



A WISH FOR LOVE AND  
VENGEANCE

J CLAIR

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**Fantasy World: The Explorers**

[Fantasy World Vol 1 and 2](#)

**Wishes**

A Wish for Love and Vengeance

# A Wish For Love and Vengeance

WISHES BOOK 1

By  
J Clair

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# Table of Contents:

[Chapter 1 – The Day the World Ended](#)

[Chapter 2 – Bailey](#)

[Chapter 3 – Judge](#)

[Chapter 4 – Higher Learning](#)

[Chapter 5 – What Matters](#)

[Chapter 6 – Knock Knock](#)

[Chapter 7 – I Heard You the First Time](#)

[Chapter 8 – Rupture](#)

[Chapter 9 – Turned](#)

[Chapter 10 – What's Eating You?](#)

[Chapter 11 – Substitute](#)

[Chapter 12 – Leah](#)

[Chapter 13 – Moving](#)

[Chapter 14 – Omega](#)

[Chapter 15 – Trust](#)

[Chapter 16 – What We Fear](#)

[Chapter 17 – Together](#)

[Chapter 18 – Red and Blue](#)

[Chapter 19 – The Best There Is](#)

[Chapter 20 – Eleven](#)

[Chapter 21 – Gods Among Us](#)

[Chapter 22 – Unfinished Business](#)

[Chapter 23 – Elder](#)

[Chapter 24 – Behind Us](#)





# Chapter 1 – The Day the World Ended

## [Year 10]



The one-room schoolhouse was painfully tiny, and even more so now that the village of Lowsunn was crowding in, clamoring for a coveted seat. Consequently, anyone late was forced to stand upon their aching feet. The stampede of villagers kicked up a cloud of dust that eventually settled on the floorboards, which creaked under the collective weight. Though there were nearly two hundred villagers in attendance, no one said a word. The only sound was the groaning of the structure itself.

All of the extra desks and chairs had been removed. All unnecessary equipment had been locked away. Within minutes, the only part of the floor not occupied by a pair of weary shoes was a meager five-foot square space in the front. There, the history teacher stood with a maniacal smile, causing a few of his colleagues nearby to wince in disgust. Yet it didn't matter how much the other teachers hated Mr. Young. Nothing short of fire was going to make them disperse. For the only time in the entire year, he had the spotlight, he had the goods, and everyone in attendance was there to make sure they were expediently delivered.

Mr. Young rubbed his sweaty hands together as he silently hoped the ancient pews would be able to bear the weight. As the last of the villagers—a few of the elderly—squeezed in just beyond the double doors in the back, he cleared his throat and surveyed the room. They all waited for him to begin, giving him their undivided attention and awe. Since the building only had six windows, three on each side, there was already little light in the room. Faceless bodies now blocked the meager sunlight that fought to enter, and the room was soon cast under a cloak of unsettling shadow. As unidentifiable eyes blinked off rapidly in Mr. Young's direction, he closed his in satisfaction.

He concentrated.

Beams of light shot through the windows and barriers of bodies, spilling into the room like a flood of water, filling every space in a matter of seconds. Then, after it maximized its presence in the room, most of it suddenly disappeared. All that remained was a spotlight over Mr. Young, the source coming from the windowless and moldy flat ceiling above. Light couldn't originate from that point, yet it did. The audience gasped in delight. Many had seen this presentation several times, but the moment never ceased to amaze. How Mr. Young was able to call forth the sun to magnify him, even through the concrete blockades of both body and object, was a subject of much debate. It had to be magic.

He cleared his throat once more, and a blanket of silence descended upon the audience.

“Ten years ago,” he began. “The Advent came.”

As his sentence ended, both the room and Mr. Young were suddenly cast into utter darkness. The bare wall behind the history teacher came alive, and an animated display of the universe came into view. It spread across the room like an oceanic wave lapping against the shore, except it never retracted once it splashed against the other side. It trapped the audience in its holographic projection and held them there. Stars twinkled like diamonds, moons orbited around foreign planets, and colorful nebulas shot out at the students in 3-D fashion. The audience gasped and awed at the spectacle as space danced around them gracefully, performing a waltz that even the best of them could not imitate. Mr. Young continued.

“We call it Advent because the definition says it all: it was the beginning of something already anticipated...it was the end of the world. We all knew the day would come. We just weren't sure how. Ten years ago, we received our answer.” The audience gasped in horror.

Mr. Young grinned and scanned the room once more before he proceeded, watching them all witness his power, each one falling under his spell...well, there was one who was uninterested, but there was good reason for that, he supposed.

“Aidan, pay attention,” Mr. Young called out to the young man in the far left corner. His short spiked black hair and half of his bored

eyes were visible amongst the sea of silhouetted faces and little lighting.

“Sure,” Aidan replied quickly, refocusing his attention on the holographic stars. Satisfied, Mr. Young resumed his presentation. The animation of the universe changed in an instant and zoomed in on a planet that was familiar to everyone. Amassed by a collection of large continents and very few bodies of water, they stared at their brown, green and red planet as if it were an old acquaintance. Three moons circled its atmosphere. At the other end of the universal map was a comet, streaking across the black expanse with a red-hot tail.

“We don’t know where it came from,” Mr. Young said, stooping down behind their planet. “Or its exact composition. Whether it was a hunk of rock, a ship, or a massive, sentient being. All we know for sure...is how it changed our way of life.”

The display flickered, and the comet smashed mercilessly into the side of the planet, creating an explosion that splashed the room in a light so intense that everyone, including Mr. Young, had to avert their eyes for fear of going blind. Nevertheless, he continued speaking as the light subsided.

“The comet impacted with a force that could be heard and felt all over the world, changing the terrain and taking half of our population with it. Innumerable people...died instantly....” He paused to wipe a hand across his sweating forehead. “We all thought it was the end – the apocalypse, and in a sense, one could say that it was. That era had been eradicated in an instant...but the survivors were destined for a greater purpose. The World of Naropa had been altered, not just physically but also spiritually. The population that had not been annihilated were transformed.”

The universe's display vanished, and the room was cast back into its natural dim light for a moment before fading into a purple hue. White-hot tattoos were revealed from underneath the villagers’ long sleeve shirts. Branded deep into their right forearms, each tattoo depicted a picture of six organ pipes with a long sword in the middle. Most of the villagers had only one tattoo of the image on their right arm, some had two tattoos of the same picture, and even fewer had three.

Aidan pushed his sleeve down further though it made no difference. Even through the fabric, the tattoo burned bright as if it had just been seared into his flesh.

“Everyone was marked with these seals,” Mr. Young said, one of his own shining beneath the silk of his shirt. “Most were only given one, but others were blessed with two or even three. Each seal...granted the bearer a wish. A wish with no strings attached whatsoever, as long as the Judge approved it. It’s the only reason we were able to rebuild society so quickly...no one regrets being given these gifts. However, we must still never forget the lives lost in receiving them. These wishes came at a price, and that makes each of them a beautiful, wonderful curse.”

He paused as the room reposed in silence. The purple hue was lifted, and the lighting returned to normal. The seals on their right arms faded until they were no longer visible from underneath the fabric of their clothes. Aidan sighed wearily as Mr. Young bowed his head.

“I perform this presentation once a year to not only remind you of what happened but, more importantly, to stress how much we need you here in Lowsunn. I know there’s a temptation to use your wishes for your own pleasure, but we ask you to suppress those selfish inclinations. To continue restoring our world to its former glory, we hope that all of you will stay patient until it is your time.”

Most nodded at his words. A hand shot up from the left-hand corner. Mr. Young took a deep breath and pointed at his young pupil.

“Yes, Ori? You have a question?”

“How long do you think it will be until the world is restored completely?”

“It’s hard to say,” Mr. Young admitted. “Significant damage was done to our way of life. So many wishes were used at the beginning of what we now call the 2<sup>nd</sup> Era. Priority was placed on restoring the atmosphere, the wildlife and whatnot.”

“Yet no one wished for all the destruction to be reversed, or to bring back the countless lives that –”

“We’ve had this discussion before in class,” the middle-aged teacher sighed. “As I’ve explained, we don’t know everything about what happened on that day.”

“So it’s best to leave a hole in our planet?”

“A contained, harmless hole. It’s been handled.”

“There’s no way you could know that.”

“That is the point of our scouting missions, or have you forgotten?”

“Someone from Lowsunn has been there?”

“That will be enough questions from you,” Mr. Young snapped, his eyes darting amongst the other faces for their reactions. Though they appeared squeamish, they kept their focus on him. Ori raised his hand again.

“I said no more questions.”

“I don’t have one.”

“Then what is it?”

Ori smiled through his blue eyes and ice-breaking smile. “Aidan has one.”

“Can’t Aidan speak for himself?”

“He said you wouldn’t call on him if he raised his hand.”

The audience chuckled, and a few Elders in the far back began shushing. From the crippling glares they unleashed on Mr. Young afterward, it was evident that they were going to intervene if he didn’t take control soon. Why he had called on the trouble-making child in the first place was beyond their comprehension.

“Okay,” Mr. Young said with a scowl, pointing to the young man with the spiky black hair. “Fire away.” It was a risky move, allowing Aidan to speak – but if he could maintain order during their exchange, he would have gained respect in the eyes of the Elders. A privilege that few possessed.

“Well, I was thinking,” Aidan began with a sly smile. Many in the audience turned around to watch him complete his sentence. “If we’re supposed to hold off on our Yen –”

“– in my classroom, you will refer to them as wishes, Mr. Serafino.”

“I don’t understand why. The rest of the world calls it Yen, but that’s not what my question is about. What I want to know is why we don’t get to use these ‘beautiful curses’ the way we want to, while the Elders and even you - get to go wild.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Take this schoolhouse, for example. You used a Yen three years ago to turn it into this major interactive experience, and yet you’re the only one who knows how to control it. It’s impressive, but isn’t it a waste? All it does is help you.”

“It enhances the learning experience and improves the quality of my lessons.”

“Which are still boring, which is why your attendance is low. The only time anyone comes to your sessions is to hear about Advent; otherwise, no one bothers. I’m sure you’ve noticed.”

“I don’t need to justify myself to you,” Mr. Young huffed, feeling the raised eyebrows of his superiors. “Who are you here with anyways? Does your mentor know where you’re at?”

“Does it matter?” Aidan said. “What you fail to remember is that we are free to choose which courses to attend. This isn’t a school. It’s a simple, scared little town that keeps people in line by dangling small comforts over their heads. It does little to prepare us for the outside world. A world that each of us will be forced to encounter whether we like it or not. If it wasn’t for the strike system, no one would even bother getting out of bed.”

“Once you choose a class to attend, however, you are stuck there,” Mr. Young’s face started to redden. “If you’re skipping an evening class to attend this presentation, then you know that I must hand you over for disciplinary action. Given that you already have two strikes against you, you know what that would mean, don’t you?”

“I don’t need to think about it,” Aidan said, his lips in a flat line. “Especially since I’ll be leaving.” He began to worm his way to the door when a shout nearly stopped him cold.

“You stay right there!” Mr. Young barked as the few Elders standing in the doorway made sure to form a trembling human barrier. They looked down at him in disgust, but Aidan challenged them silently, one at a time, with no expression on his face. Then he shifted his gaze back to the forefront and gave the teacher a declaration.

“Let me out right now, or I’ll burn the entire schoolhouse to the ground.”

He said it with such conviction that Mr. Young nearly fell over in shock. The Elders in the doorway stepped out of his path urgently as

the villagers pressed up against each other, sacrificing their comfortable positions to let him step out of the room freely. They dared not even to touch his hooded robe. Aidan stopped in the doorway just for a moment to address the room one last time.

“Keep the Discipline Squad out of my hair for this, and I’ll ensure you all keep yours.”

He didn’t wait for a reply, leaving as fast as he could, and the room burst into scared whispers and murmurs of concern. Ori sucked his teeth and chased after him, nearly tripping three times before he hit the door and the dense, warm air outside. He caught up to Aidan quickly and joined his stride under the canopy of low-hanging tree branches and a thick silver haze. The village of Lowsunn was tranquil now that its inhabitants were being held hostage at the presentation. He didn’t care to see the rest of the lecture—about how chaotic the world had become, how it had been relatively organized before Advent, blah, blah, blah.

“Geez, Aidan, what was that all about?” Ori chuckled nervously. “You weren’t really going to set that place ablaze if they kept you there, were you?”

“What do you think?”

“Yeah, okay. Stupid question.”

“This whole place is laughable,” Aidan sighed as he picked up the pace, not yet sure of his intended destination. “It’s a prison, not a quaint little village in the middle of the forest. It’s the only explanation why the general populace lives in cabins the size of birdhouses while the Elders are in miniature mansions. It’s all one big joke.”

“There’s room for improvement, but it’s still our home. Might as well get used to it.”

“Hard to when you already have two strikes. It’s plain history. No one with three strikes gets an exemption. Not a single one.”

“Well, I don’t have any, so it kind of sucks to be you,” Ori laughed, throwing his hands behind his head. “Did you hear me? It kind of—oh never mind.”

“We can leave whenever we like,” Aidan said, ignoring him. “And it might be better for us out there. The dust has settled.” He picked up a stray twig from the dirt road and threw it into the nearby brush with barely a thought. Ori thought over the comment as he let out a

big yawn. The annual presentation of Advent was one of the few times the village would be up well past curfew, talking excitedly about how they could each contribute to a world that still needed so much bandaging. How their involvement in Lowsunn would eventually give them a purpose they had yet to figure out themselves.

The excitement would all end tomorrow though.

Aidan had already seen it happen four times. The inevitable news of a scouting mission gone wrong, a new threat discovered lurking at their borders, another wish rumored to be used for the further decimation of Naropa...it was only a matter of days before their ambitions were crushed like the berries they hovered laboriously over to make their morning coffee.

"Yeah, we could leave this place," Ori said finally. "But if we do it now, we won't have much to look forward to. What are you going to do out there? Use a wish to secure yourself a shelter? Fight over a body of freshwater? You're better off here. No worries. All the water you can drink. The food you can eat. Shelter. Protection. Warmth."

"So you would rather live comfortably in a cell than see the world and be free?"

"It feels like an easy choice to me. Let's see...stay here until my wishes are used for the greater good, in which case I'm then kicked out, and I'll be seeing the world anyways...or, leave now and die. Hmmm."

"I survived out there once. We can do it."

