifted himself off his ornate chair. Supported by his daughter, he carefully walked to Epolus and followed by a sigh spoke, ‘you need something?’

‘Yes,’ replied Epolus, not meeting his old man’s eyes.

A sharp sound of cloth ripping made Fa turn to the prince whose right hand, now covered in thick brown fur, hung beside him; it's long claw-like fingers nearly scraping the marble floor.

The next moment the beastly arm lurched towards the old man, effortlessly ripping through his chest and exiting out his back.

A sharp throb of pain on the back of Fa's head initiated the blackening of the world around him.

The only things he remembered as his vision continued to darken were the shrieks and screams of the princess, red blood fountaining out of the hole in the king's chest and Kolben screaming out orders that he couldn't fulfill.

They knew what I was, was the last thought to cross his head.



Blue Appeaser

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Trest Canal Basin, Itolk

Dinso

Aermes lifted his heavy head and looked around the room. Grogginess began to drain from his mind as his vision slowly adjusted. The red light of the northern sunset, pouring in from the skylight above, bathed the large room, painting it a dark carmine.

The place, what looked like an old tavern, was empty; abandoned. A thick layer of dust carpeted the bar, floor and the furniture. Intricate cobwebs shimmered red between the chairs, indicating that there had been a while since the last time someone was here. The sitting area was large enough to hold fifty people comfortably.

Aermes spotted a dust covered staircase, spiraling to the upper floor, on the far wall behind the bar.

Looking around, he noted something odd about the furniture in the tavern. The chairs and tables were short, similar to how the bar counter and stools were low. Aermes felt like he was almost sitting on the ground. He pushed himself off the chair and began to explore the place.

Starting a few feet above the ground, the windows in the room, rose up, stopping just before the ceiling. Aermes walked to one of the tall windows and peered through the dusty glass.

Outside, the snow covered ground was lit red in the dying light. The wind seemed to be blowing hard against the pines at

the distance, beyond which tall white peaks kissed the clouds. Aermes lost himself, staring at the white scenery colored in shades of red and pink when hushed approaching voices brought him back.

He hurried back to the table he woke up on and sunk to the chair, eyes affixed on the wooden door at the far end across the tavern. Aermes noted that even the door was smaller than usual. Big enough for men of an average height but a slightly taller one would have to duck to pass.

With a silent swing, the door hinged open, slamming off the wall with a soft thud. Gusts of wind brought snow in the tavern, settling it on the dust crusted furniture and floor. From the open door, Aermes saw a large black shape arrive against the white background. The man ducked to enter the room.

Dressed in a hooded, black, fur coat, the man walked across the room with heavy steps, shedding the snow heaped on his hood and shoulders. Small clouds of dust rose where he stepped marking his path on the wooden floor like an animal's tracks on a soft ground. He stopped by one of the larger tables in the middle of the room and shook his hands vigorously, warming them up. He pushed his hood back with his gloved hands.

Aermes strained his forehead at the sight of the man's face. His long black hair resting on his shoulders were combed back. Aermes noticed the man's eyes, which caught the evening light and shone golden, as he scanned the large room, spying the corners and windows. The man wore a black stubble with patches of gray.

Under the beard, Aermes noted a strong jaw and an intent face of a man who wasn't new to the world. He walked a few steps towards the bar and perched his neck out like a bird straining to listen and nodded to himself. Aermes saw the man's lips move, after which he walked back to the table and began to peel off his gloves.

The soft mummers grew closer and one after the other people started to pour in through the small door.

The first one was a tall woman with blond curls that fell down her back. Her fair skin and knife-like features were that of a duend royal. The woman was easily a decade younger than the man, in her late twenties, Aermes estimated.

She smiled as she approached the man in the middle of the room, stopping a yard before him. She performed a small curtsy, which the man waved away, not unkindly.

'Are we standing, Lord Aariq?' The woman's eyes sparkled with the glimmer of a lake in summer.

'If you make us.' He replied.

The name hit Aermes like a hard brick to the head. He knew who the man was, he knew what the time was.

Aermes thought back to the years before he had moved to Thaldea; he had memories of the place he was born in, the place where he learned to walk and talk. He remembered running after his father in the giant stone hallways, chasing butterflies in the maze-like gardens, watching his father treat people in the great halls.

There in that castle was a corridor that not many were allowed to enter. This corridor had likenesses and paintings of the Dakians that had lived over thousands of years. The corridor twisted and turned, went up and down, spiraled into stairs and ramped into slopes.

Aermes had been warned by his father to not go there alone, lest he get lost, so some nights after supper, his father would take him for a stroll in the corridor. He would tell him the names and deeds of the men and women whose busts and paintings and statues lined the walls of the stone passageway. And from there, Aermes remembered the name of Aariq Dakians, the first of the new world.

Aariq was the first Dakians to take the throne of the Clabekan stretch. Aermes also knew that Aariq Dakians died in 18 YOC at an age of fifty-nine. Estimating the age of the man that stood before him, Aermes decided he was somewhere around 2 YOC, give or take a few.

Aariq took off his long fur coat and placed it on the table. Beneath it he wore a black long shirt, studded with a row of agate down the middle and on the cuffs; the shirt had dark shimmering flowers embroidered in intricate patterns.

His leather pants complimented the color of the shirt and contoured the muscles on his legs before disappearing into his black boots, also flecked with glimmering agate.

The next person to enter was a short man black of hair, followed by a young girl with red curls and a miatagarri man with wispy hair. Behind them came another boy and a man.

The duend woman by the table stepped back and held out her hand.

Vines of wood danced alive from the floor and began to wrap themselves around the chairs at the table. The wooden floor rippled as thousand wood snakes thick and thin rose up and coiled over the chairs, enlarging them. Within a few moments the chairs, which seemed to have grown out of the floor, were big enough for a man to sit in them.

Aariq and the duend sat at the table as the rest of the group crossed the room. They sunk in quick bows and scrambled to take off their coats and settle into their seats.

Looking at the group sitting before him, Aermes knew beyond a shadow of doubt who they were.

The duend woman with curls like woven gold wore battle leathers under her coat. A brown leather vest, dotted with bearings of multiple metals and gems, was loosely slung over her tight white shirt. Her legs were covered by a short leather skirt strewn with similar metals, worn over white pants and boots that ran all the way up her calves. *Skirri*, Aermes thought.

The short man with black hair wore a rich purple robe, fastened with a wide white belt around the waist, with small metal balls that hung down from the ends of his long sleeves jingling with every slight movement. *Doi*.

The young girl with the red curls was dressed in battle leathers too. Unlike that of the *Skirri* woman, she wore an entire suit of leather. The skin hugging leather shirt and pants were one whole

piece that covered her from her wrist to her calves, where it tucked into her long boots. A normal person would have passed out from the heat alone in a dress like such. But not an Arud.

The miatarri man was slender and looked almost weak in his short white shirt and loose-fitting pants. He slouched in his chair like he was drowning in it. Aermes found it hard to view him as the personification of light, a Kamillah.

The rest two were a boy around fifteen who wore light steel armor over his linen shirt and cotton pants, and a duend man in an affluent ruby tunic, completed with a cape and gem studded pants, giving him a royal appearance. Aermes guessed them to be Kang and Nachen Can respectively.

‘Shall we begin?’ Skirri chimed.

‘Yes,’ Aariq said, ‘Brendor has some tidings from the south, I assume.’

‘Yes, my Lord,’ Kamillah pushed himself up, sitting straight; not unlike a child struggling to keep his balance.

‘Forces of the Council are moving in the Ingens from the south. They are exclusively attacking the universities and libraries and not engaging with the ruling lords and kings, unless opposed. The same is happening in Canem too. Say, my Lady, when did you hear from Twendil last?’ He turned to Skirri.

‘Not for over three moons,’ Skirri replied.

‘I’d think so,’ Brendor said, ‘Since the royal messages are sent and received at libraries the communication from these areas has been shut down. From what I hear, my Lord, the Council is moving entirely unopposed. Nearly two hundred schools and libraries in the Ingens and Canem have been demolished. Some book-keepers pleaded to at least let them keep some of the books and scrolls. Their requests were obliged, by setting them afire with the piled up books, scrolls and journals.’

The faces on the table cringed in pain and clenched fists in anger. The room fell silent for a while.

‘Why libraries and schools?’ The young Kang wondered to himself.

‘Those who control knowledge control the world, Tijur,’ Aariq said.

‘Well said, my Lord,’ Brendor replied, ‘the focus of this act seems to be to mask the events of the war and the formation of the Council.’

‘Oh they’d like that wouldn’t they?’ The red haired Arud girl wasn’t pleased. ‘Why are we sitting here and talking, and not attacking them right now?’ Her question, more of a retort, was directed at Aariq.

‘Not without reason,’ Aariq said, ‘Eida, Brendor, Heuth and I saw the war to the end. We know what this organization, they now call the Council, is capable of doing. They have more than half of DieTerra’s governments and monarchs kneeling, and a military of over three million troops. We can’t just attack them.’

The young girl scrunched her face and looked away, annoyed; unhappy with the answer she received.

‘Don’t get him wrong, Kaeri,’ Skirri spoke, ‘don’t take Aariq’s caution for cowardice. We do not fear death... We do not fear our deaths.’

‘Eida is right, little one,’ Brendor continued, ‘the Council has declared us as the enemies of DieTerra. They want us dead. And the heads of the Council know the nature of our powers. Our lineage. The war was chaotic enough to mask our origins and families, but now that the dust has settled, we are not concealed anymore. We are fortunate that our namesakes are some of the most important individuals on DieTerra. If not for that I’m sure the Council would have slaughtered all the Dakians and Skirris and Dois and Aruds...’

Kaeri’s face changed from that of vexation to that of a disheartened girl.

‘We have lost our present,’ Aariq said, ‘if we lose again, we lose our future.’

Eida put her hand around him. ‘There still might be some left who know the true lineages.’ She pointed out. ‘We have to be ready for inquisitions.’

Aermes noticed, a deep cloud of helplessness and despair loomed over the seven. It was like seeing a depressed lion who had given up on the hunt. A sight heartbreaking and bone chilling at the same time.

‘Well,’ the short Doi man clapped his hands together, snapping the rest out of the silence. ‘This table could use some wine.’

‘At times like these...’ Aariq laughed and waved to the man, allowing him to do as he pleased.

Smiling, Doi pushed himself off the chair; metal balls jingling. He made his way to the bar, the soft chimes announcing his movement, light shimmering off the gems on his elaborate purple robe. He strutted behind the counter and turned his back to the room searching the shelves for his desired liquor.

‘Go ahead, Brendor,’ he called out without looking away from the bottles.

The miatagarri nodded to his back. ‘The Council has also set up a table for ruling. They are calling them the Fathers. Their forces, which they are ironically calling the Peacekeepers and the heads of states and nations, are all answerable to these seven men.

‘The first two decrees passed by these Fathers are that no educational bodies can exist without the Council’s recognition and no stone-users can exist outside the Council. They are claiming both these actions are vital for establishing an all-encompassing peace.’

‘An all-encompassing rule,’ Eida scoffed.

Tiny bells chimed as the Doi walked back with two long necked bottles in one hand and a tray of tall wine glasses in the other. He set the bottles at the center before placing a glass in front of Aariq and filling it with wine.

‘Thank you, Kaon,’ Aariq said.

The man nodded and continued to serve the people around the table, finally settling in his chair with a glass brimming with the red liquid.

‘My Lord,’ Kaon said, ‘have all these naono settlements been emptied?’

‘A lot of them have,’ Aariq replied, ‘and a lot of them have retreated to the mountain cities looking for asylum. Those who were left behind were loaded on ships and taken to Caelum.

‘This entire place is a ghost town now. Because, I wasn’t strong enough to hold my lands.’ Aariq hung his head, cursing at his reflection in the wine.