"Ha," Ori retorted. "From what I've heard about you, your definition of 'survived' is very different from mine."

"Well, there's definitely no way we'll make it if we don't have our Yen as a backup. It doesn't make sense to travel once the Elders have already used you and you have no way to defend yourself."

"From what I hear, they equip you quite well before they kick you out the door. And there's rumors of sister villages being created nearby. Why does it always have to be mud with you? Can't it be rich soil sometimes?"

"Why do I even bother talking to you?" Aidan groaned, casting his eyes up to the moon. "Nothing is ever solved. I might as well be talking to myself in the mirror."



“Oh, no. This is much better,” Ori chuckled, patting him on the shoulder. “After all, your reflection doesn’t talk back. Right? I mean, it doesn’t, right?”

“Get off of me,” Aidan growled, throwing his shoulder back violently. “Your hands are so soft; I find them offensive.”

“As I find your hair,” Ori muttered, throwing his hands into his pockets. “But you don’t hear me trying to shank your feelings.” He sucked his teeth and thrust his hands back out into the air. The village clothes were notorious for their roomy, dark blue pants that were strangely designed with pockets barely able to contain a pebble. All were expected to wear a bright yellow, long sleeve shirt and then, the worst of all – the child-sized backpacks. Little fanny packs that you kept on your back, held together by a belt across the chest. It was hilariously cruel, but that was the local weaver for you. Until someone else decided to either learn the craft or wish to become a master weaver, they were all at the mercy of Luca Lorde.

Of course, Aidan never wore the standard issued clothing, opting to don the thick, hooded robe and cloak his father had given him when he graduated secondary school. It was drenched in black and littered with sharp strokes of hot red across its surface as if they were cuts into his skin. No other symbols or patterns were emblazoned upon it otherwise, and Aidan saw no reason to decorate it further. He already had enough markings.

“So, where are we going now?” Ori asked, rubbing his hands through his messy blonde hair. From the steadily rising tide of voices far behind them, they could tell that the presentation was now over.

“Bed,” Aidan declared. Ori rolled his eyes. Aidan’s hibernation schedule was directly correlated with the number of villagers around him. If it hadn’t been for Ori’s insistence, Aidan wouldn’t have even gone to the schoolhouse. Ori thought to himself that perhaps that would have been the better move in hindsight. Still, he knew where Aidan truly went in the deep of night...

They continued walking casually, past the miniature cabins that were all designed precisely the same. Whoever had wished them into existence had little imagination. The vegetation surrounding the cabins, however, made up for their lack of décor. Reaching across the sides and over the humble rooftops, thick white tree branches

stretched over with a decadent array of flowers in full bloom. An explosion of blues and pinks and yellows pushed against the tree leaves and kissed up against the wooden posts of the village homes. There were even a few Yen-born arbors that produced flowers within flowers. However, these Yen-manifested flowers were unique: in full bloom, their eerie luminescence rivaled even that of the moonlight in radiance.

Each known by name, the local birds traversed back and forth between plants, carrying the seeds to dull brown spots behind the houses. Each seed that fell and became a part of the rich soil created new jaw-dropping scenery. Though there was little sunlight that could break through the sentinel forest canopy up above, the surroundings and ambiance of Lowsunn were undeniably rich and cozy.

Still, to Aidan, it was like receiving a bouquet of fake flowers. An outsider looking in would think it was paradise.

But it wasn't.

***It couldn't be.***

It was just a pretense. A ruse to make him comfortable. And the moment he fell into comfort's arms, he knew he would be taken unawares. His Yen would be stolen from him either through torture or some other unspeakable measure. So it didn't matter if Lowsunn was the most relaxing environment he had ever laid eyes upon in his whole life.

It was not impenetrable.

And its inhabitants were trying so hard to believe that it was. Just because it provided necessities that were no longer guaranteed in the new world: a secure shelter, an abundance of fresh water and food...community...it didn't mean it was invincible. It had survived almost a decade, but how long until its luck ran out? How long until the remnants of the Cataclysm came knocking at Lowsunn's door? The people were in denial. They couldn't even call their tragedy by its common name, opting to call the Cataclysm "Advent" instead. Anything to soften the blow of their losses.

Lowsunn used to be a real village with another name, but none of the original townspeople were there anymore. Even if the original

inhabitants had survived the Cataclysm, they surely would have lost in the aftermath.

Wishes were being used left and right and without restraint at the time. All the Elders knew for certain was that the founder had used one of his wishes to restore the village to its rightful, pre-event origins. Then, he used his second and final wish to throw a massive, invisible barrier around it. Anyone who didn't have permission to enter from the chosen Elders couldn't break through no matter how hard they tried. Without worrying about the danger outside of Lowsunn's walls, the village could focus on the only real task at hand: surviving.

"You think the Elders will ever give us a scouting mission?" Ori asked as they reached their quarters. All single men and women bunked together in their own respective cabins as if they were at boys' and girls' academies. They were each at separate ends of the village (boys to the south, girls to the north), but it wasn't necessary considering there were few midnight excursions. Everyone knew the risks. Getting caught after curfew meant banishment. Banishment meant death.

"What are you talking about?" Aidan replied, half-listening.

"I hear they're going to announce their selections at the dance," Ori said. "You know. The Dance of Yesterday?"

"I have no clue what you're talking about."

"Don't you ever wonder how we get our away missions?"

"I never paid much attention. The odds of me being picked for one are astronomical."

"Because the Elders hate you. Your birthday is probably what they call their Advent. But I might be picked for one. Would you be sad if I left?"

"You wouldn't be gone long, so no."

"What if I got killed while I was away? Would you be sad then?"

"You would have gone on the mission knowing full well the possibilities."

"So, is that a no?"

"That's a no."

"You're the only thorn in the rose garden, aren't you?"

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Aidan groaned. “And what’s with the hypothetical situations? There’s only one thing we should be worried about right now. The end of our fifth year.”

“You mean how we’re supposed to give our wishes to the Elders?”

“Exactly.”

“I take it you have no intention of following through on that.”

“Do you?” Aidan asked, turning to face Ori for the first time in their conversation. Ori grinned and shook his head.

“Hey, Aidan!” a student of Mr. Young shouted from behind them. They turned to see a short, stocky boy with glasses more like goggles. “Heard about your threat during Mr. Young’s presentation. What are you doing? Trying to graduate early? You know you’re not getting expelled while those are still active.” He pointed directly at Aidan’s right arm.

“I understand that, Jared,” Aidan said.

“Then what’s the deal?”

“I have a plan.”

“Oh? Do tell.”

“I would rather not,” he said, staring forward. “The walls have ears, and the wind is an excellent messenger.”

“Isn’t he hilarious when he gets all metaphorical like that?” Ori laughed. “Don’t know where he gets it from.”

“Fine, whatever,” Jared huffed. He turned to Ori. “You watch out for this one. He’ll get you in trouble too.”

“Oh, I’m fully aware,” Ori chuckled. Jared waved bye and ran off to the right as the two boys remained outside their home. The crowd from the presentation must have decided to mingle in the village center, located further north and in the opposite direction the boys had gone. The voices were now at a tolerable volume.

“Guess I don’t have to blow a hole in the shield next week,” Aidan said, looking towards Ori for a reaction. All he did was raise an eyebrow in puzzlement.

“Because you have a master plan all of a sudden?”

“Tell me more about these missions.”

“Basically, the Fourth and Fifth Years are their strongest and most mature, so the best of them are sent on missions outside.”

“I already know that part.”

“You want to learn something or not?”

“Fine. Go on.”

“I think the Elders use the somewhat established adults because they don’t want to risk their own lives to procure supplies and information.”

“I don’t even want to know what it takes to get established around here...still, what I don’t understand is why they use the Fifth Years. They have the most to lose. They could stay out there as long as they pleased, and if anyone tried to bring them back, they could just use their Yen to resist.”

“There are chaperones, of course,” Ori replied.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“So your master plan is to go on one of the missions and then bail?”

“Exactly.”

“Like no one has thought of that one before,” Ori scoffed. “And I’m sorry, but it’s too late for you. You said it yourself. No one’s going to send you out there without a leash, a bridle, and a muzzle. You’ve caused too much trouble.”

“But you’ll be selected, won’t you?” Aidan asked, looking hard into Ori’s eyes.

“Doubtful. I associate with riff-raff like you.”

“When they’re desperate enough, they’ll take you,” Aidan nodded with confidence. “And when that happens, I’m coming along for the ride.”

“While getting me killed in the process.”

“What are friends for?” Aidan chuckled.

“Well, this is highly suspect,” a pleasant, sweet voice muttered from the shadows between the two cabins. The boys turned, half-worried that too much had been heard when the intruder stepped into the moonlight. Ori smiled with glee.

“Morrigan! How good it is to see you! To what do we owe the pleasure of being able to bask in the glory of the marvelous, radiant, magnificent – ”

“ – put a lid on it, Ori. I’m sick of your false praise,” she snapped, pushing her maroon, thick, horn-rimmed glasses further up the

bridge of her nose.

“But I thought you liked that sort of thing. Sucking up,” he grinned. “Or is it only acceptable when you’re the one doing it?”

“I love people sucking up to me,” she smiled through her rapidly blinking eyes and thick green lipstick, “but I would hardly consider you a person. Something between a virus and a deformed toad is more precise.”

“Yet I’m still on the evolutionary chain. There’s hope for me yet. Oh, Morrigan!” Ori pretended to swoon as he pranced around her with clasped hands. “Your compliments are like the kiss of snowflakes upon the cheek.”

“That wasn’t even remotely intelligent.”

“So, what do you want?” Aidan said bluntly, crossing his arms. “Ms. Head of the Discipline Squad. Here to follow up on some rumors?”

“Are they rumors, Aidan?” she asked, leaning close to his face. “Considering every single person present at that presentation is ready to testify against you?”

“Oh, is that how many people I have to kill tonight?”

“You’re not funny.”

“Murder never is.”

“You have a subpoena for tomorrow morning at 8 a.m.,” she said, handing him a folded packet of paper. Ori whistled at the size. “I assume you know where the Squad’s chambers are located.”

“You assume wrong. I’ve never been there in my entire life.”

“And afterward, I can tutor you in the library on proper use of our tongue. It can help with whatever... backward, wild man grunting thing that’s dribbling off your lips.”

“Whatever it is, I’m sure it’s not green,” he said, gagging at her lipstick. She gave a false smile, her cheekbones raised as high as they could go.

“Language doesn’t have a color, imbecile. See what I mean about having to tutor you?”

“That’s the second time you’ve mentioned us getting together,” Aidan raised an eyebrow. “Are you asking me out on a date?”

“I would rather choke on my own vomit,” she said with an up-curved lip. “And I would never do such a thing as to taint my

reputation.”

“Taint?”

“Do you even know the meaning to -” she turned to Ori. “Can you please enlighten your dense friend here?”

“Enlighten? What poetic enunciation is this?” Ori batted his eyes. “Perhaps the lady cares to educate this backward gent on the particulars. You know green happens to be my favorite color.”

“Go jump off a bridge,” Morrigan said flatly. She shoved them aside and headed back towards the village center where the crowd enjoyed themselves. Both of them couldn’t help staring at her strange, multi-layered clothing ensemble and bouncing pink pigtails as she walked off.

“You think that’s her natural color?” Aidan asked, but Ori ignored him.

“Her speech loses some of its bite every day,” Ori sighed. Aidan unfolded his arms and glanced at him. He didn’t know what to think of their strange relationship. Sometimes he was sure Ori was in love with her, and then in the next second, it couldn’t be anything but loathing. What went on in that head of his?

“All of Lowsunn knows I’m not going to that hearing,” Aidan declared out loud. Ori nodded in agreement as he continued staring off in the direction Morrigan had disappeared.

“She knows too, but it’s part of the job description. Has to keep up a good standing for the higher-ups. She is the only villager our age to gain their favor. She probably has an exemption.”

“Ugh,” Aidan gagged. “Then who would want to be here a moment longer? I’ll never understand women like her.”

“You don’t understand women, period.”

“Oh, and you’re one to talk!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You drive me nuts every time I see the two of you interact,” Aidan shook his head. “Your eyes study her whenever she walks by like she’s a new species, but then your lips say otherwise.”

“I’m maintaining my distance until I’m sure of who she is, that’s all. I know what I’m doing. Unlike you.”

“Are you talking about Leah again?”

“You said her name. Not me.”

"I know her well enough," Aidan said, glancing away and re-folding his arms.

"Oh?"

"We have a class together. Woodworking."

"Right. I'll make sure to check the roster and see if that class exists."

"We were partners. The teacher put us together. She made me a practice sword."

"Uh-huh."

"You don't believe me?"

"I didn't say that. I just suspect there's more to the story than you're willing to admit. Don't you remember who you're talking to?"

"Right," Aidan said, closing his eyes. "The last thing I need is to be thrown on your radar. I don't know what's worst. Being a part of your conspiracies or listening to them."

"I would say listening because then we can work together. We've yet to figure out the mystery of the disappearing chocolate cake."

"I already told you," Aidan sighed, slapping his forehead. "The head of the dining commons ate it whole."

"But she's so nice."

"**She's fat**," Aidan stressed. "And noticeably fatter after the incident."

"That's stress from the job."

"For someone who's paranoid, you sure are willing to dismiss those you like."

"She could be pregnant."

"Yeah, you go ahead and ask her."

"I'm a gentleman. I wouldn't think of it."

"Uh-huh. Or is it because she gives you the leftover cookies after hours?"

"You saw that?"

"Now who's part of a conspiracy?"

"At least you're not," he smiled. "You're not on my radar...yet."

"Lucky me," Aidan said as he began heading inside the cabin. "Lucky me."





THE NIGHTMARE WAS MORE vivid than usual, and what made it worse was that for the first time, Aidan couldn't wake himself up. He was back home again, falling out of bed over the piercing screams he heard coming from outside. Aidan hoped that it was all a figment of his imagination, conjured up in his sleep...but the shrieks didn't let up. Disoriented, he staggered to his tiny clay hut window and scanned the area.

His neighbors were outside his window.

And they were on fire.

Aidan rushed out through the open door, so concerned with the plight of his neighbors that he didn't even think of whether his parents and little sister were okay. They had been outside the safety of their home.

However, as soon as his feet hit the dirt, he was paralyzed.

The sky had turned a blood red. The clouds, a lightning blue, and a sickly yellow rain drizzled from the heavens, slowly corroding the clay of their homes and withering their bountiful harvest. Aidan stepped back inside as soon as he realized the effects of the yellow rain, but it didn't appear to affect his skin any more than regular water did. Still, he took off his shirt and wrapped it in a turban around his head for protection, then rushed back out and searched for a solution to the fires. A way to save his people.

Water, sand, blankets – nothing worked.

And as he watched them all stumble and fall, barely even twitching once they hit the soil—he wondered why he was the only one not afflicted. He felt like throwing up, and the only thing that prevented him was the sudden boom in the distance, sounding as if the planet itself had just cracked in half. He ran to the source, past the smoldering clay huts and the recently deceased. He hit the edge of what was once his home, now just a land of fertilized soil, sitting atop the second mountain of Tilkin.

A firestorm was approaching him, rolling across the adjacent mountains and valleys with a mix of thunder, flames, sand, and destruction. Aidan stayed frozen in fear as it approached with a deafening roar. Nothing he did could save him. His fate would be no different than those of his people.

And he didn't mind at all.

He closed his eyes as he felt his skin begin to singe and crackle, the hairs on his arms and head already gone. He winced and grit his teeth through the tears, accepting his inevitable fate when unexpectedly...

A voice asked him a question.

***“What do you wish for right now?”***

Without a moment's hesitation, the sole survivor of Quinn spoke.

“I wish I was protected from the fire!” he cried aloud.

Just as the firestorm descended upon him, he screamed, not over the incoming storm, but the intense ripping sensation that came from his right arm. Three seals appeared in an instant. Two illuminated, signifying wishes yet to be granted, and one dark—blackened due to the words he had just uttered. He had no time to examine the symbols. The pain in his arm was too great. All he could do was roar as the firestorm engulfed him, destroying everything he had ever loved, leaving no trace behind. As if his life had never existed.

He screamed and screamed, and at one point, he went mad.

But then it was over.

The storm subsided, vanishing into thin air as if it had achieved its sole purpose...and only Aidan remained amidst the smoking ruins. Two tornadoes of fire, as small as bracelets, circled his wrists at an increasing rate of speed, but he wasn't looking at them or the devastation at his feet. He couldn't contain his rage any longer.

It erupted like a solar flare. In an instant, everything within a five-mile radius was reduced to flat land, mountains and all. The village of Quinn and the mountains of Tilkin were wiped clean from Naropa.

Aidan barely survived the fall from the mountaintop as it crumbled beneath his feet like an avalanche. Even after he awoke, all he could do was breathe in the soot, cough, and swear.

What had happened to his people...his village – it could not have been an act of nature. Nature had been a catalyst, but it was not the cause. Red sky? Yellow rain? No, this was an attack by a willing mind. And someone had definitely spoken to him before the firestorm had arrived. That voice...that voice would know what had happened to his people.

It would know who was responsible for their deaths.

It would know who had to die by his trembling, eager hands.



## Chapter 2 – Bailey



A cry shot through his nightmare and startled him awake. The moment he came to, Aidan realized just how real his dream had felt. The room around him was ablaze, a wall of flames writhing up against every bare wall and lapping at the ceiling with its forked, devilish tongues. Leah stood in front of the bed with her hands clasped and head bowed, muttering inaudibly. In an instance, a ring of ice shot out from the carpet. In a single motion, the ice snuffed out the fire, giant ice spikes replacing each flame. The large ice spikes cracked once they touched the ceiling, and steam erupted from the tips. Leah muttered again, and they shattered and spilled all over the floor, the water slowly leaking through the floorboards and into the dirt below them.

She leaped forward onto the bed to avoid the cold water on her bare feet and landed right on Aidan's leg. As soon as she heard him wince, she turned around and leaped playfully onto his bare chest without mercy. He had to catch his breath from the cold of her bare skin, but her playful attack let him know that she was fine.

And really, that was all that mattered.

She wrapped her arms around him and nuzzled her head into his neck as he gritted his teeth. The touch of her fingers on his bare chest nearly made him shriek – he still wasn't used to the burning chill her body maintained after using her abilities.

"Did I do it again?" he whispered in the dark once the cold subsided. He could feel Leah's eyelashes brush against his skin as she opened and then closed her eyes.

"It wasn't that bad," she replied, her voice soft and distant, her breath chilled and crisp like winter. Already she was beginning to fall back asleep. Was she used to his nightmares already?

"Do you think anyone noticed?" he asked.

"There's no way everyone slept through that, but we'll worry about it tomorrow." He looked down at her and admired her long and

fine icy blue hair, taking on a silver tint in the lunar streaks of light streaming in through the window behind them. “You weren’t worried last time,” she yawned. “What makes tonight so different?”

“I have to go before the Discipline Squad tomorrow,” he said. Leah practically catapulted off him and sat up on the bed. She crossed her bare legs and gave him an intense glare, though as always, it didn’t have the effect she intended. Her gorgeous, mesmerizing eyes were incapable of any kind of real anger. They maintained their innocent shine and infant wonder that he longed to find again in his own. But it didn’t matter. As long as her innocent eyes were always there to gaze into, he was satisfied by how happy his reflection looked within them.

“The Discipline Squad? What for?” she asked, forming two long chopsticks made of rock in the palm of her left hand. She used them to wrap her hair up into a bun as he continued.

“You didn’t hear about what happened at the schoolhouse?”

“That was you?” she asked in disbelief, scooting forward on the bed. The creak it made wasn’t loud, but whenever it made that sound, he was sure someone had woken up in the room next door. “Wait,” Leah said, cupping her chin in thought. “That means you have three strikes. What happens now?”

“I might get kicked out,” he said, admiring her smooth olive skin. Her beauty was making him feverish.

“But you still have two seals. They’re not going to let you leave with those.”

“So I keep hearing,” Aidan said, a hint of amusement in his voice. “Which means if I’m kicked out, I’ll be leaving before they get the chance to take them.”

Leah cast her eyes to the sheets and sighed. “I’m not ready to go, Aidan. It’s too soon.”

“I understand,” he said, leaning back onto the headboard. “Your parents controlled your entire life, even before the Cata—Advent. You barely saw the outside world, and even now, all you hear about are the horrible things that go on out there. But they’re exaggerating.”

“You told me yourself that it’s dangerous.”

“It is,” he said, sitting up to face her better. “But it’s also the most heavenly and elegant thing you’ve ever seen. If we focus on what the bad people are doing, we forget about the good. What people create out there when they’re unrestricted – it would take your breath away. The people here do okay, but it’s nothing compared to seeing a hundred people gathered together, working on the same project. Think about it. I’ve seen cities made of glass erected before my very eyes, oceans placed permanently in the air, clouds turned into the perfect soil.”

She grimaced. “That last one doesn’t sound **too** appealing.”

“Okay, but you get what I’m saying. The list goes on and on. Do you understand why I want out of here so badly?”

“But you could have left years ago,” she said. “So what made you stay? Scared of the policies in place?”

“You mean the one where if I leave without permission, I’ll be killed? No,” he laughed. “If I was able to survive out there that long, nothing this place can do will harm me.”

“But they will come after us if we leave.”

“Let them come,” Aidan said, clasping her hands gently. “For all we know, it’s a bluff. We never hear any news about those that ran off, whether they survived or not.”

“Then why are you still here? I’m curious.”

Aidan paused and studied her face. He could see that it had been on her mind for longer than just one night, but was it the right time to tell her everything?

“I still have something I have to do first.”

“Aidan...” she whispered. Tears began to fall and crystallize against her soft cheeks and the way her lips pursed – he could tell that his response had hurt her, and that was the last thing he wanted to do. But he couldn’t tell her now. Not yet.

He reached forward and pulled her into his arms.

“I want to tell you,” he said. “I do. I promise I’ll tell you everything soon.”

“But you’re my husband,” she sobbed. The words brought forth a startling sensation, like a dagger going through his throat. He instinctively grit his teeth and fought against the lump in his throat. He couldn’t reveal how close she was to breaking his resolve.

“I know,” he managed to reply. “I know. I haven’t forgotten, but trust me when I say that this is the only thing between us that is still a secret, and it’s for a good reason.”

“Is this what adults mean when they say that our age is too young to get married?”

“First of all, no one even knows we’re married, so no one’s judging us. Second, they have no clue what they’re talking about. There are elderly couples who get married and separate. It’s not the age that matters; it’s the commitment, and I’m yours forever.”

“But you’re such a wild man,” she laughed, gently pushing him away from her. Though her face was still tear-stained, her jade green eyes were playful and forgiving. “You just do things on a whim. What’s to stop you from falling for someone else in the future?”

“When it comes to love,” he said with a straight face, “it takes a lot to warm my heart, but once it is, it burns only for the one who kindled it.”

“You’re so full of it,” she laughed, pushing him back onto the pillows. “How many times have you said that line to a naïve young girl?”

“Not a one,” he smiled, grabbing her wrists and pulling her on top of him. “And for the record, I don’t just want a girl. I want you.” He kissed her hard, and she squeezed her thin arms tightly around his neck. After a few moments, she parted from his embrace and stared deeply into his hazel eyes, searching for something. He allowed her to explore his expression and take in every emotion he felt for her.

Only to her, and to her alone was he exposed, and it was so strange how comforting and free it felt when he was with her. Usually, one wrong word from anyone, human or beast, was enough to make him want to send them into an everlasting inferno, but for her, it was as if every wound had been healed, every dirty deed had been wiped clean, and the life he had once lived was not his – like it was just a recurring bad dream, or a story told to him so many times, he had taken it on as a memory.

He was not the most tactful or articulate man. Aidan wasn’t nearly as strong as he wished he was, and he sure made plenty of mistakes, but he felt close to perfection in her presence. There was little wrong he could do in her eyes. Every act, no matter how



heinous, had a reasonable explanation. She thought the world of him, and consequently, he was hers to do with as she pleased. He would transform himself for her because he couldn't bear the alternative. For her to see him as so many others did... No, that was unbearable.

"You really love me?" she asked finally, clutching the sides of his face. He tried to give her lips a peck, but she kept his head stationery, waiting for her prince's answer.

"I would do anything for you," he said. "And I love you so much that it makes my heart break when you're not with me." He meant every syllable.

"That's just because you're getting old," she chuckled, letting him go. "It's probably a stroke."

"You're not getting rid of me that easily," he smiled, grabbing her shoulders hard. She looked him up and down with a mischievous smile.

"Like you could stop me," she said. "You know you're just with me because you need protecting."

"That," he chuckled, "is exactly why I'm here. All that stuff I said about loving you – I rehearsed it in the mirror eight hours ago."

"Eight hours ago, you were threatening to kill everyone in Lowsunn."

"Not you," he whispered.

"How thoughtful," she said, giving him a peck on the lips. He leaned in for more, but she grabbed the sides of his head again. "You know I can see right through you, don't you?"

"I do," he said.

"And you'll tell me your secret as soon as you're able?"

"Of course."

"Okay," she sighed, letting go and leaning back onto his chest. Once again, he could feel her close her eyes, and within a few minutes, her heavy breathing resumed. He adjusted his seating position slightly to make it more comfortable for her neck. Then, he began to stare out into the space around him. The sun was starting to dawn in the background, illuminating their surroundings so clearly that he could easily see the damage that had been done.

The walls had been scorched, and the wallpaper was crispy and peeling. The little of what he could see of the floorboards was black, and the door still had tiny embers resting within its cracks.

He looked down at his young wife, sound asleep, and placed a hand on her head. Even her hair was cool to the touch—as if she didn't have an ounce of rage stirring within her. Perhaps he should consider taking her approach sometimes.

The threats to Mr. Young, the strikes against him, the Discipline Squad, his outbursts, and the occasional damage done to the rooms in which he slept – what had it brought him but trouble? He had a reason to stay in Lowsunn, yet he was doing all he could to get kicked out. He thought nothing of Leah's safety.

She knew nothing of the outside world. How could he ask her to leave with him when her life was already so concrete? What if she was killed the moment they left? What if she wasn't happy? What if he got into a scuffle over something petty and died, leaving her all alone? That would be far worse than if he had just sucked it up and finished out his last year.

There was no way he would allow the Elders to take his Yen, but he could at least take advantage of them until his inevitable departure came. Why couldn't he enjoy the free shelter and amenities he would have to work so hard for once he was free?

"I'm sorry," he whispered into her hair. "I'll think of another way."

Leah moaned in her sleep, as if she had been reading his mind. Satisfied with his conclusion, Aidan settled further back and rested against the bed's headboard. After a minute had passed, he fell asleep with a clear mind.



THE FIELD OF VISIONS, located a mile to the east of the schoolhouse, was by far Aidan's favorite place within Lowsunn's shields. No one knew who had created it, but there wasn't a single inhabitant that wasn't grateful for it.

Even Aidan.

Five years ago, someone had introduced the idea that the buildings and small fields in the village weren't enough. With all of

the classes, the community, and the scouting missions – there was still something missing: imagination. What was the point of having wishes at one’s disposal if they didn’t have the creativity to make them count when it was time for them to be used? Sure there were always those that made their wishes off of a feeling, a fleeting thought – but whoever had created the Field of Visions realized that by giving someone the ability to open up their imagination and give it free rein, they would eventually reach a point in which they knew precisely what they wanted to wish for.

Not to mention the Elders claimed that if anyone came up with a purpose that benefited everyone—that individual would be able to use their wish as they saw fit upon the end of their fifth year. Much better than being told what to use it on.

The Field of Visions was a meadow, ten square miles in length. At first, no one understood how incredible this unsuspecting field was, but within a week, the grassy area became a hot spot. Once someone stepped onto the grass, they gained the ability to play like never before. They could practice the abilities they might have gained through previously used wishes, all to their heart’s content. Any damage done to the earth or sky was immediately reset, as if it were all a big game.

Others, who had yet to use their wishes, were somehow given the ability to act as if they had. If one was considering using a wish on gaining the ability to fly, all they had to do was think it. Suddenly, they would soar high, as long as they didn’t go beyond the Field of Vision’s borders (in which they would then revert back to their original, powerless form). Creating castles out of thin air, experimenting on what it would feel like to embody a creature they had seen in a textbook, learning what it felt like to rip moisture from the sky and expand it into a waterfall—there was hardly a moment when the Field of Visions was empty during the day. This was the ultimate playground.