‘We did the best we could,’ Eida said, ‘we ended the war.’

She rested a soft hand on the man’s shoulder. Others exchanged nervous glances, looking at their lord and lady and each other; silently, waiting for someone to speak.

‘My Lord,’ Brendor broke the quiet, ‘there is more.’

Aariq looked up with the face of a disheveled man waking up from sleep. ‘Yes, please continue,’ he said, ‘forgive me.’

Brendor bowed his head with visible respect. ‘Since the Council outlawed the practice of magic and declared stone wielders the enemy of DieTerra and its peace, they have reportedly imprisoned over seventy practitioners and fifteen wielders.’

‘I heard about the Council hunting wielders and practitioners,’ Heuth spoke ‘but eighty five in two years? What were these men doing? Sleeping drunk?’ Anger and disbelief laced the man’s rough voice.

‘It would seem,’ Brendor replied, ‘the naonos have developed a substance for the Council that upon contact suppresses the weaker faux stones’ vibrations to a significant degree, making the wielders almost powerless... Though this substance is still not nearly refined enough to suppress the Vivi stones.

‘For the practitioners, apparently, overwhelming numbers were enough.’ He added with an unemotional tone.

A grim silence once again filled the hall. The meek sounds of the wind rustling the trees, shedding snow from their leaves, seeped in through the closed windows, punctuating the muteness. Looks of disbelief and confusion were exchanged across the table. Some sipped their wine while others stared at it.

Except Brendor. He watched the stunned faces turn to him, then to one another, waiting for them to absorb this new information.

‘How many have gone into hiding?’ Aariq asked taking in the news with a swallow of wine.

‘Everyone, my Lord,’ Brendon replied, ‘and they will come for us soon.’

‘From what I have gathered, the substance can suppress the vibrations for a limited time before it falls apart because of the stress. And since the Council has only used it against the faux stones. They most likely are uncertain if the substance would work against the natural stones. Hence, I am sure they will avoid a head on capture by force when it comes to us. But we should expect a Council delegation at our door step all the same.’

‘Now that is truly unfortunate,’ Eida rolled her eyes, ‘my palace is a royal mess.’

Kaon and Heuth laughed out loud while Aariq cracked a toothy smile. ‘So all that is left for us is to return home and wait.’ He said.

‘Yes, my Lord.’ Brendor grimly replied.

‘Well,’ Kaon exclaimed, ‘we still have a bottle and half of this amazing Mosan wine.’

A soft blur began to creep into Aermes’ field of vision before he was pulled upwards through the roof.

Diminishing sounds of hearty laughter around the table was the last thing he heard before the room disappeared into a translucent smear of white and red as the familiar tunnel swirled around him.

Distant voices talked in hushed undertones, someone screamed in a foreign language, sounds of crackling fire and smells of jasmine and orange floated around him. He hurtled through the blurry whiteness, not knowing up from down, for what he assumed to be ten minutes before he felt ground and grass beneath his legs.

Aermes pressed his palms against the wet grass, as he sat there, waiting to regain his sense of balance.

The white blur lifted up and swirled into non-existence, revealing a gray sky above him. Cold wind patted his face as

Aermes pushed himself to his feet, leaning on a tree for support. A few feet from where he stood, the trees gave way to a clearing.

Aermes waddled into the giant field and was set aback by the sheer view that waited for him.

At the center of the green land, ample enough to house a small town, sat a black castle. With four towers at its corners and a giant black gate at its front, the castle stood proud on the grassy earth. It was too majestic and superior to not be a king's dwelling.

Aermes noticed that the structure lacked the defensive walls for fortification, generally associated with a castle, and there weren't any signs of the presence of guards in the towers or on the ground.

A deafening screech froze Aermes in his steps towards the black castle and a dark shadow blanketed him and the ground around him. He looked up to see the giant shape grow rapidly, as it descended towards the castle.

The ground beneath his feet shook when the bird landed; its massive claws digging in the soft soil. Aermes circled along the trees at the edge of the clearing, trying to get a better look at the golden condor.

The bird was gigantic, over half the size of the castle, and unearthly.

Its smooth skin gleamed gold, devoid of any feathers, while its giant lifeless eyes were balls that stared at nothing, with a yellow shine. The way the golden condor folded its wings, reminded Aermes of Auda's armor.

The condor lowered its elongated neck to the ground and a man stepped off it. Aermes began to walk closer to get a better look. The man wore a white long coat over his red and white clothing.

On the back of his long coat was the symbol of Peacekeepers—two concentric circles, a line intersecting them through the center with a yellow and a red sphere at its two ends.

On his head, the man wore a white peaked cap with a familiar looking golden design along its band and a Peacekeeper symbol forged from metal, decorating the cockade. He wore white gloves with golden embossing along their lengths.

Upon getting close enough, Aermes noticed the man stood over six feet with a broad frame and the fair face of a duend. His blonde hair snuck out of the back of his cap, over his neck. The man stood with his hands folded in front of his waist tapping his feet with impatience, thin lips twisting from boredom.

Aermes turned when the giant gates began to creak open. A recognizable figure walked forth from behind the doors at a brisk pace. The man wore an aqua linen shirt with laced brown breeches and brown boots. His long black hair were greased back while his face was still and gray like the sky above them.

‘Come to kill me or capture me,’ Aariq called out as he walked towards the tall man.

‘None, my Lord,’ the man sunk into a deep bow, ‘you flatter me by implying I could do either.’

‘So I’m to believe the Council sent the great General North just to talk?’

‘Yes, my Lord,’ the man replied, ‘I come with a proposal.’ The man kept his head bowed as way of talking to lords and kings.

Aariq raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

‘If we could step inside, my Lord,’ North said.

‘Here is fine,’ Aariq replied.

‘Very well, my Lord,’ the General straightened his neck. Aermes noticed that the man was half a head taller than the lord. ‘The Council proposes that as long as they stay in isolation away from their subjects, and not use their *gifts* in any threatening manner, they will let the Pillars and their families live in peace.’

‘Until they find a way to obtain our stones,’ Aariq said grimly.

‘Until we find a way to obtain your stones,’ North cocked his head and smirked with a sly glint in his eyes.

‘I accept,’ Aariq said, ‘and will tell the others. Now get out of here.’ He turned away and walked back to the slightly open, giant gates.

‘Pleasure talking to you, my Lord.’ The disdain in the Peacekeeper’s voice was clear and mocking.

Smiling to himself he turned around and began towards the golden behemoth, who was using its beak to scratch its smooth wings.

Aermes felt a familiar tug before he got pulled off the ground and the world around him disappeared into a white blur; once again swirling with distorted faces and voices. He closed his eyes and waited, till he felt a soft rug under his body.

Aermes pushed against the ground, propping himself up and crossed his legs under him. He lifted his head and saw the deep set amber eyes staring back at him.

‘Well congratulations, Dakians,’ Belyore said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Trest Canal Basin, Itolk

Dinso

The sun had been down for a while and the moon had begun to creep up in the dark satin of the sky.

Aermes trudged through the woods, exhausted after his experience, unable to muster enough strength to access the magic of the stone and launch himself in the air, or even to think about doing that.

He was walking at a pace slower than that of an old man with a walking stick, when he finally admitted that he should have taken up on the basoama's offer to stay for the night; but a sense of urgency made him decline. If she was offended, she didn't show.

Her vassals had packed an assortment of fresh fruits and a flask of sweet honey-lemon water for his consumption on the road. Aermes leaned against a wide trunk, heaving, tired like a bull after a day's hard work in the farm, and slid to the ground in a half-controlled, half-falling motion.

With his eyes flapping shut by themselves, he reached in his satchel and blindly groped around until his fingers touched the wooden flask. With shaky hands, he uncorked the flask and began to chug the honey-lemon water, almost choking himself at one point.

The sweet and thick liquid had a rejuvenating quality to it. Consciousness began to return to Aermes as he felt the blood rising in his cheeks.

A feeling of being awake after a tiring sleep filled his head. He wondered if the water had any caffeine in it. He took another long gulp. *No. Just sweet and lemony.*

Aermes once again shuffled around the contents of his bag and brought out a ripe dragon fruit. He thumbed it, testing its softness, before biting into it.

Red juice, which ran down his cheek, was soaked by the collar of his white shirt. The fruit tasted fresher than anything could be. Aermes chowed down the final piece in one single bite and leaned back, chewing, letting the juice trickle from the side of his lips, while the sweet flavors swirled in his mouth.

He picked up the flask and took a long gulp of the tangy-sweet water washing down the bits and pieces of fruit in his mouth. He corked the flask shut before stuffing it in his bag and swinging it over his shoulder. Aermes sat there eyes closed and arms crossed thinking about the vision he saw.

He saw the faces of the Kings and Queens before him, the liberators who suffered for the people, gave away their legacies and kingdoms in the hope of peace. He saw the serene expression of Eida and smiled when her face changed to Auda's. He remembered the hard lined face of Aariq, the face of a man who had seen tough times and had made hard choices. He remembered the sacrifices in his heart, though he couldn't recall them.

Countless voices and faces floated in his head. He knew they were him but he wasn't them.

A sense of pride followed by immediate anger washed over him. He pushed himself to his feet and dusted the grass off the pants' bottoms.

Aermes breathed in the fragrant forest air, filling up his lungs with it, like a thirsty dog lapping at a cool stream. He looked up at the stars slowly twinkling into view, piercing through the black of the night.

Cold winds flew down from the mountains in the north. Aermes held himself but the cold wasn't something he couldn't bear. He continued forward, his movements sharper and quicker than before.

The forest was unusually quiet that night. No critters, no birds, no distant footsteps of nocturnal mammals. Nothing on the ground nothing in the trees.

Aermes kept glancing over his shoulders when a feeling of being followed began to take root in his mind. He dismissed it as a stupid paranoia every time but looked back nonetheless.

It never hurts to be cautious. Especially when you are by yourself.

The eerie silence of the forest didn't help. Long ominous howls of the wind were the only sounds that echoed amongst the trees, and honestly, Aermes thought he could do without them.

A small shadow moved in a tree up ahead or so he thought. He realized it was just the thick greenery of the branches, taking shapes in the dark as they danced with the wind. Aermes wondered if he should try out this running technique that he'd been thinking about ever since he came out of the vision.

He found it weird how all of a sudden he had realized a new way of using the energy of the Yadroliq. It must be the feeling early men might have had when they would've realized that fire could be used for many things other than keeping warm and cooking meat, he thought.

Aermes went over the technique in his head once again. Instead of directing energy out from his feet and palms to create blasts strong enough to propel and maneuver himself in the air, he would create miniscule blasts in his leg muscles to propel his feet on the ground like the rotors in a steamer.

He understood that this technique would allow him to go great distances, virtually without stopping, using the littlest amount of energy, but the drawbacks of the technique weren't trivial either. If the blasts weren't carefully controlled, he could risk tearing his muscles or worse snapping a bone. Also, the fatigue his muscles would experience once he stopped, would make him unable to move for a good amount of time.

Aermes was lost in his thoughts when he heard a soft thump of something dropping on the densely grassed forest floor. He spun around with a start to see a small shape crouching.

The girl wore a blue frock with golden frills running from the shoulders to the waist. Her short purple hair shone in the moonlight as she stood up smiling.

A rag doll with white skin and even whiter, almost silver hair sat on her shoulder with its arms tied around the girl's neck, like an infant monkey clinging to its mother. The doll donned a red dress similar to the nobles of western Ingens.

Aermes took a step back but something about the girl stopped him from panicking. He stood up straight and watched the girl dust off the hem of her skirt, which ended above her ankles showing her flat white shoes.

The girl, not more than fifteen, had a royal aura to her and instead of confusion or concern, it made Aermes look at her in wonderment and awe. He cocked his head, expecting the girl to address her appearance, not wanting to ask her, in the fear of being rude.