Aidan often frequented the field, practicing his Fire Arts and stretching their limits. Some days he would just cast fire into the air until he was exhausted, meditating on the depths of his stamina. It was only then that he realized that, even with a power gained

through Yen, there were still limits to one's use of it. What the particulars of this revelation would mean – he wasn't yet sure.

Other days, he would see how much area he could set ablaze, or if he could cause damage to the ground beneath him faster than it could reset. To the villagers, it looked like he was constantly taking out his anger on the world in one fiery manner or another. But for him, it was simple therapy. Here, he didn't have to worry about harming anything. He could just destroy to his heart's content. There were no repercussions.

Though on this particular hazy morning, playing in the Field of Visions would have just that. Aidan had begun experimenting with how high he could raise the temperature of his body, when he suddenly noticed a woman approaching from his right. Though he hoped it was his imagination manifesting her into existence, he knew he had no skill in holographic imaging, even in the Field.

There was just no way he could get every feature right. Her dark brown skin, her strong and confident stride. Her affinity for plaid shirts and dark blue cotton jeans. Her intense, serpent-like eyes and full, pursed lips. She had coarse, short hair that barely touched the bottom of her neck, and her shoes were always worn and tired, yet they never ripped or broke down – symbolic of the woman who placed her calloused soles within them. She was the only adult that Aidan respected unconditionally, and he suspected that there may not ever be another.

"I'm not surprised to find you here," she said, her thick accent dominating the air. Aidan let his body temperature revert to normal and turned to face her. She examined him from head to toe and shook her head. "Relax. I'm not here to scold."

"You've scolded me before, Bailey."

"Because I thought you were strong enough to take it."

"I am."

"Then you won't mind if I say a few words to you now." A corner of Bailey's mouth raised as she waved him forward. "Come walk with me. We have some things to discuss."

"I have an appointment with the Discipline Squad," Aidan said.

"Yes, and you're a few minutes late by my assessment. Don't worry. I've already taken care of your problems. Just come."

Aidan raised his eyebrows in surprise and obeyed, trying to keep up with her stride, her long legs taking only one step for each of his two. She walked like she was marching, as if heading to the next battle. He could only imagine how she slept.

“You covered for me?” Aidan asked as she led them back to the village center, no doubt heading to the far west where the brewing shop and the dining commons building were located. She had often told him that food was the most important catalyst for a smooth conversation.

She lived in the North End of Lowsunn, where many of the adults lived. Yet, her business primarily resided in the South, with many of the youth whom she mentored. Depending on what her kids needed, she would have to go back and forth between the North and South, retrieving notes, sensitive information on allergies, and things of that nature. There was nothing odd about this.

What was strange was that instead of running straight down the middle of the village, she would jog along the diamond-shaped perimeter, corners and all. Aidan had asked her why. Why in the world would she do that when it wasn't required? When no one asked her to? When no one cared. All she could say was that it was cheating to make your own way, and maybe if Aidan was more conscientious of order, he would understand. Like many adults, she had her established quirks, and so he let that particular conversation slide. He only hoped that if he was dying at one end of the village and she was at the other, she would ignore the order of things that one time.

After they had walked along the diamond layout from the East to the North to the West, they arrived at their destination. Bailey craned her neck forward, examining the small and empty round tops outside of Zorin's Brewing Shop. There were already twenty villagers sitting in various spots, giving their orders to the few waiters and waitresses employed there.

Zorin was no fool. Having no desire to fight for his life in the outside world, he had immediately used all three of his wishes to establish his legacy in Lowsunn. The first gave him his power – the ability to concoct elaborate potions that gave the consumer temporary abilities. Although they only lasted a few minutes at most,

they were absolutely essential for the scouting missions, giving the adventurers superhuman strength, speed, new abilities, or even invincibility when they needed it most. They not only were awe-inspiring concoctions, but they also had a pleasant, sweet taste as well, making their consumption recreational on top of practical.

His second wish was to ensure that no one in all of Naropa could replicate his power.

And the third – was for a permanent residence, which he found right smack in Lowsunn, before it was rebuilt by the current Elders. He said he felt a good vibe coming from that area.

The Elders couldn't refuse the man, even before they met his jolly disposition and oversized beehive of a beard. They said that he was the real reason the shields were erected. So no other outsider could wish for permanent residence again, though Aidan knew that couldn't be true.

Bailey hummed in delight once she found the exact table she wanted. "Are you hungry?" she asked, pointing at her discovery.

"Not at all," he replied. A couple of teenagers excitedly took the table with the invisible reservation. Bailey shouted out a Hey to get their attention. She shooed them away, and they scurried off. Aidan let Bailey choose her seat first, and then he sat across from her, falling into his wicker chair with a heavy sigh. Under the shade of the straw canopy above their heads, her eyes were more intense than ever, and he struggled to remain calm.

"Aidan, how old are you?" she asked. That was not a question he had expected.

"Twenty-one," he said.

"Do you consider yourself an adult?" she asked, stressing the A in adult as if it were a separate word. He studied her face carefully for clues as to what she was aiming at.

"I do," he said with a frown. "Why?"

"If you're an adult, why are you afraid of me?" she asked in concern. "I'm not that frightening, am I?"

"I've seen you do some things that could put fear into a person. But I'm not saying that I'm afraid of you."

"But you know that you shouldn't ever have to fear me, right? I may be a little harsh, but it's never towards you. You're my sponsor,

but also my friend.”

“I realize that.”

“Then can I ask you, as your friend...what the hell you are doing?”

“You’ll have to be more specific.”

“You have two strikes against you. Today would have marked your third and resulted in your expulsion. Now, if you want to leave, that’s okay, but at least give me some time to further myself before you make that decision. You know how poorly your actions look upon me?”

“I understand.”

“Then you also realize that you’re causing suspicion to fall upon us? That you might be putting all we’ve worked for in jeopardy?”

“I get that,” Aidan said, clenching his fists. Bailey noticed the gesture immediately and glanced down at them.

“Aidan, we’re just talking. Relax.”

“It sounds like you’re making accusations. It sounds like you’re saying that I could care less about what happens to you and Ori and anyone else who’s working for the Movement.”

“Well, I’m right, aren’t I?” Bailey asked, leaning forward in her chair and placing an arm over the small table. “You’re here in Lowsunn because I asked you to come, and you felt indebted to me. Not because you believed a word I said. Not because you cared. Stop me when I’m wrong, Aidan. You’re barely attending the classes, and I’ve heard rumors that you’ve been spending a lot of time with one of the Elders’ daughters. Please tell me it isn’t true.”

“Rumors aren’t always a fact.”

“So you were not seen sleeping in her bedroom the other night?” Bailey asked casually.

“It’s not what you think,” Aidan said, giving her an intense glare.

“It better not be,” she huffed. “The last thing I need is a fling destroying our progress.”

“It’s not a fling,” Aidan said flatly. “If it was, I wouldn’t be trying so hard to keep it a secret.”

“Oh! So something is going on with the two of you.”

“I don’t see how it’s any of your business.”

“Are you really going to talk to me like that?”

“What?” Aidan snapped. “Don’t like how your own medicine tastes?”

Bailey sat back with a huff and stared at her young protégé with a smile in her eyes. “I enjoy it thoroughly, as a matter of fact. You’re the one who’s getting upset.”

“I’m not getting upset.”

“Emotional then...like a little girl.” Aidan was taken aback and stared at Bailey for a moment. He took a deep breath and then put his arms onto the table, staring deep into Bailey’s eyes.

“Why is it...whenever I start sparring with you, you begin insulting me? Why can’t you just tell me that I’m being –”

“ – ornery,” Bailey said with a smug smile.

“That’s not the word I was going to use.”

“Well, I am your mentor. You have to mind your manners.”

“Why is it you can’t just talk to me like a human being? Huh?”

“Because it’s impossible to do so when you’re always on the defensive. If you were Ori, sure. I could sit here, order a drink, and discuss with you in detail what mistakes you’re making – and a great deal of progress would be made. But then again, if you were him, we wouldn’t be sitting here in the first place, would we?”

“You could still try – given our history.”

“History is meaningless if you haven’t learned from it,” she chuckled, putting a finger into the air as a signal for an observant waiter to go and retrieve her usual. “I’ve told you how sensitive our operation is, but you can’t see beyond your own two hands. You don’t see the labor that many of us are putting in, and the overtime thrust upon us due to your actions. You know I’m right. I saw it all over your face the moment I walked up. You know you’ve been bad, but instead of taking the lecture like a good and faithful soldier, you start barking back like you actually have something valid to say.”

“So what do you expect me to do? Apologize?”

“I’m a big girl. I don’t need to watch your poor acting performances. Just watch yourself. That’s all I require.”

Aidan sneered and began cracking his knuckles, looking out beyond the tacky tablecloths and into the open where so many were walking to their survival classes or snug cabins. They were all so controlled, so manipulated, and they couldn’t even see it. No, it was



worse. They did see it, but they followed through anyways, hoping that those in charge would reward them in the end for their obedience. They lied to themselves and believed that those on top actually cared for their well-being because they were of the same organic composition. **That's** what was sickening to watch, and Bailey, who knew him more than anyone, was now asking him to comply and become one of the drones.

"That's not true," Bailey said suddenly, placing a calloused hand over Aidan's. "I would never ask that of you."

"What are you talking about?" Aidan asked, though he knew Bailey had just opened him up and peered deep inside.

"We're both actors on a stage, **Tallawah**. Both of us. You may think that I'm tapped into the network - that some part of me believes in the village's mantra. But I am merely giving a performance. What you fail to remember is that the Elders compose the audience, and they are watching our every word, and our every step, making sure we're following the script. Don't let them see through your mask. We need you...I need you."

"I told you before we came here that I would be more trouble than I'm worth."

"And yet I took the risk because we need you more than you think."

"I still don't understand why I'm so important. What's so unique about getting pissed off all the time? That's a detriment, not a skill. And I've been waiting for nearly **five years**. Five years, and nothing has happened. What am I waiting for?"

"Perhaps explaining it to you would help the situation, given that asking for your compliance obviously hasn't worked."

"Your mistake in trusting me," Aidan said, and Bailey shook her head in amusement.

"Okay. I'll tell you the truth. One thing I like about you is that you don't listen to someone just because they're older than you. They have to earn your respect. As an adult, I want to knock you over the head, but as a visionary...I see how valuable your attitude could be if properly channeled. No matter how much someone tries to persuade you to their side, you won't go out of fear or hope of reward. You have to believe in the notions that they're spitting at you. Some might

see just another angry kid. I see a passionate, potential leader that could win over the hearts of thousands because people want to fight against the status quo, but they don't know how. They want to be saved, but they don't have the strength. They need someone to carry their burden."

"So now you resort to cheap tricks, Bailey?" Aidan scoffed. "Flattery?"

"No tricks, *Tallawah*. Not a one. You know what I had to give up for the rest of the Elders to take you in."

"A seat in their company," he said under his breath, remembering the exact words she had said to him on his first day in Lowsunn. He had shrugged his shoulders then, but now he understood just how big a deal that was. She had been in a position of great power. Considering the goals that she had in mind for the village, there was no way she would have given up her ambitions without something of equal or greater value in exchange. He couldn't see in himself what she saw, but her actions were clear: he was more important to her than being an Elder. The least he could do was behave while she got the rest of her plans in order.

"I remember," he said finally, taking his hands away from hers. "But I still don't understand."

"You don't have to understand," she said. "Just continue to trust me. Remember that the original purpose of fire was not to consume but to provide warmth for others. I'm not asking you to change who you are. Just to turn down the intensity." He turned his head and stared at the villagers who were walking past once more, examining their defeated strides and expressionless faces.

"I will," he said. "From this point on, I'll do my best to behave."

A burst of laughter interrupted their conversation. Aidan spun around to see a couple of adolescent boys, and they immediately tried to hold in their giggles once they saw they had been caught. Aidan snapped his fingers, and instantly the jam sandwiches on their bark trays flash-evaporated, consumed by Aidan's power. The boys' jaws dropped in shock, and one of them gave Aidan a pained face. The other ran off to find an adult who would listen.

"We weren't even talking about you!" the boy who stayed behind cried out, but Aidan ignored him. As the boy angrily got up from the

table to retrieve replacements, Aidan turned to face Bailey. She had closed her eyes and firmly planted the palm of her hand against her forehead.

“Sorry,” Aidan replied, holding up both hands in surrender. “Now, I’ll behave.”



## Chapter 3 – Judge



All his life, he carried manifested his anger through faces of his adversaries. Whether it was a heckler from behind, an insolent adult from in front, or a beast that sought to devour him – there was always a face. Like an assembly line, they passed through his thoughts, met him en route, engaged in an unforgettable battle with him in the recesses of his mind, and then continued on their way, forever changed by their interaction.

And Aidan hadn't even had his Fire Arts back then.

But this was different. Whoever was responsible for the deaths of his people had not just wounded his body but his heart as well. Spectacularly, something...no, someone...had destroyed his friends, his neighbors, and everyone he had known from birth in one fell swoop. But this time, for the first time - there was no face. Like a coward, the enemy (whoever he was) had sent nature to do his dirty work and then ran off into the shadows, so Aidan couldn't inflict his own nature upon him.

What was there to do now?

The village and mountain were completely gone. His people had become one with the soil. His family...his family! That's right! His father and mother had gone off with his youngest sister, Diana, on an expedition. When he had turned five, his parents had taken him off of the mountaintop and into the world. It was an expedition to see the different kinds of plants and berries and landscapes—far more exotic and lavish than anything they could witness in Quinn, with its rocky terrain and high altitude. It had now been Diana's turn. But how far had they gone? Did they get caught in the storm? Did they even know what had happened?

Aidan stood and squinted through the thick soot that hung in the air like a mist. It stung his eyes, and they watered so much that he was afraid they would soon go dry. But if he was going to find his family, he had to keep his eyes open to see them, and so he bore

the pain. Trying to breathe as little as possible, he waved his hands through the fog as he walked, coughing and batting at it like he was pushing aside leaves from within the thickest of rainforests. He kept walking, but where was he headed? He had no way of knowing where his family had gone or if they had even survived. If they had been caught in the firestorm, they would have been reduced to ash, and he would never find them.

Aidan stopped to think, closing his eyes to give them some rest. It was eerily silent, and though he doubted anything would come of it, he decided to shout out the name of his little sister. No voice answered him in return, and he stood there shaking, overcome with the unknown. Whether he stayed or went, it was all chance. There were no guarantees as to how his life would play out now.

Though the sky was still as red and orange like fire, he could feel a chill starting to crawl up his arms. The heat from the firestorm was passing, and the night frost was beginning to creep back in. He remembered he had put his shirt up into a turban on his head and quickly reached for it, but of course, it was gone, having been obliterated in the chaos. The rest of his clothes as well. Suddenly he longed for the cloak and robe that his father wore daily.

Aidan rubbed his arms and then stopped suddenly when he felt a slight but strange indentation in his skin. He glanced over at his right forearm and saw it with clarity this time.

Tattoo markings. Three of them. One was dark and faded, while the other two were glowing a metallic blue-white color. They were humming visually and audibly like a beacon, and he tried to wipe them away. They didn't come off, but the flashing became more rapid, blinking faster and faster. His mind raced to find the answers - the key to this strange branding. Only when he contemplated what had just happened over the last hour did he remember.

The voice.

It had asked him a question. It had asked him...what he wished for at that moment.

***I wish***, he thought. ***I wish that...***

And then he wasn't in the soot anymore. He was in a large circular room. The walls were composed of massive, midnight blue bricks. A manmade fire the size of his entire body hung upside down

in the middle of the ceiling like a chandelier. The floor was of granite, and the same marking branded into his arm three times was displayed in the middle of the floor in grand fashion. A sword with a small, medium, and large organ pipe on each side. On top of the center of the colossal marking sat a man, leaning forward on a small wooden stool that was far too short for his long legs. He was wearing a long, dark purple hooded robe, and his head was bowed as if in prayer. Aidan surveyed his surroundings, not sure what to make of them, when he came to a realization.

This man...he could be the one responsible.

Aidan took a step forward and felt his body freeze in place. To his utter disgust, it felt as if hundreds of invisible hands had suddenly wrapped their fingers around every inch of his body, keeping him at bay, urging him to abandon his intent. But he continued to fight against his mysterious restraints. He grit his teeth, and his eyes went wide in rage, but it wasn't until he saw the hooded man lift his head that he stopped. The invisible hands relaxed their grip upon him, knowing full well that he wouldn't make a sudden move. Not now. The atmosphere had gotten thicker, and a strange sensation permeated the room, making it feel like he was at the bottom of a quicksand well. Without any foreknowledge, he suddenly knew. He just knew - the man was about to speak.

"What do you wish?" the man asked, his head turned away, preventing his face from being visible. His voice was deep and haunting, and the way it echoed off the walls, it felt like he was everywhere at once. Aidan glared at the man and chose his words carefully.

"Were you the one that destroyed my village?" he asked. The man bowed his head once more.

"And what if I did?" he replied. Not cold. But no emotion either.

"Then I kill you," Aidan promised.

"You cannot kill me. Your power is lacking," the man said—with such confidence and assurance that Aidan believed him. Who was this man?

"But did you do it? Did you destroy my village?" Aidan asked as calmly as he could.

“I did,” the man said, to which Aidan responded with a lunge, but the invisible hands had resumed their grip. The man sighed heavily as he maintained his gaze upon the floor. “I need you to understand something, Aidan. I hope you will remember these words forever.”

“There’s nothing –” Aidan was cut short as a hand sheathed his words.

“The brandings on your arms are wishes,” the man continued, seemingly unaware of the young boy’s outburst. “You have used one to save yourself from the fire. The other two – are there to be used whenever you like. Only two more. Once you use them, they will be gone, and you will only have whatever power you’ve gained from them at your disposal. That will be the only power you will have to rectify the massacre I’ve just unleashed on your people.”

Every muscle of Aidan’s body fought against his restraints.

“This conversation will be our only real exchange. After I let you go and you return to the world, our meetings will be different. I, and I alone, have given you this power of making your dreams a reality. All I ask in return is privacy. When you make a wish, either audibly or internally, you will be transported here, between the veil of space and time, and you will make your request. I will grant it, and then you will go back from whence you came, as if nothing had happened at all. You will ask me no questions about who I am and what I do. Non-compliance will result in the loss of one of your wishes until none are left. Do you understand?”

Aidan’s breathing slowed as he tried to nod. The hooded man received the message.

“There is no use in figuring out who I am anyways,” the man said. “You will just waste your wishes and your life searching for answers that have no real significance. Enjoy your life. Enjoy your wishes, and somehow, forget about what I’ve done to your loved ones. For what it’s worth...I am truly, truly sorry.”

The invisible hands let go of Aidan, and he immediately sprinted forward.

“YOU WILL BE SORRY!” he screamed, but only ash and soot engaged him, coating his tongue mercilessly. As he gagged and coughed at the thick, vile mixture, he squinted his eyes and noticed that, once again, he was back at the spot where Quinn had once



stood. He clawed at his tongue, trying to remove the taste from his mouth, spitting and coughing more as he thought of what he had just witnessed.

The hooded man. He was the culprit, and he hadn't even denied it. This strange, powerful man could transport him to different locations at will. Who was he? A god? A supernatural being from the myths of old? If so, why would he reveal himself now? Why did Quinn have to be destroyed, and what were these...wishes.

Aidan inspected his arm and rubbed a hand across it once more. Two wishes out of three he still had. Using one of them had saved him from the firestorm. Somehow, he had been shielded from its path. When it had decimated his people and brought the mountain crumbling down, he...no, it was not the firestorm that had destroyed the mountain.

He remembered now.

It had been him. The hooded man.

He was responsible for destroying the platform on which Quinn had once stood. Aidan examined the palms of his hands in silence, searching each crease for a sign. And as he stared, he began to see it. It coursed through his veins like blood, but blood it was not. His eyes, somehow, could see through his skin like an x-ray and identify the substance as if he had studied it since birth. It was a chemical. No, not a chemical, because chemicals needed a catalyst or some other substance to perform a feat. This...this was like liquid fire. It was like an oil, a burning sun and a spark all in one. It was rage manifest.

And it had become a part of him.

Aidan stared at his hands in awe, watching the fluid course through him, giving his body fuel and energy, taking over the jobs his blood once had. He didn't understand how it was possible, but he realized its potential. He took a deep breath and raised his head upwards, stretching a palm towards the sky. He imagined the liquid fire surging like adrenaline through his veins, to his wrist, into his hands, and beyond his fingers – erupting from his pores like a geyser.

To his shock, a surge of fire burst from his palm, streaking toward the sky with a shrieking sound that made him wince. There was no

pain or pressure. Just the flames. They reached higher and higher, rocketing towards the sky without end. Then, with nothing more than a thought, it ceased, and his hand looked no different than it had before. It had not been burned or singed.

He no longer saw through his skin, but he felt it pumping through him, building in intensity until the next release.

A curt smile formed on Aidan's lips as he thought of what he had just acquired. **Two more wishes, huh**, he thought as he examined the seals on his arm. **Two should be more than enough.**



“YOU MISSED OUR APPOINTMENT,” Ori replied as Aidan approached the Field of Visions. Aidan shrugged his shoulders.

“Tell that to the boss lady. She wanted to have a chat.”

“Oh, I see. Then everything's cool. Hey, do you think this looks good on me?”

Ori spread his arms out wide, allowing Aidan to examine him. He was wearing a black leather shirt and pants with belts, chains and bracelets strung around his body, looping around his limbs and midsection so tight, it was as if they were infused into his skin. The jacket over his shoulders reached down to his ankles and looked like a battle robe he had stolen from a museum. The contrast of black to his blonde hair was strange, but Aidan cared little for fashion. How would he know if it was a proper ensemble or not?

“Looks good,” Aidan said flatly. Ori gave him a skeptical look.

“You're just saying that!” he retorted, trying to stretch his legs. “It doesn't look too tight or anything?”

“Can you breathe?”

“Yes.”

“Then it's not too tight,” Aidan said, trying to keep a straight face. Ori smirked and tried to reach the dagger that was hanging from his hip underneath the jacket, but he was restricted in movement, and it ended up looking like he was making failed attempts at stretching exercises. Aidan couldn't bear it any longer. He burst out laughing, covering his face as his whole body shook. Ori grunted in annoyance and flexed his muscles, shredding and ripping the costume. The

fabric floated down to the grass as Ori brushed off the village garb he wore underneath. Yellow shirt and blue pants.

“It may not look appealing, but it gives me the movement I require.”

“Oh, like it makes a difference in how this will all end,” Aidan scoffed, wiping away his tears. He hadn’t laughed that hard in a long time.

“You won’t be laughing when I rip that special robe of yours to shreds.”

“You can’t,” Aidan declared. “It’s very unique. Had someone on the outside infuse it with regenerative properties. So even if you somehow destroy it like you just did your costume there, it will always come back together, like it has a mind of its own.”

“I could have used that...” Ori said, glancing down at the shredded pieces. “It sucks creating a new one each time.”

“Or you can, you know, not rip it to pieces.”

“Oh, it’s impossible to get out of it once you’re inside.”

“Why would you –” Aidan stopped and slapped a palm onto his forehead. “How are you able to get me roped into these ridiculous conversations?”

“It’s because we’re best friends,” Ori said, retrieving his dagger and throwing it from one hand to the other. “And the bitterest of rivals.”

“Says you,” Aidan muttered, looking around him. “We only hang out because Bailey requires us to. If it was up to me, I would spend my time on more important matters.”

“Like Leah?” Ori flashed him a cheesy grin. As he smiled, he extended the dagger in his hand out towards Aidan, and it began to grow. Slowly, the blade's surface expanded until it was the size of a man’s torso in length. The hilt stretched out until it was nearly a foot long, and in seconds, the dagger had transformed into a massive sword. Aidan wasn’t impressed.

“Could you stop bringing her up?” he asked politely. “It’s annoying.”

“Why? Because she makes your heartache? She gives you those butterflies?”

“Butterflies?” Aidan sighed, putting a palm on his forehead again.

“You know, that fluttering feeling you get in your stomach when you’re in love?”

“That’s not it –”

“But you do looooooove her,” Ori laughed, expanding his sword even further, until it was larger than his entire body. Still, he kept it outstretched as if it possessed the exact weight of a dagger.

“Now that I think of it,” Aidan said through squinting eyes. “Bailey did say there were rumors about us being together. I wonder where she heard such things.”

“You’re not insinuating it was me, are you?” Ori said with an appalled look on his face. “I mean, why would I spy on you? It’s not like you’re this hot-headed risk that needs to be babysat because one wrong move and everything we’ve worked for is unraveled.”

“No,” Aidan smiled. “Of course not. I’m as harmless as a newborn kitten.”

“I know,” Ori smiled back. “That’s why this sparring session will end with your butt planted firmly on the ground.”

“You’ve never won a match between us.”

“Because I’ve held back.”

“You always say that,” Aidan said, letting a chuckle escape. He noticed that the other villagers in the field, young and old, had begun to back away, taking their manifestations and play to a safer distance. The last thing they wanted was the equivalent of having their sandcastle kicked over.

“Does that mean you can’t beat me?” Ori said, crouching low. He kept his sword close to his body now, forcing Aidan to stare back at himself in the blade’s reflective surface. “I’m ready for whatever you have to dish out.”

“If you’ve been holding back,” Aidan warned. “That means you won’t mind if I take this a little more seriously.”

“Of course not,” Ori’s voice quavered. Aidan opened the palm of his right hand, and the liquid fire began to leave the pores of his skin, seeping out in a concentrated mold until it had formed into a sword made of magma, about four feet in length. He cut off the flow abruptly, and the magma hardened, creating a black and red blade that was crude in design but still sharp enough to heavily damage flesh. He glanced over at Ori for his reaction.

“You’re really going to come at me with a sword?” Ori laughed. “After what you know about me?”

“Just because you wished to become a master swordsman with a blade you could manipulate by your imagination, that doesn’t mean I can’t overcome you. You’re still a product of Lowsunn’s teachings.”

“You keep saying stuff like that as if it makes me weak. Perhaps survival training here isn’t as extensive as being out in the field, but I was taught tactics. Strategy. You had to go off your emotions, which means you only know the situations you’ve actually experienced. You don’t know how to deal with a variety. Situations outside your personal life.”

“I’ve noticed that you’ve suddenly become serious,” Aidan observed, allowing more liquid fire to enter into his sword, refashioning it like a mystical blacksmith. He let the fire expand the sword’s surface outwards until it resembled a handheld folding fan in design, losing its previous shape entirely. Ori’s eyes smiled as Aidan continued.

“Did I hit a soft spot? Insulting the village you love so much?”

“Perhaps I want to prove its worth,” Ori replied. “That our experience and training here matter too.”

“Experience,” Aidan repeated calmly, looking down at the magma fan in his hand. “Training...Ori, all your training means nothing against an enemy who’s been in the thick of battle. Sometimes, logic doesn’t give you the power you need to get the job done. Sometimes the feeling, the instinct of having faced impossible odds, is all it will take for you to reach the next morning. On the outside, in the real world - we don’t look at it as a victory when we defeat an enemy or kill another human – we look at it as survival. We break down and weep and march forward on shaking, wobbling legs, just grateful that we made it through another day. It’s not a game like it is here. It’s our reality.”

“But I’m not your enemy,” Ori replied. “Not one bit.”

“And that’s why I’ve won every round...even when you stopped playing around and tried a crippling blow. You still don’t get it. Every blow has to be a killing one, or there’s no point to this. If you die here in this field, you were never ready for the real thing. So you’re actually better off. At least here, you won’t be tortured. You won’t be

subjected to the dark imaginations of others. You won't have to witness firsthand what sick minds can truly do with the Yen they possess."

"If that's true, then why am I not dead? Why haven't you killed me yet?"

"Because I never considered this real sparring. I've thought of you as a child...coming at me with a painfully dull wooden sword. If I had engaged you as I should have, we wouldn't be having this conversation."

Ori dropped his head and meditated on Aidan's words. Finally, he lifted his eyes and stared at him with a smile of victory on his face. Aidan shook his head. Why was he amused? There was nothing funny.

"I'm glad you've opened up to me for the first time," Ori said to Aidan's surprise. "I was wondering when you would. All the small talk, all those little snide remarks you made on our walks from class – they weren't you. That was an Aidan on his best behavior, appeasing my banter and dealing with my presence for Bailey's sake. I see the way the two of you interact. You don't mince words with her, so I knew you weren't taking me seriously...I can't tell you how happy I am right now."