'An honor to be in your presence,' the girl sunk in a deep bow, 'Your Grace.'

'Your Grace?' Aermes said, 'you mistake me lady, I'm no king.'

'Yes you are,' laughed the girl as if Aermes had told the funniest joke, 'you are Aermes Dakians, sixty-sixth King of the land, air and sea.'

'I am Nixie Igoda. They call me Nixie Truemind.' The girl smiled a toothy smile which wasn't anything, if not pretty.

The clouds moved away and moonlight lit the world around them.

Aermes stood there staring at this strange duend girl saying things that didn't mean anything to him. All, except the name *Igoda*. Everyone in DieTerra knew that name, and feared it. He knew Igoda, but not this girl in front of him.

'Igoda you mean...' Aermes trailed off.

'Yes,' Nixie nodded, 'and father is here too. He'd like to speak with you.'

Father? A sudden wave of fear crushed Aermes; his tongue retreated to his throat, his heart sunk to his stomach and his feet froze in place.

Noticing this, Nixie smiled a pretty smile and slowly Aermes began to relax. He was calm again. His crippling fear, chained in the back of his mind, was entirely passive.

‘Do not distress, Your Grace,’ Nixie said, ‘father is not an enemy.’

‘Nor a friend,’ a voice boomed from the darkness behind the trees and shrubs.

‘Yet,’ said Nixie.

‘Yet,’ repeated the large man as he stepped out from behind a giant trunk.

The man wore a brown broad rim hat and a matching long coat that hung above his calves. Inside, he wore an embroidered vest over a white shirt and a neatly knotted silk tie. His black pants, creased to perfection, rested gently over his brown snake skin shoes. His skin was the slight dark of the humans native to ChowMos. Aermes then looked at Nixie; white as milk. *Duend mother*, he thought to himself.

As the man strolled towards him, Aermes noticed something peculiar about the man’s clothing. They were clearly made from rich fabric but the thing that caught Aermes’ eye was that unlike his or the girl’s, how impeccably clean and perfect they were.

It was as if the man had dressed himself moments before stepping out from behind the tree. There was not a speck of dirt on his shoes or a blade of grass on his coat. Aermes wondered whether or not the man had even walked a dozen feet in the forest.

‘Your Grace,’ the large man performed a slight bow and took off his hat revealing the face Aermes had seen in the tidings since he was a kid.

‘Hebol of the sea,’ Aermes exclaimed, disbelieving his senses.

‘The one and only,’ the man smiled a smile which was proud and gleeful.

‘You don’t seem like how I imagined you would.’

‘That’s what is wrong with the world, Your Grace,’ the man was genuinely disappointed. ‘When they think of an Overlord they picture us with long fangs and claws dripping with the blood of infants we devoured. But let me be honest with you, Your Grace, we are not inherently evil men. That is how the Council wants us to be seen. That is the image they associate with us. And they have been the shepherd to the DieTerran sheep for a millennia. A vile, vile shepherd.’

‘So tell me, Your Grace,’ Hebol said, ‘what is Vrinma planning to do?’

‘Planning?’ Aermes asked, ‘about what?’

‘So he hasn’t told you?’ Hebol seemed surprised, ‘I wonder why?’

‘Maybe it will be a motivation,’ Nixie said and Hebol nodded in agreement.

‘What are you talking about?’ Annoyance was slowly trying to creep over Aermes but it was kept at bay by an invisible wall in his mind. ‘What was Master Vrinma supposed to have told me?’

‘We’ll get to that, Your Grace,’ Hebol said, ‘do you wish to head to my camp? It’s not far from here.’ He motioned with his hand, a gesture telling Aermes to walk alongside him.

‘Here is fine,’ Aermes said, ‘besides I have to get to the shrine as soon as I can.’

‘That you do, Your Grace. You know Belyore didn’t tell Aasim about the third vision stone because he got prematurely pushed out of the vision.’ Hebol did a soft grunt which Aermes assumed was a laugh. ‘How did you do, Your Grace?’

‘I completed it,’ Aermes said, ‘you know my father? You know where he is right now?’

‘No, Your Grace. I was hoping you could tell me,’ Hebol hummed. ‘The last time I heard he was being hosted in Viyn by some gigan royals. That was, let’s see,’ he counted on his fingers, ‘about five years ago.’

Aermes huffed and hung his head for a bit. ‘Why do you keep calling me that?’

‘Calling you what, Your Grace?’ The man asked.

'That.'

'Your Grace?'

'Yes.'

'Well because you are. You hold the Yadroliq, don't you?'

Aermes nodded.

'Then you are the King of the land, air and my domain, the sea. Didn't Vrinma tell you the story?'

Aermes shook his head. He still didn't understand what the man was saying, but he decided to let it go. 'So tell me Hebol of the sea, why are you a world across, here, tonight, talking to me?'

'Well, Your Grace, because a war is coming. And I want to assess both the sides.'

'A war?' Aermes asked.

'Yes, Your Grace and I'm here to see which side should I choose... Tell me, Your Grace,' Hebol continued, 'how strong are you?'

'How strong am I?'

'How strong are you?' Hebol repeated.

'I don't know,' Aermes mused, 'strong, but not strong enough... not nearly as strong as I feel I can be.'

A wide smile spread across the Overlord's face and he clapped Aermes on the arm.

'I want to fight alongside you, Your Grace,' Hebol declared, 'but I can't just yet. The Council seems to be invincible from every standpoint right now. So you see, I will need you to prove yourself to win my support.'

Aermes rubbed his forehead. He didn't have a clue what the man was talking about, he wanted to scream, to run, to ask him what in the world he was saying, but he didn't do any of that. Instead he asked, 'and how do I prove myself?'

Another smile lit Hebol's eyes and he looked at Nixie, who smiled back at him.

'Before the war, Your Grace, there will be many battles. One of them may just be around the corner. There is where you prove yourself.'

Aermes nodded, thinking about nothing and everything at the same time. His mind was chaotic and tranquil at the same time. It confused him, but then it didn't. 'So you came all the way and tracked me down to tell me this?' He finally asked.

'No, Your Grace,' replied Hebol, 'I am here overlooking a personal assignment. You will find out about it soon enough or you might already have and do not realize yet.

'Whichever it may be, I want you to know that I'm not your enemy.'

'Or your friend.' Nixie chimed.

'Yet.'

'Yet,' Nixie repeated.

Hebol reached into his vest's pocket and pulled out a golden dial, which Aermes assumed was one of the new western timekeepers that had just begun to come into the Ingens. A thin gold chain hung from the dial disappearing inside the pocket.

Hebol pressed a small knob protruding at the dial's top with his thumb and the golden face of the dial swung open. 'A few more,' is what Aermes heard Hebol speak under his breath before the wind blew the rest of his words away.

'Your Grace,' Hebol flipped the dial close and dropped it into his pocket, 'a lot is about to happen, big things have been set in motion and you and your friends are at the center of it. You can be like your predecessors and shut your eyes to the world, the things it does to you and the people around you or you can fight. You can fight to change it, make it different.'

'Fight who?' Aermes said.

'There is only one enemy, Your Grace' said Hebol, 'for you at least.'

'The Council.'

'The Council,' Hebol nodded, 'and they have their gaze set on Fiachori and you, the Pillars. And before the sun rises tomorrow you'd have lost a lot. That is if you are in a position to comprehend loss.'

'What do you mean?' Aermes asked, 'what's about to happen?'

'Your friends have landed themselves in the spider's web, Your Grace,' Hebol looked genuinely sad as he shook his head, 'and Vrinma has been betrayed.'

'Just promise me one thing, Your Grace.'

'What?' Aermes asked.

'That you won't die tonight.'

Aermes felt stung by the request but not enough to still his tongue. 'I won't,' he promised as sincerely as the tree promises to grow.

A strong gust of wind blew from the south, rattling the thick canopy above them. Aermes looked to the sky as the green roof above them shook, violently, caught in a wind storm.

Two large shadows darted across the night sky and took the wind with them. A wide eyed Aermes turned to Hebol who had put his hat back on.

'They are headed for the shrine, Your Grace.' He turned to Nixie, 'give him a little push.'

Nixie nodded, reached out her hand, and touched Aermes' cheek with her cold finger tips. Aermes felt a slight zap on his face, similar to a static shock.

He felt different. He felt strong. Focused. Curious. Aermes had to confront the shadows. They shouldn't reach the shire.

'Till next time, Your Grace.' Hebol and Nexie bowed and quickly disappeared into the dark thicket.

Aermes turned around, looked at the sky then at the ground, then back at the sky. He lifted his right foot and slammed it hard against the forest floor.

The next moment he was above the canopy, cold wind stinging his face. He saw the large shadows at the distance, kicked the sky behind him and darted towards them. The shadows seemed to have stopped. *No*, they were turning around.

Aermes coiled his arm ready to meet the flyers.

The loud blast from Aermes' punch marked their encounter on that cold moonlit night.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Fiachori Shrine, Ugwu Mountains

Dinso

‘What happened to Fa and Kolben?’ Bernice repeated, louder this time.

‘I don’t know,’ Vrinma confessed, ‘they have disappeared and from the Seer’s estimation it’s the Peacekeepers. This is the same type of blind spot that we saw when Ren was captured.’

‘So they must’ve been bound in tigwyn handcuffs,’ Ren speculated out loud.

‘That is most likely what has happened,’ Vrinma looked up at the graying afternoon sky.

‘But you said the Peacekeepers wouldn’t make a move until the king was there,’ Bernice said, an unfound urgency was thick in her voice.

‘That is true,’ Vrinma shook his head ‘we can’t see the king either. We suspect he might be dead.’

‘Dead...’ Bernice’s eyes went wide.

‘Yes,’ Vrinma said, ‘Kolben and Fa might be in much bigger danger than I could have ever anticipated.’

Bernice turned to Auda with eyes that had somehow turned red, ‘Auda, what are we doing?’

‘What?’ Auda felt caught off-guard by the sudden question.

Exhaling audibly, the old master placed a kind hand on the girl’s shoulder.

‘Aermes is not here,’ Vrinma said to Auda, ‘you are the next in command.’

Auda looked around and all eyes were on her. Bernice’s and Cadmael’s had anger and fear, and while Sui looked more confused than anything. Ren was trying her best to appear indifferent and calm.

‘What do we do?’ Auda mused to not anyone in particular. She began running scenarios and possibilities in her head. ‘Aermes would definitely want to help. When we heard about Ren and Sui being captured, he decided to go headfirst into the Peacekeeper camp in an instant.’

Everyone, including Vrinma was focused on Auda, eagerly waiting for her decision; though they all knew in their hearts that there would be no surprise to it.

‘We’re going to Vameej right now,’ Auda declared, ‘Master, how long will it take for us to get there?’

‘You, Cad and Ren,’ Vrinma said, ‘can be there by dawn. Bernice can be there in mere moments but I think she’d like to keep your speed.’ He gave Bernice a sharp look. ‘Wouldn’t you?’

‘Yes, Master,’ Bernice lowered her head like she was ashamed.

‘What about Sui?’ Ren asked.

‘I will send her with them,’ Vrinma said waving his hand to the five Keepers who had gathered not far from them. With their eyes fixated on their Ladies and Lord, their weapons were ready on their backs. ‘Don’t worry about her. They will take care of her till you get there.’

Ren nodded with slight hesitation. She smiled down at Sui and after ruffling her hair pushed her forward, gesturing her to go to Girdon, who immediately dropped to his knee to greet the girl with a gentle hug. Ren smiled at the exchange.

‘That settles it then,’ Bernice said, getting everyone’s attention.

‘Yes,’ Auda said. ‘We should leave right away.’

Cad and Ren gave swift nods, signaling their approval. Auda responded by beginning to hover off the ground.