"I just insulted you," Aidan stated.

"You just showed me how much you cared. You could have let this ruse continue until the day I died, probably on a scouting mission...but instead, you've finally given me the knowledge I needed to improve. I can prepare now. Deep down, you don't want to see me killed."

"Perhaps you're right," Aidan said thoughtfully. "Though I have no clue why."

"It's because we're growing on you. No matter what you've seen on the outside and what you've endured, even you realize that you don't have to be so hardened while you're here. You have the freedom to turn into the man you would have become under different circumstances."

"And what if that man is even worse than what you see now?" Aidan asked. "What if all that hardship merely kept my true nature at

bay? What if I'm a villain whose nature is being shackled down? What about that?"

"You're not evil," Ori said quickly. "Bailey wouldn't have brought you here otherwise."

"Or maybe she's brought home exactly what she needed. A weapon. Just waiting to be used."

"Well, then I'm telling you, from my perspective, it's not true. Are you lacking in tact? Yes. Violent? Yes. Angry? Of course. But you haven't been here long enough, even though it's already been years. You're still grappling with the pain of the outside world. Once you understand that you have friends, you can start to relax. You'll realize that we're on your side – that we're not the enemy...and if that doesn't persuade you, all I have to think about is the way you look at Leah. Then I know that deep down, you're just a big old softy with a hardened shell."

Aidan scowled and closed his eyes.

"Alright, Ori. Time to prepare yourself."

"You're not going to try to kill me just because I called you a softy, are you?"

"Just get ready."

"You make fun of me all the time. It's only fair I get to do it to you too."

"You brought up Leah again."

"Only because I know it gets you all gooey on the inside," Ori grinned. "You melt like chocolate."

"Go ahead. Keep it up. See what happens."

"I'm not the one getting butterflies whenever someone mentions her name."

"I don't get butterflies!" Aidan screamed. Ori just laughed at him.

"Your legs are probably all wobbly now. Knees knocking. Stomach just filled up with all of those fluttery little butter-"

Aidan threw the fan directly at Ori's head.

Ori pivoted and thrust his sword upward, cutting the fan in half, but as soon as it was split, it exploded. Shards of the fan burst out like fireworks in all directions at once, so fast that even Ori couldn't block all of them. He grunted as he was hit all over, the tiny hot shards piercing his legs and arms. As soon as Aidan saw that Ori

was momentarily distracted, he concentrated on the shards that were stuck in Ori's body, and they all exploded simultaneously, creating deep gashes in his arms and legs. Before he could recover from the attack, Aidan then shot out a beam of fire from the palm of his extended left hand. The flames were about to consume the swordsman when the trajectory was abruptly altered. It curved just as it was about to hit Ori's face and then shot up into the sky, the heat barely licking up against the swordsman's nose. Aidan cut off the beam from his hand and let the fight continue no further.

Ori fell backwards onto his back and dabbed at his wounds with trembling fingers as Aidan approached him.

"Aren't you going to help me up?" Ori groaned, examining the blood on his fingers. Aidan stared at him like he was a foreign object.

"Depends on if this session is complete."

"It's done," Ori said as he mentally told the gigantic sword at his side to turn back into a dagger. He placed it back into its scabbard and offered a clean hand to Aidan. Aidan lifted him to his feet.

"Can't say I've seen you use those tactics before," Ori winced, limping on his left leg. "Usually, it's just the burst of flames you shoot out from your hands."

"What you, no...what **we** must remember, is that battle is far different now than it was in the past. Previously, humans had limitations. If it was hand-to-hand combat, no matter how innovative one was in their attack, there were still a finite number of moves and combinations an individual could perform. Given that we all had the same composition, there were also a finite number of sensitive places that one could hit or have damaged. If someone brought a knife to a fight, even a child would understand the limitations of those objects. Bottom line, there were ways to get around each and every situation involving an opponent. You just had to understand what tactic to use in each particular instance. Back then, training – even militaristic training – was vital.

"But this is not the past. We have no idea what a person can do until they reveal the full extent of their abilities, and even then, it might be too late for us to react. Where once we would have killed someone by hitting their heart, they may have now turned it into living steel. Once, we could have focused on the weaknesses found



in the human body, but now they may no longer be available. I've seen people wish to become their own devised creations – creating whole new species, whole new anatomies to explore and understand. In the outside world, there is no structure, and there are no rules. It is a sandbox. A free space. An all-play. Imagination and creativity run wilder than ever before, and that means it's also the most dangerous place to be. There are an infinite number of scenarios to encounter. Have you faced an immortal? Have you fought against a human who still has three Yen and isn't afraid to use all three against you? No, you haven't. And neither have I, because everyone I've known who has is now dead. If you want even a chance of surviving, you can't just rely on your training. We don't have that luxury. You must react. Have your complete strategy already in place and ready to be implemented or altered in half a second. Then maybe you'll have a chance to see the next sunrise."

"Sheesh," Ori said, brushing his hands on his clothes. "Now I see what you're talking about...you and Bailey were really out there?"

"Unfortunately," Aidan said, letting his eyes fall to the grass. "That's why it's hard to just – go with the status quo here. Our mentors and teachers claim to know what life is and how to prepare for it – but their advice doesn't match the reality I've seen."

"Well, this was a very eye-opening session," Ori said, with no smile this time. "I'll be considering everything you've said. I'll do better next time. I promise you that."

"It's up to you. Sometimes I feel like I don't even know what I'm talking about, to be honest."

"No, good advice is good advice. So I'll consider it. It's when we can't even listen to one another that we truly lose ourselves. With that being said, may I offer you some?"

"Go ahead," Aidan said with a wary eye.

"Take Bailey's advice," he said. "Get with the program. As much as you're able. No matter what you believe or how passionately you believe it, you have to remember that this world is bigger than you. Your actions will have inconceivable consequences for us and generations to come. Pick your battles. I'm sure that even on the outside, it's the same. You might have to fight more often than you like out there, but there have to be a few fights that you can retreat

from or avoid altogether. I don't want to change who you are, Aidan. I'm just looking at the whole picture. What Bailey and I...what all three of us are trying to do – it's bigger than any one of us. So...do you think you can do that? Get on board?"

"I'll try my best," Aidan said, extending a hand towards him. "But from here on out, I'm coaching."

"Agreed," Ori said, taking the hand and shaking it vigorously. "An easy trade."

"If you don't mind then, I'm going to head out now. Going to see you know who."

"Right," Ori smiled. "But before you go, just tell me one thing. Those tactics back there. It didn't feel like there was emotion behind it. There was planning involved, no offense. Did you create that maneuver yourself? The whole fan exploding into pieces thing?"

"No, I learned it from someone."

"Who?"

"The man who murdered my little sister," Aidan said with no expression on his face. "My sister and I traveled together for a while after the Cataclysm happened. I was wounded and forced to watch her fight a man that had come to take her away. Said he wanted a young slave, and that it had to be a girl. Diana fought hard, and it looked like she might win, but...she had used her Yen already. He obviously had a lot of experience in facing combatants with Water Arts. I was about to use one of my seals to save her, but before I could, he performed the trick that you just witnessed, except it was one giant sword exploding into hundreds of smaller blades, not a fan into shards. She died instantly."

"What happened to you?" Ori asked, afraid of the answer.

"I became his slave," Aidan said flatly, staring straight into Ori's eyes. Ori wanted so desperately to look away. "Naturally, that didn't last long."

"Why do you use that technique?" Ori asked in disbelief.

"Especially considering the source?"

"Because like advice, a good technique is also a good technique," Aidan smiled. "Out there, we don't always have the luxury of morals."

Aidan walked away abruptly and left Ori in the field. Ori watched his friend's back and sighed heavily. He had wanted to go on a scouting mission so badly, but after hearing Aidan speak of the outside, suddenly, being inside Lowsunn's shields didn't sound so bad.



## Chapter 4 – Higher Learning



**N**o one was forced to attend every survival class in Lowsunn, but it was strongly encouraged. Even the most boring classes had valuable insight into the outside world that each and every graduate would one day have the pleasure – or horror – of experiencing first hand. The village was more like a train station than a town in that no one could permanently stay for sure, except for the Elders who had built the place.

No one simply arrived at the village's doorsteps and got in, of course. It wouldn't still be standing if that were the case. Most got in through referrals from the Elders. Back when the Elders were mentors and went on scouting missions, they had found new and promising candidates while in the outside world. Safety and comfort were precious then, so few fought against the wishes of their benefactors. But every so often, discontent arose. Though there was little action, no one could deny that candidates with two or more wishes were preferred over those with one. They were given preferential treatment and ensured that they would receive the best that Lowsunn had to offer. Such simple observation brought on suspicion, but silence would still grip the voices of the discontent. This did not extend to Bailey, however.

Bailey was not one to be silent.

"If you have any chance out there," Bailey shouted aloud in the classroom. "You need to study the information acquired from the scouting missions. Knowledge is the only thing that separates you from life and death. Once you know your enemy and, more importantly, their abilities, then you can formulate countermeasures. Take out your pencils, and don't you dare tell me you left them at the cabins. I remembered to bring ten. Surely you managed one."

The class shuffled around in their small fanny packs as Aidan leaned back in his creaking chair. He watched Bailey pace behind her desk, her head down in concentration. Occasionally she would

grab one of the several pencils on the surface of her desk and begin chewing on the end.

They were back in the one-room schoolhouse, now with the desk/chair combos that Bailey was fond of. Although they were far more comfortable than the pews or the stools that Mr. Young used, Aidan was surprised that Bailey had not been accommodated better. Perhaps she had requested no special treatment to better blend in with the teaching staff. Who knows. She was mysterious like that.

“Can I borrow a pencil?” one student asked another in the back. The room was so empty and bare besides the students and their desks that even the whisper echoed, but Bailey gave no sign she had heard the innocent request. Aidan sighed and closed his eyes while he waited. He hadn’t brought a writing utensil, but he didn’t need it. Being in the wild had taught him that you had to remember everything yourself. You couldn’t refer to notes in the heat of battle.

“Where’s your pencil?” Bailey finally asked the student in the back, as if the echo had made a loop around the room and finally reached her ears.

“I left it on my couch at home,” he said quickly. The waver in his voice was undeniable.

“If it was your weapon, would you have left it behind?”

“No, Ma’am.”

“Then why a pencil?”

“Because it’s not important. It’s just a pencil.”

“So you’re telling me that you can remember everything I’m about to say?”

“I’ll do my best.”

“That’s not good enough. Stand up!” she barked. He shot up to attention, and Aidan decided to peer backward. It was George. A new student to the class that probably wouldn’t bother attending again after Bailey made an example out of him. There were few enough students there as it was.

“How many Yen do you have, George?”

“Um...two.”

“Two currently, or have you already used one?”

“I used one.”

“Then you have one Yen left, Couch. Your laziness reminds me of a couch. Do you mind if I call you Couch, George?”

“I don’t mind.”

“That’s because you’re a piss stain. You’re the residue of someone relieving themselves. Do you mind if I call you piss stain?”

“I’d rather you didn’t.”

“Couch, can you make your way over to the front? I have several writing utensils here on the desk.”

He was fuming as he obeyed the teacher’s command, muttering “excuse me” as he navigated around the other students. When he finally made his way to Bailey, she placed her hands on her hips and stared him down like he was a fly daring to invade her space. Surprisingly, George was not backing down from her glare. Aidan and the other regulars tough enough to survive Bailey’s hazing snickered in anticipation.

“You want me to shut up, don’t you, Couch?” she sneered. George balled up a fist.

“I do,” he said through grit teeth. A murmur went throughout the classroom.

“Then hit me...stain.” George leaped forward, aiming his left fist straight for Bailey’s face, but her reflexes were like a crack of a whip. She reached behind her, grabbed a pencil from the desk, and slammed it as hard as she could through his balled-up fist. The few students there winced in response, and a scream of unbridled agony erupted from George. He shrieked in pain as he clutched his trembling hand, blood already seeping from the wound. Bailey didn’t soothe him or even send him to the infirmary. She just grabbed his collar and yanked him towards her until his face was right in hers.

“That pencil just cut your assault short, Couch. Suddenly, that little pole of lead doesn’t seem so innocent, does it? It almost feels like a weapon. Now that I’ve made myself clear, don’t even think about going to the infirmary until my lesson is over. If you leave before then, I don’t ever want to see you come back. You hear me?”

“I heard about you,” he said lowly just as she let him go. She scowled and leaned her ear in close.

“I’m sorry, did you say something?”

“I said that I heard about you,” George replied boldly, raising his head. “You intimidate your students because you still want to be in power. I heard you used to be an Elder and you lost the job. Probably because you’re a psychopath.”

The classroom went deathly silent.

“No,” she answered. “I intimidate them because they need to have a steel resolve. People take my class to prepare for the scouting missions that may come their way in the future. If they can’t take my heat, they have no right to be walking outside these walls. A recommendation from me to the Elders grants special consideration. I’m sure this is the reason you’re here now, is it not?”

“Don’t try to run away from this,” George huffed, still clutching his wounded hand, his face reddening. “You want to make an example out of me? You want to act like I’m helpless just because we’re inside the shields? What if I was to show you what I could do right now?”

“You want to fight me, Piss Stain?” Bailey laughed as the rest of the room chuckled with her. George’s face became redder as he nearly began crying.

“When I walked in here, I was afraid of you,” he said through grit teeth. “But I’m not anymore. All I want to do is make you feel what you’ve done to me.”

“Good. That’s the point,” Bailey said. “You can’t let fear grip you.”

“Do you know what I can do?”

“Couch, please. Stop trying to make this dramatic. Go back to your seat.”

“I control the wind,” he said ominously as the entire classroom felt a breeze rustle past their feet. The wind kept circling the floor, over and over, brushing the dust and crumpled papers until it had developed into a gust and then transformed into a miniature tornado. The students kept their hands fastened to their creaking oak seats, though it wasn’t because they were concerned for their safety. They just wanted to keep watching the show. The only person in the room George wanted was their teacher, so they weren’t worried for themselves.

Bailey smiled as the winds were purposely directed at her. They picked her up off her feet until she was about a yard off the ground,



and then the assault began.