Ren followed suit and threw down her disc, which began to float a few feet above the ground and with a little hop, she

stepped on it. She looked at Auda rise rapidly and followed her into the sky.

A shattering boom behind them was accompanied by Cad appearing at a distance. The next moment Bernice materialized between Ren and Auda from a blinding flash of light.

Vrinma watched them till they were little dots in the dusk sky. Sighing to himself, the old master turned around to the five Keepers and Sui waiting for him. After meeting every Keeper's eyes and verifying the resolve in them Vrinma spoke, 'are we ready?'

The Keepers replied in a unison of nods and yeses, while Sui simply looked up at Girdon's chin, clutching his wrist with both her hands. She turned to look at the old master who took a few steps back and began moving his hands in front of him, tracing wide arcs and tangents in the air.

With a soft sizzle, not dissimilar to water on a hot pan, a small ball of gooey black fluid appeared out of thin air, a few feet from Vrinma's chest. Sui's eyes widened and a soft gasp escaped her lips when the ball began to rapidly expand in size; thick black fluid moving on its surface, seemingly alive.

Vrinma took several steps back, getting out of the expanding sphere's way and within moments there was a six foot sphere of restless black fluid standing between him and the Keepers, who were now performing stretches, readying themselves for the trip.

Walking away from the large pulsating sphere, Vrinma turned towards the group, hands, hidden in his long sleeves, folded in front of him. 'This will drop you in the forests, a few miles north of the capital.'

'Alright then!' Girdon nodded to the master and the others.

Scooping Sui up in his arms, he paced towards the dark pulsating sphere. He strode straight into the sphere's surface and the fluid moved around him, swallowing him whole. The other Keepers followed right behind and without breaking their strides, disappeared into the spherical fluid.

Waiting for a few moments after Kaeb disappeared into the fluid, facing the pulsating sphere, Vrinma opened his arms wide and brought his palms together in a swift motion. Mimicking the

gesture of his hands the black sphere contracted onto itself, until it snapped out of existence.

Exhaling a satisfied breath the old man turned around and began towards his study. He wondered if the young Pillars were capable of tackling, what he believed to be, a premeditated conspiracy that he might have pushed them into.

Lost in dark and unfortunate thoughts, Vrinma didn't notice when he arrived outside his study. Upon approaching the door he saw a tall man, dressed in a long sleeved black robe similar to his, waiting inside. Standing next to the desk, riffling through the pages of an old book, he oddly wore a gleaming claw on his right hand.

He must have been sparring. Vrinma proceeded to greet the man who smiled his wide smile at the old man's arrival.

'Master Isies,' he called out, 'when did you arrive.'

The man closed the book, 'just got in,' he said. 'I have been waiting for you... Have the Pillars and Keepers left for Vameej.'

'Yes,' Vrinma paused. His eyes widened and doubt bled into his voice, 'how did you know they would be leaving for Vameej.'

'Oh, just a hunch.'

Isies smiled and following a quick blur the old master was leaning over coughing blood. Hard steel claws entered Vrinma's stomach and exited from his back, bathing red in his warm blood.

Isies turned the sharp blades in the master, spiraling his entrails, before retracting the claw. With loud wheezing sounds, Vrinma fell to the ground; blood gushing from the hole in his abdomen.

'Sorry, Master,' Isies said over the old man who was now sputtering blood from his mouth, 'you wouldn't have let my friends in the shrine.'

He bent down and lifted Vrinma's robe to his waist. With his claw, Isies made several careful incisions, on the old man's thigh, all emanating out from one point.

The flesh parted unprompted, and the blood pushed out a black round crystal. A dark viscous fluid appeared to move inside the smooth crystal sphere.

‘Also,’ Isies said, bringing up the crystal dripping with blood to his face, ‘I really wanted this.’

Cleaning the blood off his claw, Isies sat under the cypress tree in the courtyard.

Bodies of shrine residents were strewn around him in their peach and beige robes, now dark with the blood pooling under them.

With a loud creak, the large wooden doors swung open and two tall, furred shapes plodded inside. In the dark, their small and crooked antlers were menacing knives rising towards the night sky.

The irazurras walked up to the master sitting under the tree, gazing contently at the massacred bodies adorning the courtyard. Still wiping his claw’s blade, Isies stood when the two beasts were close enough and noticed he was easily a foot shorter than the shorter one of the two, that too without considering his antlers.

‘Did you find him?’ Isies asked the taller beast, not bothering to look up from cleaning his claw.

‘Y-yes,’ the irazurra stammered, visibly intimidated by the man, ‘fucker came at us over the forests in Trest.’

‘And..?’ Isies removed his claw and latched it on his belt. He lifted his head and stared into the irazurras red eyes.

‘A-and...’ the irazurra reached into the jute bag he wore and pulled out the pale head by its long black hair. ‘He couldn’t live to see the night,’ the beast boomed still holding the dismembered head for Isies to examine. The boy’s golden irises now a grayish yellow were fixed up as if trying to peek into his own head.

Nodding to himself, Isies stepped back from the beasts, ‘alright, let’s get going then.’

The master turned around and with his pointed finger sliced the air along imaginary lines, which only he saw, and in the blink of an eye a large sphere of thick black fluid was pulsating where there was nothing a moment ago.

Isies turned to the two irazurras and gestured them to step into the sphere. Nodding nervously, the beasts stepped forward.

‘What do I do with this?’ The taller one held the boy’s head high.

‘Leave the lord with his subjects.’ Isies replied.

With a *humph*, the irazurra hurled Aermes’ head on the corpse of a duend girl nearby and stepped into the black fluid, disappearing immediately. He was followed by the other beast and Isies after that. The sphere contracted unto itself and vanished, leaving the dead silent, in the cold of the starless winter night.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Tim Raug, Khem Vameej

Bound in tigwyn and gagged with blood soaked rags, Fa and Kolben rocked in the back of the dark cabin.

Called the Prisoner Transportation Unit by their captors, the vehicle was something unlike Kolben had ever seen, let alone Fa. With a gray metallic body displaying the Peacekeeper crest embossed on its sides, it didn't look much more different than a giant metal brick.

Kolben had seen automobiles in Canem, his father owned two, which he wasn't allowed to drive, but this thing didn't look anything like those small two-person transports. This was a giant, traveling, metal hall that didn't rely on burning fuel for movement; he assumed, since the vehicle emitted no smoke.

The darkness inside the cabin made it impossible for Fa and Kolben to even see each other, though their faces were not more than five feet apart. In addition to their hands being cuffed behind their backs, the cuffs were tightly secured on the metal walls and their feet chained to the floor.

Soon after they were locked in the dark, Fa and Kolben began trying to communicate by rattling their chains and humming as loudly as they could, but neither of them could understand or even see the other. After hours of this, with their throats parched,

ankles and wrists bruised and throbbing, and minds disoriented from the darkness, the boys had inadvertently given up.

The rocking of the cabin combined with a growling stomach and dry throat lulled them into a deep slumber. Their agitated dreams were the repetition of the day's events, twisted into tormenting nightmares.

The loud clank of the back door opening, woke up the passed out boys. They fluttered their eyes open when the moonlight faintly illuminated the darkness. A large shadow reached in from the doorway and pulled them out by their hair as they protested in angry noises, the blood from their gags now dried around their mouths.

When their legs and wrists refused to budge because of being chained to the floor and the wall, the beast angrily leaned in, over their bodies, and tugged at the heavy chains. With a metallic clank, the now broken chains rattled to the floor.

Fa was thrown to the hard ground with a heavy thud, followed by Kolben, who fell to his side and unsuccessfully tried to prop himself up. Not knowing how to help him when he was in a bound state himself, Fa watched his lord helplessly, from a few feet away. A Peacekeeper hurried into view. Helping Kolben up, he sat him behind Fa so that their backs were supporting each other.

With a quick motion, the soldier brought out a pair of handcuffs and cuffed their already cuffed hands to each other. Fa realized immediately why this was being done. They knew he wouldn't transform with Kolben tied to his back. This was the same position they had bound them in the prison cell at the capital, as they waited to board them on the PTU.

The tall figure, who Fa now saw was a furry giant with thick hooved legs, arms that hung till his knees and antlers so large and sharp they seemed to be slicing at the night sky, left them on the ground and turned away. Grunting incoherently to himself, the irazurra walked around the Peacekeeper vehicle before disappearing behind it.

Craning his neck as far he could in both directions, Fa scanned their dark surroundings. They seemed to be on the edge of some

large clearing, with tall trees lining its boundary not hundred yards from them.

Behind him, a few dozen yards from the PTU, Fa saw several similar looking but differently painted vehicles, out which marched Peacekeepers dressed in their white and red colors. Fa noted Kolben was spying in the same direction.

Faint voices were carried by the night air to them, over the rhythmic thuds of the Peacekeepers marching in position.

‘We have a thousand Peacekeepers,’ the voice was of the Lieutenant General, ‘how many soldiers have you brought, Drereth.’

‘Five hundred, General,’ the duend woman replied.

‘Aaaah!’ With a bellow Zasiën stretched his massive furry arms towards the sky as if just waking up from a long nap. Everyone insisted him to stay in Epolus Varenruth’s appearance until they left the capital, but Zasiën reminded them that the king was dead, the princess was in prison and so, ‘no one gives a shit about the Varenruths anymore.’

Following his brother’s command, Zanyur too shed the appearance of a burnt Sofelan Remurian and returned to being the towering beast that he was. He spotted their youngest brother, plodding towards them at a leisurely pace.

‘Are they secured?’ Zanyur inquired.

‘Uh-huh!’ Zynuk replied, ‘cuffed the fuckers the same way you did at the palace. That one won’t be turning into a herenuer unless he decides to kill his friend.’

The slow up-down movement of Zanyur’s snout showed that he was satisfied by his brother’s reply. ‘We should head to the spot,’ he turned to Zasiën, ‘Isies should be here soon.’

Zasiën’s lips curled back over his snout revealing a row of jagged fangs in a twisted smile.

‘Finally, I get to meet Him,’ he said to the sky. ‘Let’s go.’

With a turn, Zasiën started pacing towards the volcano, with Hvok falling beside him. Though over six feet tall himself, Hvok was dwarfed by Zasiën; his head barely reaching the beast’s chest and the funny thing being that Zasiën was shorter compared to both his younger brothers.

'Where's your captain?' Zasiën asked the General.

'With the men,' Hvok replied, eyes focused straight ahead, 'waiting for my orders.'

'And the Blue?'

'Asleep in its chamber,' Hvok scratched his face, 'what about your ehunesks? I was really eager to see them.'

'They are in the forest,' Zasiën smiled a toothy grin, 'I didn't want your men to shit their pants, right before the battle.'

Hvok let out a booming laugh and patted the beast's furry arm. Ahead, at the distance, Tim Raug rose to the sky as a dark giant. The now dormant volcano grew rapidly bigger as they approached it.

'You know,' Zasiën spoke to Hvok and the others behind him, 'when they imprisoned Him, they dropped the Epriollum straight down a flaming Tim Raug's gullet. But over the past thousands of years the cube, pushed and pulled on by magma and rocks, has travelled underground further away from the volcano's base.'

After walking the next several moments in silence, Zasiën stopped a couple hundred yards from the base of the volcano. Zanyur and Zynuk positioned themselves behind their brother while Drereth moved to the side, to stand by Hvok.

'Now we just have to wait for-'

Zasiën was interrupted by the sudden appearance of a giant black sphere not twenty feet from them. The sphere's viscous exterior gleamed like liquid onyx in the moonlight. Breaking the sphere's moving surface, a tall man in a dark robe stepped out followed by two irazurras. The sphere disappeared immediately behind them.

'Now if He isn't doing this, who is?' Zasiën was giddy with ecstasy as he walked towards the robed man to greet him.

'Isies,' Zasiën called out.

'Zasiën, my friend,' the master shook the irazzura's massive hand. 'Are we ready?'

'Just been waiting for you,' Zasiën pulled back his lips into another nightmarish grin.

‘Let’s do it then,’ Isies said. ‘Point me where.’

‘Alright!’ Zasién said, gesturing Isies to follow him. He led the master towards the volcano, with the two irazurras trailing behind him.

‘Nodius. Mubuk,’ Zasién called out to the irazurras without turning, ‘how was the Dakians?’

‘Untrained,’ Mubuk, the taller one, replied without hesitation, eliciting a booming laugh from Zasién and a grin from Nodius.

Zasién stopped at an unassuming spot and asked everyone to spread out in a large circle. Nodius and Mubuk greeted the others with nods and got nods in return. While Isies only performed a mocking salute at Hvok, who found that hilarious and wheezed for a good long moment.

‘Right there,’ Zasién said. ‘You feel it?’ he asked with his neck strained and eyes shut.

‘Yes, I got it,’ Isies replied calmly, ‘you can let go now.’ Bringing up his hands in front of him, Isies spoke to the others, ‘everyone move at least ten paces back.’ All obliged immediately.

Isies slashed the air with his fingers and traced several arcs with his hands before a massive disc began to expand high above their heads. The moonlight gleamed off the pulsating black liquid as the disc cast a giant shadow on the ground below.

Slowly, from the black liquid, the base of a massive metal cube began to emerge.

The Epríollum descended about halfway, out of the fluid disc, before it started to plummet to the ground. The twenty-foot cube met the ground with an earth shattering thud.

Everyone stared at the ancient relic, its once elaborate exterior now tarnished and battered from the thousand years it spent in a volcano; the carvings and etchings on its metal faces melted and dented. The sound of Zasién’s feet thumping against the ground, as he approached the Epríollum, was clear over the silence around it.

Eyes fixated on the cube over twice his height, Zasién reached out his hands and began to scrape along its surface with precise

methodical movements. His fingers came to a stop when they happened upon a cylindrical handle, long enough for him to wrap his hand over it.

With a loud grunt and a visible strain of someone trying to lift a heavy weight, Zasien turned the handle halfway before quickly stepping back and shooting others a nervous glance.

Metallic cranking followed by whirring of what sounded similar to large gears turning and chains being pulled, the Epirollum's faces began to open at the edges. The top face lifted up and slowly and arced to the ground attached to the back face. The front and the side faces, also in a controlled motion, arced downwards until the cube was lying flat on the ground; its insides empty, save for a few massive chains and cuffs.

Zanyur and Zynuk turned to their brother, concern plain in their blood red eyes.

Without taking his sight off the chains and metal cuffs, Zasien walked towards them. Stepping onto the cube's front face, Zasien took a few long strides to reach the center. He bent down and lifted a metal cuff, large enough to go around an elephant's leg. It was still locked.

'He's not here,' Zasien turned to his brothers with an expressionless face. 'He's not here,' he repeated, slightly quieter. He pushed himself to his feet, his tall antlers rising above him, and began towards the group.

'Brother I...' Zanyur started but was cut off by a wave and a sharp stare from Zasien.

'Tell your men to close it up,' he said to Hvok in barely a whisper. Hvok looked up at the irazurra's eyes which looked clouded and unfocused in the dark.

Zasien turned to Isies and spoke again in barely a whisper. 'You will help them bring it to the Hall, alright?'

Isies looked at the beast towering over him and something scared him. Something strange, something new; something different. And before he knew it, it was gone.

Zasien jerked up, like snapping out of a trance and looked around, confusion clear on his face. He suddenly raised his snout in the air and took several loud sniffs.

‘Prepare your men,’ his booming voice was back. ‘The Pillars and Keepers are here,’ he said to Hvok and Drereth. They both gave stiff nods and sped away.

‘Bring me my armor,’ the General shouted pacing towards his battalion, ‘and ready for battle.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Tim Raug, Khem Vameej

The sunlight had begun to light the sky from the east, in shades of red and orange, as they circled the clearing, hidden behind the giant trees, trying to stay inconspicuous. Auda estimated that they must have walked for at least seven hours.

Being able to easily navigate the dark, Bernice led the group from the forest, up the slope of Tim Raug, until they found an elevation at the base with a clear view of the field in front of them and rocks big enough to hide behind.

Bernice, Auda, Girdon and Alleli squatted behind the covers, examining the armies in the field. The others looked over their shoulders.

While everyone else had to strain their eyes in the dim light of the dawn to make out the shaped below them, Bernice saw them clear as day.

‘About five hundred royal guards and a thousand Peacekeepers,’ she announced quietly.

‘Do you see the kids?’ Girdon asked.

After scanning for a moment, Bernice answered, ‘yes. They are at the center. Beside that giant cube. There...’ Her eyes widened and voice disappeared when she saw them, ‘i-i-irazurras and e-ehunesks... a-and an appeaser.’

Girdon and Alleli looked at Bernice with a sense of disbelief but then saw the large black shapes move in the field.

‘How many?’ Girdon asked.

Bernice turned to him, her eyes wide with shock.

‘How many?’ Girdon repeated, in a voice stiff enough to wake her up.

‘T-two ehunesks,’ Bernice shook herself, ‘five irazurras.’ Fear fled away at the same pace as it had seeped in.

‘And the appeaser?’ Girdon noted the giant still shape towering in the distance was not a peculiarly shaped boulder, ‘can you tell which one?’

‘A Blue,’ she replied immediately. ‘Wait.’ A dark shadow stepped out from behind the cube and began speaking with one of the irazurras. Bernice’s eyes went wide but not from fear this time. Confusion muddled her thoughts. ‘Master Isies?’

‘What?’ Auda and Alleli tried to make out the faces in the dim light of the dawn.

‘Are you certain?’ Girdon tried his best to sound calm.

‘Yes,’ was all Bernice could manage to squeak.

‘Traitor,’ Nyaz called quietly as hushed gasps and curses rose from behind.

‘Perdyr spawn traitor’ exclaimed Kaeb.

‘If he is here,’ Girdon’s voice was rough, ‘Vrinma might very well be dead.’

Auda and Bernice turned to him while Alleli stared forward, trying hard to not meet anyone’s eye.

Girdon hung his head as his face scrunched up; he took a deep breath. ‘Isies,’ he rubbed his knuckles in the ground, ‘if he is here Vrinma is dead and he has the Black Cloud.’

‘We will have to fight him too?’ Cad asked.

‘Yes,’ Alleli replied, ‘if we are lucky, we kill him.’ A wave of agreeing grunts rose around her.

‘I’ll fight him,’ Bernice declared.

Girdon nodded. ‘Tell me, Bernice,’ he pointed at a shape standing beside the cube, ‘Does that man with the hammer have red hair?’

‘Yes, how did you...’

‘Hvok!’ Auda and Ren exclaimed.

‘Yes,’ Girdon agreed. ‘Now here is how this will go.’ He grazed the ground with his palm, evening the red soil.

‘Ren will create the initial distraction. Then Bernice and I...’ and as the moon descended, clearing the sky for the sun, Girdon laid down his battle strategy. He drew crosses and arrows and circles in the ground with his finger while the others looked on, nodding at him and at each other.

‘I think we have it.’ Reuth spoke. Agreements from others followed right after.

‘But,’ Auda spoke up, ‘how will we free Fa and Kolben? We will need the keys to their tigwyn handcuffs. We can’t cut or break tigwyn. Maybe we should-’

‘No,’ she got interrupted by Alleli, ‘my Lady, *you* can’t cut tigwyn but there are some who can.’ She focused on Girdon and raised an eyebrow. The man nodded.

He turned to Ren and caught her gaze. ‘Ren,’ Girdon said, ‘you can proceed.’

Bernice crouched beside Girdon as he clutched the long shaft of his double-axe in one hand.

Ren stepped forward towards the edge of the mound and observed the dark shapes to the south. The farthest cluster of moving shadows indicated the Peacekeeper battalion and the royal guards, standing along with the giant shapes of the two ehunesks and the four-armed Blue appeaser.

Ren raised her hand to the sky, fingers pointing at the fading stars and brought it down in a swift arc.

A pillar of thunder split the sky before crashing to the ground on which the two armies stood. Deafening noise erupted when the lightning met the men and the beasts; drowning the screams of the burning, melting soldiers.

The lightning hadn't moved a finger in the sky and Bernice was already off, flying to the shackled boys. Girdon held onto her arm as the blue-white column of thunder branched downwards illuming the dark sky over the field.

The thunder had forked halfway towards the unsuspecting Peacekeepers and royal guards, when Bernice and Girdon stood above the chained Pillars, with the giant cube at their backs.

One of the irazurras was having a conversation with Isies, who stood behind Hvok and a duend woman warrior, all turned towards the descending lightning. The other four irazurras stood further south, closer to the soldiers than to them.

Girdon held the shaft of his double-axe in both hands and pulled it apart into two separate axes. He brought the axes down. One blade met the chains and the other met the cuffs, at the same time, when the lightening met the ground.

A sharp clank separated the metal links, freeing the prisoners, who didn't waste a breath to push the binds away and get on their feet.

The noise attracted the attention of the nearest group and upon realizing the situation Zasien and Isies darted towards Bernice followed by Drereth and Hvok.

The battle began with the smell of a hundred charred bodies filling the area. As the sun slowly colored the sky red in the east, the ground mirrored it with its puddles of blood.

Zasien pounced at the petite miatagarri girl like a lion hunting a sheep. He raised his palm and fire began to build up beneath his skin. The girl gave him a look that was the opposite of helpless, before disappearing into a golden beam of light.

Zasien landed on the empty ground and was greeted by a blade directed to his shoulder, which he caught in mid-swing. The armor clad warrior jumped back, pulling the sword away and began circling the towering beast.

'Ah, Lady Skirri,' Zasien bared his yellowing teeth in a grin.

His antlers rose high above him like gnarled knives trying to climb to the sky. A spinning ball of bluish flames appeared between the antlers, getting bigger until it was about a foot wide.

Auda stood at a distance, visor down and the sword held up, protectively, in front of her body. A shaft of fire sizzled forth from the fireball and met her sword and armor, coloring the metal in shades of orange and blue.

In a bid to conserve her energy, Auda let the fire wash over her, since her armor was resistant enough to keep her safe. She eyed the irazurra at the distance, who too stood still, a blue fireball spinning above his head.

Nearly blinded by the continuous stream of fire pouring on her, Auda pushed the flames away by creating an airless bubble around her. The fire flooded towards her but was stopped a feet away from her body by an invisible sphere.

On trying to take a step backward, she lost her balance and almost fell over.

The ground had risen over her feet, cementing her in place, holding her still. Two mounds of solid earth, tough enough to not be broken by force, rose up to cover her legs to the shin.

Auda began to melt the ground away but she was too late. The fire around her had created the perfect distraction for Zasien to close the distance between them unnoticed. The irazurra burst through the flames and by the time Auda noticed the beast, his fist kissed her in the middle of her abdomen, knocking the wind out of her.

She buckled under the force of the punch as blood spewed from her lips, covering her teeth red. Enough to leave a dent in her enchanted armor, it was a blow of incomprehensible force.

Auda took a sharp inhale, forcing wind in her unwilling lungs, before receiving another smash to her face. The intensity of the blow dented the helm inwards and launched her off the ground. The long sword left her grip, flying away across the field.

Auda's body bounced in the dirt twice before she stayed herself in the air, levitating a yard above the ground, as she closed her wounds and repaired her cracked bones.

Auda searched for the irazurra on the dusty plain, while smoothing out the dents in her armor, making it more solid, tougher. A sudden gust of wind made her look up to find the giant shadow above her.