George forced her limp body to circle around the room like a rag doll, banging her against the students' desks and occasionally into the walls. Eventually, George grew weary of the smile planted on her face and decided to wipe it off. Circling his extended hands in front of him like he was casting a magic spell, he ordered the winds to bring her back toward the front and slam into the wall at his side. She winced upon impact but kept the smile up. He grunted and ordered her body to be slammed against the other end of the room, and she hit it even harder. This time her eyes closed, and the grin lost some of its hold. **One more**, George thought. **One more will do.**

He forced her back to the other wall, but she never reached it. Just as her body passed by him and the teacher's desk, he felt three sharp pricks hit the back of his head. The sudden sensation threw off his concentration, and Bailey landed on her feet as the winds died abruptly. Wasting no time, she sprinted forward, yanked the pencil from his aching hand, and then stabbed it swiftly through the side of his neck. His eyes lit up in shock at the movement, and she followed through with a swift punch to his left cheek before he could react, sending his head into her desk, knocking him out cold. She caught his head in the palm of her hand before it could fall to the floor.

Looking down at her handiwork, she snapped her fingers with her free hand, and a healer ran forward. He rubbed his hands together, and a light blue aura erupted over his palms. Bailey took the pencils carefully from George's throat, and the back of his head as the healer placed his palms over the wounds.

"Do you want me to heal his hand as well?" he asked.

"No, Elias, he still needs to feel that wound as a reminder." Elias nodded and continued healing George's neck. Once he was finished, Elias went back to his seat. Bailey nodded toward another student, who sent the equivalent of a bucket of water into George's face, right from the palm of her hand. George shot up at attention, sputtering and trying to climb back onto his feet, but he kept on slipping. After a couple of seconds had passed, he winced and clutched his wounded hand again.

"You still got something to say to me?" Bailey asked, leaning in close to his face. George shook his head, and she reached a hand

out to him. He took it, and she helped him climb to his feet. “Now go back to your seat, or get out of my classroom. It’s up to you.”

“You’re going to let me stay after I tried to kill you?”

“I am. You got a problem with that?”

“No...no,” George muttered as he staggered back to his seat.

Bailey adjusted her shirt and then addressed the class.

“Someone tell me what just happened.” She pointed to a raised hand.

“You used George’s Wind Arts against him,” a middle-aged woman replied. “He was so focused on hurting you that he didn’t see you pick up pencils off our desks as you were thrown around the room. And as he began slamming you against the walls, you threw the pencils into the air at the right moment. The velocity turned the pencils into miniature daggers, and he didn’t notice them flying toward the back of his head. Once he was injured, you used the moment to incapacitate him.”

“Very good, Samantha,” Bailey nodded. “Anything else, class?” She pointed to another raised hand.

“I have a question, actually,” an elderly man replied. “Two, to be honest. Why did you let George pick you up in the first place? And two, why didn’t you act as soon as the pencils were in hand? It seems to me that you were taking some big risks.”

“That would have been a reckless move in the field,” Bailey nodded. “And I wouldn’t recommend it. Sorry for that. However, there are still lessons to be learned today. Part of winning against your opponent is knowing your enemy. Have you ever played a game with someone? Perhaps sparred with a friend? Participated in a competition against a rival? What happens? Eventually, you become accustomed to your opponent’s strengths and weaknesses. You know their habits and ticks, what they can’t do and when they perform best. Now, we may not have the benefits of trial and error on the outside, but we can take calculated guesses. For example, I have seen many with George’s power. This is why we have labels such as Fire Arts or Wind Arts. Because we understand that although someone can wish for whatever they like, their desires are closer to others than they would care to admit. This is simply a part of evaluating our enemies. Furthermore, I’ve also seen many with

attitudes like George's. Arrogant, but afraid of being cut down. This means that they aren't as confident as they pretend to be. It only takes a small surprise to throw off their focus. I used this to my advantage.

"He wanted to hurt me badly, but he was still unsure if he could actually go through with it, unsure of what my abilities were. I knew he would be cautious at first, using intimidation to feel me out. I let his game proceed on his terms. Once he began increasing the intensity, that's when I focused on my goal of retrieving the pencils from your desks. But I knew I only had one shot at getting it right, so I decided to let him go further. I let him slam me against the walls, and yes, it hurt. But I sucked it up. Once his bloodlust was in full swing, he was blind. The rest was simple execution. Could I have taken him out from the beginning? Sure. But now, we have all learned something from his foolishness. He now respects me more, and he'll be more careful from now on, both inside the village and out."

"He'll also want to kill you even more," Aidan spoke up. "And since you've explained how you got out of his winds, he'll be even deadlier next time."

"Good." Bailey smiled.

"Why would you say that out loud?" George whined. Aidan turned around and smiled.

"Bailey encourages us to try to take her down whenever we please. It keeps us thinking, and it keeps her on her toes. But before you start attacking her daily, know this – she hasn't been beaten yet. And that...is without a single ability at her disposal."

"That's right," Bailey said, rolling up the long sleeve of her right arm, revealing not one, not two, but three Yen, still in place, still intact.

The class nodded in agreement as George's eyes widened in disbelief.

"But how –" he began, but she put a finger to her lips and shushed him.

"A tale for another time," she said. "We must continue."

Bailey cleared her throat and began pacing behind her desk again while the class reset into learning mode.

“Now, to continue where we left off yesterday, we were discussing the importance of knowledge. Here in Lowsunn, we try to relay to you as much as we possibly can. From recent reports we’ve procured from the scouting missions, we can inform you of some of the societies and individuals making big news. We will discuss societies another time, but I want to elaborate on some of these individuals. Write these names down.” The students got their pencils and paper ready. “There is a sorcerer named Mage who uses children as a catalyst to increase the potency of his spells. Does anyone have any ideas on how this is possible? Besides the whole ‘he used a Yen’ thing that the common folk throw out.”

“He may be harnessing the energy within humans,” the elderly man replied. “Perhaps a Yen he used enables him to turn a human into a raw substance. He then takes the substance to his lair or whatever and infuses it into his spells.”

“But wouldn’t that require the use of a second Yen?” Samantha asked. “The first Yen being his spell casting, the second being the infusing? We’re supposed to be coming up with alternative solutions.”

“It depends on what the Judge said when Mage asked for his abilities,” Bailey interjected. George raised his hand. “Yes, George?”

“What’s this discussion all about? Why are we discussing the particulars of one’s Yen? Isn’t knowing what he can do enough?”

“If there’s one thing we learned since Advent,” the elderly man answered, sitting up in his seat. “It’s that use of Yen is more complicated than we like to think it is. First, the Judge alone decides if the wish we make will be fulfilled. This alone raises a host of questions. But furthermore, there are multiple levels to any ability that one can get through Yen. It’s kind of hard to explain but –”

“I got this,” Aidan said, standing to his feet. Bailey walked over to a corner of the room to watch as he stood in front of the teacher’s desk. “Observe.”

“Wait,” George said. “You don’t care if I see your abilities? Wouldn’t that put you at a disadvantage if we fight?”

“No,” Aidan said calmly. “I doubt it would.”

“What makes you so arrogant? How do you know?”

“I’m not trying to sound egotistical,” Aidan replied, glaring at the wounded student. “Listen, you wouldn’t understand if I told you. Just watch for now.”

Bailey snickered from the corner as Aidan stretched his palms forward. Miniature flames sat stationary within each of them.

“When I used my Yen, I said that I wished to be protected from the fire. One might think that I would have just been given a type of invisible aura that keeps me safe from flames or heat for the rest of my life, but more came of it. I’m not just unaffected by fire; I can also use it as an attack. I can literally shoot it from my hands, manipulate it, increase its intensity. If I try hard enough, I can create an effect similar to a solar flare. All of these uses might be based on fire. But they are still far more involved than the words I uttered long ago.”

“We believe the Judge has the power to peer into us,” Samantha said to George. “Instead of sitting there with him, explaining in detail what we want, he already knows all the details and subsequently grants what we truly desired from the beginning. Of course, this is all conjecture.”

“I don’t understand,” George replied. “Why are you all telling me this? I thought you guys would shun me after what I tried to do to Ms. Waters.”

“It’s Bailey,” Samantha corrected. “And the moment you decided to stay in the class rather than run to the nurse, you became one of us.”

“For better or worse,” the elderly man chuckled.



“AIDAN, WHY ARE WE HERE?” Leah asked as she placed her hands on her hips. She was standing next to one of the hundreds of luxurious tables in the Western Restaurant. The fanciest and most expensive restaurant in the village. Many villagers saved their Lowsunn dollars, known as Lodulls, for years – just to have one meal at the place where the Elders and their families dined daily. Dimly lit with soft, classical music whispering across the room, the romantic vibes that welcomed you at the door were unparalleled. There was a well-dressed and groomed staff that treated you like royalty, and

decadent food that was created by a chef that had used his Yen to perfect his craft. Aidan had wanted to take Leah somewhere that he knew she would enjoy. He was tired of the pained faces she gave whenever she swallowed some of the mush in the dining commons.

Because of the cost, only a few other couples were scattered throughout the corners of the room. In the middle, Aidan could see a few friends that had pooled their Lodulls together to gain this coveted experience.

“Why are we together in public like this?” Leah asked as Aidan sat down across from her. He took the napkin from the table and placed it in his lap.

“Is this how it’s supposed to go?” he asked as Leah glanced around the room.

“You don’t care if my father finds out about us?”

“Nope,” Aidan replied, examining what was, in his mind, an excessive number of spoons and forks. “Not really.”

“Why the sudden change in heart?”

“We’re doing nothing wrong. There are no rules against an Elder’s child dating others. Besides, it’s our anniversary.” Aidan said it casually as he examined the menu, glancing at it like he had been at the restaurant many times. “I want Mrs. Serafino to have the best.”

“You think you’re so smooth,” Leah shook her head as she studied him. “But you do know that even though we’re practically alone, the fact that there are a couple of people here guarantees that there will be rumors circulating.”

“There are already rumors,” Aidan said, closing the menu. “Now, what will you be getting? I’m definitely ordering the duck marsala over wild mushrooms and krillian rice.”

“That’s the most expensive thing on the menu!” Leah said in shock, glancing down at the options. “Where did you get that kind of money?”

“I beat up a LOT of people,” Aidan said. Leah couldn’t help but laugh.

“You’re bad, but you’re not *that* bad,” Leah said with a smile. The waiter came and took their orders. Though he was surprised to see the two of them together, he didn’t say a word. No doubt, he went back to the kitchen in a hurry to relay what he had just seen. Aidan

hoped it wouldn't affect the speed of their meals coming out. He had already threatened a good number of people to be allowed inside the restaurant. Threatening a few more wasn't beneath him.

"So this is all for an anniversary, huh?" Leah asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Of course. Why is taking you out on a date so bad?"

"Because you seem...I don't know. Content."

"I wasn't happy before?"

"Let me put it this way. Even when we are together, as happy as I make you, you're still thinking of other things. Whether it's the outside world or whatever you do in secret. There's this weight that I can't get off of you, no matter how hard I rub your shoulders."

"I realized that there's no use brooding while I'm here. Not when I can actually relax for once. I've been waiting for danger to come, but I constantly forget that we're shielded from it. And it's not like we're here forever. So I should enjoy my time with you before we're thrown out. I don't want this to be all about me. I want you to be happy too."

"I am happy."

"Not happy enough," Aidan said. "I want you to be ecstatic, happy. Hyper happy."

"That's kind of hard considering we're at a place that wants to train us to be soldiers, even if they have no clue how to do it."

"I've been selfish," Aidan said abruptly. "I realize that. It's been so long since I could just let my guard down and enjoy life. I've kept you down with me. I want to make things right, starting right now, and that's why...I have a present for you."

"Oh geez," Leah giggled as she leaned in closer, elbows on the table. Aidan extended his hand out to the right, palm down, and then slowly, what appeared to be a thin rectangular stick came from his hand. Once it was done manifesting, it was over three feet long. He grabbed the end and stretched it out like a wand to his right, out into the air. In the next second, it opened up and revealed itself for what it really was: A handheld bladed fan, pitch-black in color. Leah stared in awe as he handed it to her.

"It's for you," he said. She rubbed her fingers against its surface and gave him a wary look. "I've heard of this...it's familiar."

Aidan smirked and nodded slightly as she admired it.

“But that comes from the Land of the Bones!” her eyes widened in realization. “Most of it was destroyed in Advent.”

“I had to search for it deep within the earth and pull it up through a long process of lava bursts and erosion. It wasn’t easy, but I gathered enough to retrieve it. It’s sharper than a lot of the blades you’ll find around here. I’ll have a second one for you in a couple months.”

“It’s beautiful,” she said, holding it high up above her. “It looks very sharp.”

“Sharper than you know.”

“Oh, my dear husband,” Leah cooed, folding up the fan and placing it at her feet. “So sweet. Retrieving me a weapon that can kill people on our anniversary. Well, while we’re here, I have some news for you as well. I’ve begged my dad to sign me up for scouting missions, and he’s finally agreed.”

“I see,” Aidan replied. He cast his eyes down at the table as Leah leaned forward to examine the strange expression on his face.

“I thought you would be happy to hear that. We could make that run if you wanted. Just you and me. I could find an opportunity to get away from the group, and you would just join me when you could.”

“When the time is right,” he said, looking into her eyes.

“I take it you don’t know when that time is.”

“I don’t. Sorry.”

“Is the reason you want to stay here really because you want to spend more time with me in luxury or because you have more business to take care of?”

“Both,” he said truthfully. “We’ll go soon, though. I promise.”

“Sometimes I don’t understand what you want at all,” Leah sighed, sitting back in her chair. Aidan felt a pang in his stomach as he saw her tense up. She had signed up for the scouting missions for him, and once again, he was making their time together more burdensome than it needed to be.

“Leah, can I ask you something?” Aidan said, standing up and walking over to her. She looked up at him and smiled, wondering what he could possibly ask next.

“Sure,” she said. The way her lips pursed when she said it made him go crazy with desire, but he held back. He continued staring at



her lips as he spoke.

“Will you go to the dance with me tomorrow night?”

“The dance?!” She laughed heartily. “You mean the one in the grand hall?”

“That one. Yes.”

“You hate social gatherings. So why would you go to the biggest one of the year?”

“Because I want to dance with you.”

“You don’t know how to dance, Aidan.”

“I can try...and I’ll kill anyone that laughs.”

“I don’t want to go incognito,” she said with a twinkle in her eye. “If we do this, I want to tell everyone that we’re a couple.”