Zasien brought down his clenched fists, hammering her metal covered skull. The force shot Auda to the ground, which she met with a thundering boom, creating a slight crater on impact.

The irazurra descended in front of the duend who clumsily shuffled to her feet.

‘You know why you and your friends will die here, Lady Skirri?’ Zasien called out, ‘because you know nothing about us. And we know everything about you.’

From the corner of her eye, Benice spotted Auda with her blade bare, flying towards the irazurra leaping at her. A few yards behind the irazurra she saw Isies approaching them, his long black master’s robe flapping after him.

Right before Auda began her swing, Bernice dematerialized and beamed towards her former master.

Intending on finishing him in a single blow, Bernice zoomed towards the man with an unimaginable velocity. The world around her went flat, like a painting on the canvas. The people and objects lost their depths as time seemed to freeze.

Bernice stopped herself right before she hit the black vortex swimming in place of the master. Goopy tentacles burst forth from the dark vortex latching on to her, attempting to pull her inside. She turned into light once again and shot to the sky.

Bernice located Isies standing, not far from the vortex, smiling up at her. She shot towards the man at a speed that stopped the time for her and once more she was met by the black vortex, trying to pull her in.

Bernice dematerialized again, to escape the dark tentacles, and beamed to the ground, a few yards from Isies who stood there arms crossed, unmoving.

'I have watched you train every day for a year, my Lady,' the master called out, 'I know your move before you make it.

'Also it doesn't matter how fast you can go, if you can only go straight,' He laughed.

Only straight. Bernice dematerialized once again but this time instead of zooming towards Isies, she beamed in the opposite direction, then to the sky, then to the left, then to the north.

The light beam zipped randomly in the sky before striking the master who had vanished into the vortex on the ground that once more sent out slick tentacles to catch the miatagarri, but Bernice was quick to dodge this time too.

'That *was* smart,' Isies' voice made Bernice turn and find the master not far from her. 'But you know what's smarter...?'

Five dark ovals appeared around the robed man, boxing him in from four sides and the top.

The vortexes spun around him, covering Isies in a black-purple blur, as he began to leisurely walk towards Bernice, who stood there trying to come up with a strategy. She realized, this wasn't a fight she could win with speed and strength alone.

This was a fight between a lance and a shield.

Fa had chosen his opponent long before he was freed. He had chosen him the moment he saw the prince rip through the king's innards.

The hooded imposter had made his skin crawl back then, and now that he was in his true form, he didn't look much calming either.

By the time Fa's iron binds hit the ground, he was already in the sky shooting towards Zanyur. Before the irazurra turned to notice the boy flying in on him, he was already twisting his jaw against a rock hard fist.

Thrown by the force of the boy's punch, Zanyur found his giant body ploughing the red soil of Harroug. He dug his claw in the ground, bringing him to an eventual halt.

The irazurra squinted from inside the cloud of dust, and spotted Fa flying towards him once again. Holding his snout wide open, Zanyur blasted a jet of water strong enough to shove the boy back, dropping him to the ground.

Before Fa could get up on his feet, he saw a barrage of giant boulders racing to meet him. He immediately tried to launch himself into the sky, out of the boulders' path, but two invisible hands caught hold of his ankles, keeping them secured to the ground.

Telekinesis too. The thought troubled Fa as he looked up to find the sky now hidden behind a wall of giant boulders that cast an ominous shadow on him.

Instinctively dropping himself to his knees, Fa placed his open palms against the ground and began to drink in the stony bedrock. He felt the hardness swim up his arms and integrate into his muscle fibers. The ground travelled throughout his body, hardening his skin, and the muscles and the bones underneath.

Fa clenched his teeth as several tons of boulders rained down on him. The impact from the big ones shook his body, which he held firmly in its place. Most of them bounced off him, while several shattered upon impact. Fa found himself safe in the stone shell that was now his body, and the rain of rocks was over sooner than he expected.

The boy stood up, among the spread of large boulders that had effectively changed the terrain around him. Through the cloud of dust, he thought he saw the irazurra's lips curl up into a smirk before the beast started sprinting towards him.

Stony arms shot out of the boulders around him, restraining Fa.

One held his neck and one the back of his head; one caught each of his shoulders and multiple others grabbed his arms and legs. The stone hands locked in place, making it impossible for Fa to even budge as Zanyur rapidly closed the distance between them.

Shutting his eyes, Fa tapped the creature sleeping inside him and called upon the beast. In the immediate moment, the stone hands around him began to crumble as the body they held grew in size drastically, with every passing second. The green-blue

scales emerged on Fa's skin, wings tore out of his shoulders, and a thick tail sprouted out his back, mimicking the snout that grew out of his jaw.

This will be fun. The uncharacteristic thought popped up in Fa's head when he finished transforming into the mythical herenuer.

Zanyur stopped in his tracks, mesmerized by the show his opponent had put on and half out of fear of the giant winged beast, shot out a swirling pillar of water from his mouth at the creature; remembering a little late that the word herenuer itself meant *great water serpent*.

By the time her looming pillar of lightning met the ground and the men standing on it, Ren was already on her disc zooming towards the largest of the furred beasts. The tall irazurra was confused at the commotion around him but was still quick to react when Ren got close enough, which Ren assumed must have been some form of animal instinct.

Zynuk made a quick turn to face the girl flying towards him and held up his hands, his open palms facing the approaching Ren.

A blast of wind shot out of the beast's palms, which threw Ren back in the air. She would have fallen of her disc if her feet weren't secured to it; so instead she manipulated the magnetic fields around her to stabilize herself.

The irazurra tried to pull the girl to the ground but realized within seconds that his telekinesis was not strong enough to affect a stone wielder. So he decided to make the best of his abilities against this opponent, which to him didn't appear as much of a challenge.

Ren hovered now at a distance, observing the beast, who in turn was doing the same. Or so Ren thought.

Following a small spark in the space between his massive antlers, a spinning ball of fire manifested and before Ren could react, a cascade of fiery darts were shooting towards her.

Generating a push from the magnetic field under her disc, Ren shot straight up, out of the line of fire and once she was assured of her momentary safety, she pointed her finger at Zynuk, with flames still swirling between his antlers.

Shot out from the girl's finger, the thunderbolt met the irazurra square in his left shoulder, throwing the beast off his feet with a loud thud.

Ren flew towards the ground, hovering a few feet above it as she circled a fallen Zynuk, maintaining a safe distance. When the whimpering beast shakily stood up, Ren could see that a massive patch of fur on his shoulder and chest had burned off, revealing the charred and still sizzling skin underneath.

'Aaaaaargh!' When Zynuk screamed at the sky, Ren felt her insides shudder from the beast's blood curdling yowl.

Zynuk outstretched his arms to his sides, palms facing forward, before the web of antlers on his head burst into a towering fiery crown. Streams of fire snaked from his antlers to his open palms, where they were met by torrents of strong winds that carried them forward at breakneck speed.

A hundred fiery snakes tore through the air, towards Ren, snapping their flaming jaws at her.

The snakes swarmed around, below and above her, blocking any and every escape route. Ren racked her brain at light speed, to come up with something, as a hundred red, burning fangs drew to her, ready to end her life.

'You look young for a two hundred year old man,' the red-haired general mocked as he circled Girdon.

'You haven't aged a day either,' Girdon replied, 'still the Council's lapdog I see.' He turned the axes in his hand, mirroring Hvok's movements.

'That's the life I chose,' Hvok declared, 'and I'm happy about it.' His hand tightened on the grip of his tremor hammer. Stopping in his steps, Hvok softly rested the head of his hammer on the ground; the impact creating small ripples through the earth.

‘The shrine has lost, old guy,’ he added, ‘you see your master fighting on our side?’

Girdon clenched his teeth and his axes, nerves on his arms popping out from the strain. ‘Isies will be dealt with,’ Girdon spotted the master’s black robe flapping high in the sky as a beam of light shot towards him. ‘We will deal with him once we are done with you lot.’

Hvok let out an exaggerated sigh. ‘And how will you deal with the death of your Wolf?’ He asked the Keeper. ‘Aermes Dakians had his head removed from his body last night. How does that factor in your revenge?’

‘You lying bastard!’

Girdon lunged towards Hvok, bringing down his axes in two wide arcs, aiming for the general’s chest. With a push against the ground with his hammer, Hvok sprung backwards barely missing the axes’ blades.

In a quick swing, Hvok brought down his hammer on an advancing Girdon, who dove to his side at the last moment letting the hammer smack the ground. A thunderous rumble spread from the hammer’s face, shaking the ground, forcing Girdon to almost lose his balance.

Turning towards his opponent, Hvok swung his hammer, harder this time, and struck the ground in the Keeper’s direction. Following the loud boom, a shockwave originating from the hammer’s face ran through the surface, cracking the ground under Girdon and causing him to fall.

By the time the Keeper pushed himself to his feet, Hvok was flying at him with his hammer raised over his head, his long coat and red hair swaying behind him. The hammer’s grip doubled in size as its face aimed for the Keeper’s head.

Girdon barely parried out of the hammer’s way by rolling to his side, when it came dipping to the ground.

Hvok landed in a crouch and a sharp stab of pain rose up his leg. In his peripheral vision, he saw that Girdon had cleaved through his calf with his axe. The Keeper immediately hopped back up after the quick slash, once again keeping a safe distance.

‘How does that thing slice through my armor like it’s nothing?’ Hvok said, awkwardly standing up.

‘Free naonos do the best work,’ Girdon stated before breaking into a sprint towards the general, his axes spinning in his hands like pinwheels on a windy day.

Closer to Tim Raug’s base, Alleli was facing one of the smaller irazurras. She wore a tightly wrapped suit, with her dark hair tied up in a tight bun over her head, so as to prevent them from getting in the way of her disc-blades.

At the moment, seven disc-blades were hovering around Alleli. Two in front on her, two on each her side and one over her head. The two disc-blades in front and the one on top, had saw-teeth and were about a foot in diameter. The four on her either sides were over half a foot in diameter with edges hard enough to slice through iron.

All seven blades spun with a blurring momentum, enough to emit a soft whizzing sound. To test her opponent, Alleli sent the saw-disc spinning over her head, zooming across the air, towards the irazurra.

Nodius didn’t see anything but a flash of steel flying towards him and in an instinctive counter met this flash with his ripple sword. A loud clink of steel on steel rang as the deflected disc-blade shot straight up into the sky, before returning to its spot above the Keeper’s head.

Alleli smiled to herself, thinking of the fate she had decided for the young beast. Since Nodius had stood his ground with his long ripple sword at the ready, she knew the irazurra was not over twenty years old and lacked any magical abilities. An obvious indication were his small and simple antlers.

The Keeper reached for the satchel hanging off her belt and pulled it off. She unstrung its mouth and holding it from the bottom, tossed its contents up in the air.

Twenty disc-blades, not bigger than a man’s palm rose in the air, before coming to a stop. The blades spun wildly and whizzed towards the irazurra like a swarm of metal wasps.

With a flurry of swings, Nodius parried the unrelenting blades. The continuous clatter of his sword hitting the steel discs surrounded him.

Just when Nodius blinked his eyes, two blades sliced through his furry thighs. A jab of pain shot up his legs, and three blades crosscut across his chest and back.

Nodius hastily stumbled away from the swarm of whizzing steel. At the distance, Alleli couldn't help but crack a smile when she saw the irazurra struggling to retreat.

She stayed the small blades in their positions, which Nodius was relieved to see. But his eyes went wide with fear when he saw that the disc-blades, which had been spinning around Alleli, had distanced themselves from her and risen higher in the air.

Breath caught in his throat and his hands tightened on the grip of his sword, when Nodius saw seven circular saws shooting towards him, emitting an ominous weep as they cut through the air.

Drereth sized up the lean man that stood before her with his curved swords drawn. The duend laughed as she unsheathed her swords, which were half the length of the man's.

'Hey, this is unfair,' she shouted at the man.

'Nothing about war is f-' Reuth was interrupted by the continuous hacking of Drereth's swords.

Only after blocking about ten of her quick swings, did Reuth realize her question was meant to distract him so she could get closer, negating the advantage he had of a longer range.

When Drereth persistently sliced at him from an arm's length, Reuth could do nothing more than deflect her attacks with both his swords. The continuous clanging of the steel caused a ringing in his ears.

Sidestepping a swing that sliced through the light armor on his shoulder, grazing his skin, Reuth, in a few steps, distanced himself from the duend woman. He crossed his curved blades in front of his chest so that they were parallel to the ground,

and eyed Drereth, warning her silently that she won't be able to trick him again.

Drereth smiled a crooked smile, causing the scar on her face to dance. With a quick motion, she sent one of her swords spinning at the man's shins. Gasping from surprise, Reuth brought down his sword at the final moment and the spinning short sword clanked off it.

As soon as the Keeper looked up, Drereth was over him, resuming her onslaught.

Her short sword sang off Reuth's swords, who knew he was no match for the duend at this close a range. At the first sign of a gap in her otherwise fluid movements, Reuth pushed the woman's sword away with his own, and once again retreated to a distance.

Drereth turned from the man and strolled to her fallen sword. She picked it up and leisurely turned to face him. After having tested his skills, she knew he wasn't a threat to her; not unless he somehow got lucky.

Drereth crossed her swords in front of her chest such that they were parallel to the ground, mocking the gesture Reuth had done previously, and saw the man's face flush red with fury.

Mubuk's maces were long, spiked and heavy. Laced with poison made from mundus' flesh, the double maces were lethal when wielded by a skilled fighter, which Mubuk knew himself to be.

Kaeb, the irazurra's opponent, was a big man who leaned lazily on his double-trident. A chain, with a large metal claw on one end, was coiled across his chest. With an expressionless face and his half-open eyes, Kaeb observed the irazurra's movements.

It didn't take long for the man's nonchalant nature to get to Mubuk. The beast stood straighter and spread his arms to his sides, his spiked maces pointing to the sky. The young irazurra let out a bellow and sprinted towards a man who appeared to be less than ready to counter.

Mubuk brought up the mace in his right hand, to attack, and lifted the other one in front of him, in a defensive position. He brought down the mace in a swing before a jolt of pain ran up the bone in his leg.

Once the beast was close enough, still leaning on his weapon, Kaeb had kicked the bottom prongs of the trident towards the approaching irazurra. With little effort, the hooked prongs dug into Mubuk's furry shin.

Kaeb sidestepped the now falling irazurra and with a flash, pulled out the trident's prongs from his leg. This elicited a loud wail from the beast as he crashed to the ground.

Kaeb unwrapped the heavy chain coiled around his chest, while Mubuk limped to his feet, angry tears running down his furred snout.

With his face still lacking any expressions, Kaeb crouched with his double-trident pointed at the irazurra, while the chain-claw spun in a rattling circle in his other hand.

Intimidated by the man's aura, Mubuk reminded himself of how he had crushed Aermes Dakians' bones with but a few blows. If he could kill their king that easily, these mere bodyguards shouldn't pose a challenge to him, he thought.

A blur flew towards Mubuk, and before he could react a stab of pain spread across his back.

The metal claw dug deep in his shoulder muscles. The chain attached to the claw was held by Kaeb, who now gave it a tug, and smiled at the beast.

Feeling his temper rising, Mubuk ran towards the man, with the claw still latched in his shoulder. He swung around his five foot maces wildly, determined to crush the man to death.

The command that Cadmael and Nyaz had received was to keep the soldiers, the chunesks and the appeaser occupied. They were almost immediately joined by Kolben, who ran after Cad as soon as he saw Fa fly past him.

The group's unspoken understanding was that incapacitating the large army of Royal Guards and Peacekeepers was their first priority and as they had assumed, it didn't take them much time. A third of the men were already spread across the red grounds, charred beyond recognition from Ren's lightning pillar.

Cad took out another third by flying over the battalions and showering them with continuous sonic blasts. The ground faltered below them when it was met by the powerful soundwaves. The soldiers collapsed from hemorrhaged brains; blood pouring out their ears, eyes and nostrils.

Kolben eliminated the remaining soldiers, cooking one half in their armors and freezing the other half to death. The several dozen soldiers that survived this carnage, and hadn't fled like the rest, were gifted with arrows through their skull by Nyaz who crouched in the trees' canopy at the edge of the grounds, not far from the battalions.

Once the soldiers were dealt with the group turned their attention to the three beings that were making their way across the sea of the dead and dying. The ehunesks lurched towards Cad, while the appeaser, who Kolben now realized was a Blue, sauntered calmly.

Being nearly half as tall as the two ehunesks, put his height in the twenty foot range. His dark leather skin was covered by wide strips of tarnished gold from head to toe, leaving only its eyes and hands exposed. The Blue's four arms hung at its sides as he casually made his way across the field.

'Hey,' Nyaz called out to Cad, 'bring the ehunesks towards the forest.'

Cad's fist shot in the sky in affirmation, following which, tailed by a shockwave, he blasted towards the ehunesks.

As the boy found himself grow closer to the creatures, he felt an uneasiness ride in his chest. His eyes darted between the creatures' numerous arms and faces. Some held swords, while some had an eye or a nose missing; some held spears or shields, while some had dents in foreheads or tears in cheeks.

Cad felt a hysteria rise in him, an ominous dread, as he now faced two mountains of arms and faces running at him. With completely instinctual movements, he brought his palm in front and with a hammering motion sent out a shockwave, changing his direction of flight towards Nyaz.

He looked back when the ehunesks screamed from the sonic wave hitting them. Two dozen sets of vexed eyes glared at the boy, just as he felt a blazing punch engulf his face. The world turned red to Cad's eyes. Red and hot. When he tried to breathe, fire burned his chest and when he tried to scream, it burnt his chest again.

Kolben stood frozen in his place. One moment he was racking his brain over attack strategies against the towering appeaser, and the next moment the appeaser had both its right arms in front of him.

Bursts of fire and wind shot out from the Blue's open palms in Cad's direction before Kolben's heart could beat a second time.

A wheezing Cad crashed to the hard ground, by the time Kolben leaped at the appeaser.

Screaming in anger, Kolben pushed his now red hot palm against golden strips covering the appeaser's shin and shot out a superheated torrent of air. The heatwave burst out of the other side of the metal covered leg, melting away everything in its path.

A hole in the shape of Kolben's palm sizzled in the appeaser's leg.

The boy stepped back as the giant crashed to a knee with a silent grunt. He turned to steal a quick glance at a quivering Cad but immediately regretted his decision when he felt giant fingers wrap around his arms and legs.

The Blue picked Kolben up like a doll and brought him up to its face.

The tarnished gold strips peeled off the appeaser's chest to reveal a gaping dark hole in its center. The strips began to roll off its face too, revealing the Blue's wrinkled mouth, which was stretched in a black, toothless grin.

Kolben had already cooled the air around him when cackling fire poured out the Blue's mouth and the hole in its chest.

Enclosed in a cold air bubble of his own creation, the boy screamed as the appeaser's grips on his limbs tightened. He didn't need to look around to know he was in a sea of fire and didn't need to be told that if he passed out now he would be burnt to death.

So Kolben endured the strain and kept the barrier up; even when his bones snapped in the Blue's massive hands.

With his consciousness nearly faded away, his body jerked a few times before Cadmael drew his final breath. His small body laid charred, black against the red sand.

Fa felt a sudden shiver run from his snout to tail and his mind flooded with ominous thoughts about Cad as he found himself scanning the far end of the clearing. Tall clouds of dust moved along the tree line at the distance but Fa could make out three large shapes.

Just the next moment, a sharp jolt of pain rose in his right shoulder. The immense throbbing and blood loss prevented Fa from realizing that a giant, stone blade, which had sprung forth from the ground below, had dismembered his right arm and punctured through his wing.

With his mind foggy and numb from the pain, Fa turned his snout to his right and saw the stump on his shoulder pouring out a current of red. His vision slowly darkened as the herenuer's eyelids fell shut, plunging him in a deep and dreamless slumber.

Kolben's distressed and broken body had already begun to go limp when he felt the tip of the ehunesk's rusted sword on his back.

The hard steel felt cold as it glided against his insides, and there was no more pain when the blade tore out of his chest. Letting out a tired sigh, Kolben's head hung to the side; his beautiful hair, the same red as his blood, danced in the warm breeze.

Bernice was still in a stalemate with Isies.

Every move she made, every shot she took, was countered effortlessly most of the times. This made her resolve to train much harder, since she was being equalled by a man who hadn't even been a wielder for a day.

Sadness clouded her thoughts the instant Kolben's spirit left his body, and a single hot tear rolled down her cheek. Isies who was floating a few yards away, held up by two pulsing vortexes under his palm, narrowed his eyes and focused on her face.

'Don't tell me they managed to kill one?' Isies turned to search the far end of the clearing. Bernice thought she saw a mix of confusion and discomfort on the man's face before a wide grin spread across it. 'Well this a surprise,' he muttered, 'albeit a welcome one.'

Bernice felt a fury rise inside her. Her hand shot to her side and a yard long blade of glowing golden light manifested around her arm.

With a bright flash, she swung the blade across the sky, which Isies barely dodged by dropping into a vortex under him. Long strands of his black hair slowly swayed to the ground, their ends sizzling like tiny embers.

An out of breath Ren stood on her disc, which hovered several feet above the ground. Her robes were burnt and tattered; her skin bore bruises and burning cuts from Zynuk's claws. Chunks of hair had burnt off her long braid, and her silver disc was scratched and dented.

Zynuk on the other hand wasn't doing so well either. His body was covered in charred wounds from Ren's lightning bolts, and he had lost parts of his antlers and several fangs from Ren's disc slamming itself in his face. The irazurra, similar to Ren, felt like he couldn't go on much longer, so he decided to bet everything on his final attack.

Zynuk's red eyes rolled back in his skull as he brought his trembling hands in front of him, palms facing each other but far apart. He threw his head back and after pulling in a deep breath, opened his snout at an impossibly wide angle. Cascades

of hissing fire poured out from his mouth, into the wind swirling between his palms.

Ren focused her eyes when the demonic tornadoes of fire and sand blew at her.

Sparks, the size of ship ropes, shot out of Ren's body as she watched the fiery demons circling her. The flaming shapes merged into each other, transforming into a looming wall of fire, enclosing Ren. She stood at the bottom of a well of flames, rising higher than the sky. Ren sweated in the blazing heat.

Whips of lightning crackled off her body, confronting the fire's orange with its blue.

This had been her strategy to counter the irazurra's death grip. Every time Zynuk started his attack by enclosing Ren in fire, he would then jump out at her from behind the flames and try to force a physical combat, before she jolted him with high-tension electricity and he whimpered into a retreat.

Though he managed to get a couple bites and claw marks on Ren, it surprised her that he was still able to stand.

Cloaked by the blaze, Zynuk burst through the fiery wall behind Ren, who turned immediately, to see the inside of an open snout and long rows of fangs. The irazurra flew at her like an arrow and latched at the girl's neck.

A thousand vipers of thunder shot from Ren body and impaled Zynuk, whose jaws around her neck only grew tighter.

Ren's eyes glowed blue like the ropes of electricity that continuously poured out of her body, cooking the irazurra as she fell to the ground. The beast's massive body pinned her, with his fangs still dug in her throat.

Ren tried to push the beast off but all strength had left her. Blood filled her mouth when she tried to call out for help; even made it difficult to breathe.

As the blackness closed in from her peripheral vision, Ren saw her sister. Sui smiled at her one last time before the thoughts went silent in her head.

Ren's lifeless eyes stared at the sky above.

'Nooooo!' Auda screamed as a tremendous shockwave blasted out of her body. The pressurized air packed enough punch to crack three of Zasien's ribs before flinging him across the sky.

The irazurra ploughed the ground for several dozen yards before coming to a stop and eventually getting to his feet. He saw Auda on her knees wailing when the sky raptured with the brightness of a thousand suns.

The flash lasted for not more than a second, but everyone present on the field was blinded, including Bernice, who was light herself.

Immediately after the flash, a loud crashing sounded in the forest enclosing the clearing. Everyone's head turned towards what sounded like a meteor slamming in the far grounds. Smoke rose from the distant sea of trees.

The appeaser turned towards the trees and began in the direction of the crash, when a naked man materialized in front of its face.

The man's long black hair swayed against his pale skin mimicking the swing of his member. He glowed, with a blazing white aura around his body, making his features too bright to comprehend.

The man punched the giant in between its eyes, with a motion so fast that all one saw was the Blue's torso explode into a million sparkling pieces of white light. The appeaser's legs that crashed to the ground, were the only part of it that survived the blast.

In the next instant, the man disappeared into blur of fading after images.

There were two more blinding flashes, followed by distant clanking of metal as the weapons fell out of the ehunesks' hands. With nearly their entire bodies vaporized, the two ehunesks didn't have a dozen dead faces among them. Loud thuds sounded when their massive corpses met the dirt.

Zasien's breath caught in his throat when the man realized in front of him.

Naked as a newborn, the man crouched on the beast's snout, hanging from his antlers like a monkey from a tree. Before Zasien

could think one thought, he saw his antlers under the man's hand turn red, then blue and finally white, before crumbling out of existence. His body followed the next moment. Shining flakes of light blew in the wind where once the irazurra stood.

Isies and Hvok watched wide-eyed as Zasien disappeared into nothingness.

Mubuk had been watching from the distance too, when a familiar face shone before him. Dread froze him in place as he stared into the man's eyes for a second time.

'It's not possible,' Mubuk nervously laughed to himself, 'we took off your head,' he screamed before seeing a blinding flash of light. The irazurra's body disintegrated at the man's touch.

Before Mubuk had finished speaking, Isies had arced his arms frantically in the air and five vortexes of pulsating black liquid had opened at his command: four under Hvok, Drereth, Zanyur and himself. And a giant one under the twenty foot high ancient cube that laid on the field.

The vortexes' viscous fluid swallowed the contents above it as Mubuk dissolved into nothingness.

The man vanished once again, this time to materialize in front of a friend. His unfocused pupils widened at the sight of the woman; following which the man crashed to the ground.

'Aermes!' Auda screamed at the unconscious man as she caught him in her arms.

Epilogue I

Hebol Igoda made his way through the ginormous palace with hasty steps, until he arrived at the gateway of the terrace courtyard, where they had said he'd find him. He spotted the man, across the courtyard, sitting cross-legged on the ledge overlooking the Noble district.

The man was dressed in a red robe with intricate gemstone work and his black hair were slicked back. Hebol came to stand beside him and spoke, 'Vameej has some of the best sunsets in DieTerra.'

When the man turned to him, Hebol sunk in a deep bow and only after he received a nod of acknowledgement from the man he continued, 'I have travelled fast to see you, Your Grace. Say do you know who you are?' Hebol raised an eyebrow under his tailored hat.

'Aermes Dakians,' the man said, 'I am told.'

Hebol nodded. 'And what is the last thing you remember, Your Grace?'

'I woke up with these three women's faces hanging over me,' Aermes said, 'a blonde, a redhead and a brunette,' he laughed nervously, 'it's like that jape, right?'

'What jape?' Hebol asked.

'I don't know,' Aermes fell silent. 'I don't know why I said that,' he said in a confused whisper.

'Your Grace,' Hebol spoke breaking Aermes' trance, 'do you remember anything before that? Anything at all?'

'A dream,' he immediately replied.

‘What dream?’ Hebol asked.

Aermes stared at the sharply dressed man with a serious expression, then let out a loud sigh.

‘I am a child and I am sitting in someone’s lap,’ he started. ‘They are not feeling happy. More disappointed.

‘You are too early, a voice echoes around me. I look up to see their face but I can’t, it’s too bright. *You are too early,* the voice repeats and my surroundings begin to turn white.’

Aermes nervously glanced at the man’s face, ‘after that I remember waking up in a bed here.’ He hung his head again, staring at the city below.

Hebol eyed the man for a few moments, and then burst into loud laughter. When confused golden eyes stared back at him he explained.

‘Sometime back, Your Grace, I told you that you were the King, but you didn’t believe me,’ Hebol smiled wide, ‘I should’ve bet some money on that.’ He continued to laugh.

‘I probably know you...’ Aermes spoke, ‘but do you mind telling me who you are.’ There were a thousand questions in his head but he decided to go with that.

‘My name is Hebol Igoda, Your Grace,’ Hebol declared, ‘and I am a friend and ally at your service.’

Aermes stared blankly at the large man for a few moments, before turning back to the sprawling city. ‘And why are you here, friend Hebol,’ he asked without looking away from the view.

‘I am here to extend an invitation, Your Grace,’ Hebol held his hands behind him, ‘you and the remaining Pillars will travel to ChowMos under my protection. While the Keepers search for your counterparts, you will attend my friend’s university. Away from prying eyes and gossiping mouths.’ He eyed the man on the ledge. ‘Sounds good for the moment, Your Grace?’

‘Sounds good.’

Aermes climbed off the ledge and stood beside Hebol. They watched the red sun slowly dip behind the horizon.

Epilogue II

Seven old men sat around the white crescent table, serious expressions heavy on their faces. The image of the soldier on the large glass panel flickered out, before it started to descend into the floor between the crescent's curve.

'A cosmic entity they say,' the youngest of the men with a scar on his face sat in the middle. 'A cosmic entity on this plane? With us holding the gates shut?'

The man with a long white beard that coiled in his lap spoke up, 'Vivifica cannot return, and no other being is strong enough to pass us,' he stared at the others, 'then what descended upon the forces?'

'Could it be an illusionary binding?' The bald man at one end of the crescent suggested.

'Illusions don't decimate a Blue, two ehunesks and two irazurra's in a matter of seconds,' the old man at the crescent's other end countered.

'The conclusion is clear then, my brothers,' six sets of eyes turned to the younger man, 'in an effort to eliminate the Pillars and acquire the stones, we have inadvertently birthed an Awakened Wolf.' The scar on his face twitched nervously.

'What now?' One of the fathers asked.

'Now we gather our strongest, call upon the sleeping powers and get rid of the Dakians before he grows to realize the extent of his abilities. Since we finally have the Epriollum and the Gate Stone, our counter would be final.'

The fathers nodded and hummed in agreement.

The younger man swiped at a glyph on the table and spoke into the marble, 'send in General Kyger.'

Glossary

Beings of DieTerra

Flora and Fauna

Bur Ash: a species of trees found all over DieTerra

Mud Wolf: a species of wolf, native to Vameej and Viyn

Saguzar: a species of bat-like mammal, native to Canem and ChowMos

Solitary Bear: a species of bipedal bear, native to Vameej, Viyn and Dinso

Vameej Quarter Horse: a species of horse, native to Vameej

High Beings

Duend: natives of Canem; recognizable by their fair skin and golden hair

Gigan: race of giants, native to Viyn

Human: humans

Miatagarri: natives of ChowMos; recognizable by their slender build and pale skin. They are adept at sorcery

Naono: race of short statured people, native to north Ingens. Known to be extremely intelligent and scientific

Ninfa: live throughout DieTerra and are classified according to the hue of their skin. Mountain, forest, river, desert and cave ninfas' skins are tinged with blue, green, white, yellow and black, respectively

Low Beings

Ehunesk: a race of multi-faced and multi-armed beings, native to southern Vameej

Irazurra: a single gendered race of furred humanoids, native to Vameej and Dinso. They are highly proficient at elemental magic. All irazurras are male

Izarand: a single gendered race of ancient witches, native to Vameej, Sternuo and Viyn. All izarands are female

Tupua: a race of horned humanoids found in the forests throughout DieTerra

Urgizon: a race of intelligent, humanoid amphibians

Vosbri: an all-female race of reptilians, native to the Ingens and ChowMos

Other

Basoama: immortal forest goddesses; can be found in nearly all large forests

Gllehkrtt: an animal found inside hilbaleas

Herenuer: a shapeshifting water dragon. They live in the waters around Viyn and Sternuo

Hilbalea: a ginormous sea creature; considered to be a myth by most

Mundu: a slimy, blob-like creature, which dwells in abandoned towns and ruins in Vameej and ChowMos

Groups, Factions and Organizations

Council of DieTerra: the highest authority and governing body of DieTerra

Divine Tribe: the first generations to wield the Vivi stones, and their families

Flamells: a merchant family from the Ingens

Forever: high beings with lifespan ten times to that of average people

Keepers: Forever assigned to protect the Vivi stones and serve their wielders

New Union: a revolutionary organization that opposes the rule of the Council

Order of Divinity: wielders of Vivi stones, and their families

Overlords: heads of large lawless areas

Peacekeepers: the army of the Council; considered the strongest military in DieTerra

Peace Monger Units: the most efficient squads of the Peacekeepers

Pillars: Seven Pillars or Seven Percepts of Vivi are the individuals who wield the Vivi stones

Seers: mystics and psychics; can glimpse into the future

Locations and Places

Froft Point: a small river-port near the Entral-Idul border

Last Empire: the underwater kingdom of the urgizons

Perien: low plane; Perdyr's plane

Roun: an urgizon settlement built inside a hilablea

The Silence: a calm stretch of Vameej Ocean with a varying location

Upper Wisit: a river-port in Idul

Vivien: high plane; Vivifica's plane

Miscellaneous Terms

Appeaser: a humanoid weapon manufactured by the Peacekeepers. They are classified on the basis of their destructive capabilities, which in increasing order are: Proto, Tauri, Red, Blue and White

Astro-dial: a timekeeping equipment used in eastern DieTerra

Bending: a sorcery technique used to manipulate the victim's thoughts and feelings

Caeneers: a currency of Canem

Crescent-Bow: a Peacekeepers airship

Duennish: language of duends; types are: low, high and royal duennish

Epriollum: an ancient, enchanted, metal cube

Ficanism: a major, polytheistic religion; centered on the worship of Vivifica and her pantheon

Kruits: a currency of the Ingens

Lozhal: an entity from the low plane, Perien

Mosan Wine: a thick, red wine from ChowMos

Naono: language of naonos

Ninfean: language of ninfas; has a large number of dialects

Pilgrim: a Peacekeepers airship

Plasma: a material created by the Peacekeepers' researchers

Qruths: a currency of Vameej

Rin Juice: an alcoholic beverage

Taltar Steel: a highly reinforced steel, made in Vameej

Terran: most spoken language

Tigwyn: an alloy created by the Peacekeepers' researchers

Vision Crystals: crystals containing information about DieTerra's past

YOC: Year of the Council

Zoic Accord: a peace treaty signed between the Council and the leaders of the various low beings

Non-Terran Terms

Brukh Shverd: (duennish) blessed sword

Ekinsi Teri: (naono) second skin

Qatan Bolat: (naono) hard iron

Sok Balga: (naono) tremor hammer

Storesoster: (ninfean) elder sister

Stones of Power

Vivi Stones

Yadroliq

Ximiyaliq

Electroliq

Jariq

Termokaliq

Kinetikaliq

Dibiliq

Lost Stones

Gate Stone

Stone of Bind

Psychic Stones

Stone of Communication

Stone of Force

Stone of Harmony

Stone of Projection

Stone of Truth

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