“Sure,” Aidan smiled, knowing full well it was going to make Bailey furious. “You can even tell them we’re married.”

“Oh, I’m not going to give my dad a heart attack,” Leah laughed. “But he can definitely know that we’re dating. Are you absolutely sure? There’s going to be a lot of people wanting to talk to us. To you.”

“I look forward to it,” Aidan said in a monotonous voice. She laughed and waved him towards her. She placed a hand on his cheek and pulled him close until their lips were just about to meet. Then she stopped to speak to him. Her breath was sweet and seductive, pouring into his body like it was a crippling love potion. He no longer heard the clanging of pans in the kitchen or the whispers of the waiting staff nearby. The light went fuzzy and everything in sight blurred except her. Just her. She leaned in a millimeter closer and breathed into his lips once more.

“I love you, Aidan.” The words were like an incantation, and in the next second, he lost himself. He had to kiss her, and he didn’t care if her father walked in and saw it. He embraced her and clutched her tight, his hands running through her hair as their lips pressed against each other, harder and harder, trying to part but unable to succeed. He could feel his love for her pour into him like a waterfall, washing out all the anger and hate, breaking up the horrible memories of his past and sifting through them like currents of water. The memories became diluted and began to spread out and disappear.

Suddenly, new thoughts emerged.

Thoughts of them having a public, formal wedding in which he could declare his love for her. A humble little house that they could claim as their own in the outside world – they could even place a shield over it like the one that protected Lowsunn. If he didn't have to fight anymore, he would surely use a Yen for that purpose.

He wondered what her hair would look like as they grew old. If it would turn grey or silver, maintain its icy blue or contain a mix of the two. He wondered what their children would look like, which parent they would resemble in face and spirit, how many Yen they would be burdened and blessed with. He wondered what pure bliss felt like, what not having to fight or stress out over every step into unknown territory felt like. But, most of all, he asked if those things were really possible.

He felt the world spin around him and felt the smile of her lips forming beneath his kiss. As long as Leah was there, the world hadn't completely lost its shine.



## Chapter 5 – What Matters



“**M**any of the people in this village are living a fantasy,” Bailey said as her class took down notes, excluding Aidan, of course. She continued pacing around the front of the room. “This is not to say that you are all the better than they. But at least you understand that there is more to this new era than Yen and hopes and dreams and rainbows and raindrops and all that poetic garbage. We bear what others cannot. And that is why you must study these characters as much as possible. The next exam may sound like a game, but what will happen is that I will be pretending to be one of these individuals. Verbally, and in some instances, through demonstration, you must show me how you can handle the situations I throw at you. Fair marks on this test will result in recommendations by me, to the board of Elders, for scout missions, which I’m sure all of you are looking forward to. We will have our review today, but tomorrow night, I want each of you to meet me in the Field of Visions at 8 p.m. instead of our normal class time. I understand there is a dance tonight?”

The class murmured and nodded as she waited for a reaction.

“Okay, then we will cut today’s session early so that you may prepare for tomorrow and attend the event. Enjoy yourselves if you are going, but remember the test. Now, does anyone need me to list off the names again?”

More murmurs.

“Okay, take this down: Gamer, Mage, Jinx, The Immortal – remember that we don’t know his real name, and while there are other immortals out there, we will just refer to him with this designation for now. Let me continue: Orion, Necrosis, General Yen, and the Judge. These are high profile individuals that we know about, and I want each of –”

“Excuse me,” the elderly man interrupted.

“Yes, Ticker?” Bailey asked.

“Why the Judge? How can we fight against the being who gave us our Yen in the first place?”

“Just because a man claims to be a god, it doesn’t mean he is one. Am I right?” she asked.

“You’re right,” he said. “But...I hardly think that whoever draws him will pass the exam.”

“That’s up to me to decide. Just study what you know about him until tomorrow.”

“Okay.”

“Does anyone else have any major questions about the people on this list?” The crowd shook their heads, and Bailey placed a fist on her hip. “Then class dismissed. Get together and role play a little if you think it will help. Have fun tonight, and be safe. Aidan, can you stay after class for a moment?”

Aidan nodded as the others packed up. Once they left, Bailey motioned for him to rise from his seat.

“When in private, we are equals, **Tallawah**,” she said as he stood. “There is no need to stay in a seat of submission.”

“What is it you wanted to talk about?” he asked, thinking of the dinner he had with Leah.

“I may need you tonight. The Dance of Yesterday is the biggest event of the year. The Elders all make public appearances and nearly 90% of the population will be in attendance. We’ll have ample opportunity to get some business done.”

“It may be quiet around their homes, but the Elders aren’t stupid. They’ll have guards keeping their most cryptic files protected.”

“Even so, this is a chance we can’t afford to miss.”

“I promised Leah that I would take her,” Aidan said bluntly. “And I don’t want to break my promise.”

“No longer pretending you’re single?”

“We plan on going as a couple.”

“You did hear the part where I said the Elders were going to be there, right? This includes her father. You’ll cause a riot.”

“Or a diversion,” Aidan smiled. Bailey couldn’t help but laugh.

“You say that as if it were your original intention. But you may actually be on to something. No one would dare miss a spectacle of that magnitude.”

“So I can go to the dance? You and Ori can handle the espionage?”

“We will,” she said. “But don’t expect this to happen often.”

“Thank you, Bailey.”

“So...going public. That is quite serious. You really care for this girl?”

“I love her,” he said unashamedly. Bailey was taken back in surprise, and she put a hand to her chest.

“My, you said that with no hesitation.”

“There’s no reason to have any.”

“I can’t say that I’m not a little jealous. Not of you, of course. Just the relationship that you say you have. I have yet to meet the girl formally, but I suspect she feels the same.”

“We’re married, actually.”

“What? How? When?” Bailey cried out in a mixture of joy, intrigue, and grief.

“Privately, of course.” Aidan laughed at seeing Bailey so off guard. “We had one of the villagers do it. He wasn’t a priest, so I don’t know if that makes it legal – I don’t even know how one gets married in this era, to be honest...but we did.”

“Who is the villager?” she asked with concern.

“He died the next day in a scouting mission, so it doesn’t matter.”

“I see.”

“I know it happened fast, but I’ve never been more serious about anything in my life.”

“I believe you, **Tallawah**,” Bailey replied. “When you make up your mind about something, it stays there until the bitter end.”

“A trait I picked up from you.”

“Flattery won’t get you any secrets to tomorrow’s exam,” she winked. “You are going to study, aren’t you?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. I’m sure I’ve got it handled.”

“Don’t let yourself be overconfident. There will be some twists. And I want you to do well. I also want you to consider going on the missions.”

“Why?” Aidan raised his eyebrow. “I thought I was supposed to keep a low profile.”

“I’ve been getting anxious,” Bailey admitted. “And restless. There has been word that the Elders are beginning to take a closer look at me. I may even get a teacher evaluation soon, which, as you know, is quite rare. I don’t know why they’ve taken a sudden interest, but I’m worried that my senses are getting dull by being inside all the time. I’m considering going on some away missions myself. I would love it – if you came with me.”

“You can handle yourself,” he said.

“There is no one I trust more than you,” she said. “And though I am strong, I think we both realize that we would have been killed out there without each other. The scouting missions may be more confined to specific areas that are rarely as dangerous as the village likes to make it sound. Still, I would feel better knowing that you were there.”

“I’ll have to think about it. I was just starting to get used to the idea of laying low – enjoying not having to fight. I want to be able to relax with Leah, not make her worry about whether I’m coming back alive or not.”

“Then come with me,” she said. “Part of it may be my anxiety, but it will also give us a chance to find out more about what goes on behind the scenes here. We can interview the locals, get their insight and see if there’s any shadiness. The sooner we can confirm that the board of Elders is who they say they are, the sooner we can all relax.”

“Did you ever think that maybe the reason you suspect there’s corruption going on behind the scenes is that you’re afraid of losing control? I don’t mean to insult you – but once you lost your seat, you lost your voting power. You also lost access to a great deal of sensitive information. You’re a strong woman, but even I can’t deny that you like things a certain way. Your way.”

“Because I want to make sure things are done right.”

“This may be true, but that doesn’t mean you’re not wrong. The Elders now are the same ones you were on the board with in the past. Aren’t they trustworthy?”

“To an extent,” she said. “But...Aidan, people change. Beliefs change. One minute, they could think of the world as a land of peace and opportunity. One event happens in their lives, and suddenly,

they want our entire race to die. We are ever-evolving, fickle creatures trying to balance the tightrope of light and darkness every day. All it takes is for one little push to knock us off onto one side or the other.”

“But it’s not our job to babysit or force someone to do what we believe is proper. You’re here to teach us – to prepare us for a cruel world that hands nothing to no one. You’re here to give us the tools and manuals we need to make our own decisions and our own mistakes. Nothing more.”

“But we must think of the flip side as well. Throughout history, we have trusted those in power to handle business. To do right by us, the people...and can you tell me how many followed through? Name a couple.”

Aidan paused to think. “I can’t.”

“Neither can I. Usually, the ones who strive to serve the people are in small positions of power or are isolated exceptions.”

“So if you were in power, would you follow through? Would you be different?”

“Would you?”

“I would like to think so,” Aidan said.

“And so would I.”

“What if you’re wrong, though? What if you uncover nothing, and all this does is fracture Lowsunn? Will it be worth it? Knowing that you had a hand in its fall?”

“If everything is as it should be, there should be no reason for a fall.”

Aidan sighed and folded his hands into his sleeves. It wasn’t that he didn’t believe in what Bailey was trying to accomplish; it was just that she wasn’t sure herself if there was really anything wrong – she was merely acting upon a hunch. Lowsunn was one of the longest-standing communities since the Cataclysm (or what Lowsunn called Advent). Despite the numerous attempts from the outside world to break into their haven, no one had been able to. With such an army of Yen-possessing individuals at Lowsunn’s disposal, anyone who thought of attacking the village had to think twice.

Was it worth disrupting all of that security just to confirm whether or not the Elders had good intentions? The populace wasn’t stupid.



Obviously, it was suspicious how the board decided how they should use their personal Yen. But then there was the assumption that it really was for the greater good. After all, wasn't this the point of having people in charge? To enable them to make the hard decisions that a sole person would struggle to make themselves? Wasn't this the point of teachers and students? Bosses and employees? Parents and children? So that one could teach the other to make informed, intelligent decisions that would benefit society as a whole?

Still, Bailey had never been wrong when it came to her hunches. So perhaps it was better to go along with her instincts until something suspect (if ever) popped up.

"I trust you, Bailey," Aidan replied after a long pause. "And I hope that you're right."

"You'll see," she said, her face and body relaxing at the reply. "Now go get ready. Time for you to meet the parents."



ANYBODY PEEKING OUTSIDE their window that night could immediately tell that there was a big event going on in Lowsunn – not that anybody was actually home to do so. The village was attending the dance in droves, walking in mobs across the town center to head to the grand hall, situated in the northeast. The dance of Yesterday was the one event of the year in which starry-eyed couples and groups of friends could forget about training and worry only about having fun. The music blared from invisible loudspeakers, basking the village in its majestic boom. A mixture of trombones and horns, violins and saxophones, drums and guitars blared into the air. The Lowsunn band, having used their Yen to create visual, musical masterpieces, played passionately and loudly. They created streams of colors that circled up into the air, spiraling into a tighter and tighter tunnel until they finally exploded in the night sky, forming a display of fireworks that rocked the buildings. Nothing could take the village's eyes off the majestic spectacle...nothing, except for the identity of the woman who was on Aidan's arm.

"People are really staring," Leah whispered to him as she leaned into his ear. Aidan snickered and glanced around. They were in the

midst of a crowd heading towards the dance, but all eyes and contorted necks were straining to take a peek. How the “bad boy” of the village gained the favor of one of the Elder’s daughters was prime gossip, and everyone was trying to overhear details of the scoop.

“Let them stare,” Aidan replied finally, turning his attention to the front. “Unless you’re having second thoughts. This won’t get any easier once your father knows.”

“Don’t I know it,” Leah laughed nervously. “I feel like the music will stop abruptly, and people will start fainting.”

“I’m not that ugly,” he winked to her, and she just held his arm tighter. A few low gasps were heard throughout the mob. There was no question over who Leah was with. Aidan was wearing the same robe he loved so much, and Leah was easily identifiable. Leah was wearing a glittery, elegant gown that matched her hair’s color. The strapless dress held itself up at her shoulders and extended down into a lavish array that was of bridal quality. The only strange addition to her lovely gown was a holster strapped to her back, housing an obscure, thin object inside it—the fan Aidan gave her.

“Maybe they’re gasping because you wouldn’t wear a tux to a formal event,” Leah laughed.

“I’m sure that’s what it is,” Aidan said as he noticed someone angrily approaching them from his left.

“Greetings,” the black-haired boy said, his massive fists clenched tightly. “I notice you have Leah on your arm.” A couple of similarly aged villagers, sporting spiked Mohawks, joined their friend. Aidan, Leah, and the intruders stopped walking as the rest of the crowd continued forward, taking silent bets on what would happen next. Aidan smiled, took his arm from Leah, and then wrapped it around her back, hugging her hips tightly and pressing her side up against his. She pursed her lips into a curt smile and then leaned rapturously onto his arm. The black-haired boy grit his teeth.

“Why are you with this hot head?” he asked her. Leah gave no reply. She knew Aidan had enough to say for the both of them.

“She said yes when I asked her out,” Aidan replied, softening his face. “Simple as that.”

“Yeah, right.”

“No, it’s true. It’s not my fault you took forever to do it. Maybe you would have had a chance if you didn’t stay up all night rehearsing your poetry.”

“Be nice,” Leah said, smacking a hand on Aidan’s chest. He nodded and continued.

“But don’t worry. I’m not going to harm her,” Aidan smirked. “I don’t hurt women. Just prepubescent boys who claim to be men. You’re not one of those, are you?”

“You think that because you’ve lived out there, you’re tough,” the black-haired boy spat, inching closer to Aidan’s face. “But I’ve seen guys like you before. You never last. Because you’re not strong enough to take it.”

“Take what?” Aidan scoffed. “The rules? The uniformity? The relaxation?”

“The discipline. Your kind always gets banished. If it wasn’t for Bailey covering for you, you wouldn’t even be here tonight. I would watch my back from here on out if I were you.”

“Well,” Aidan chuckled. “I have this lovely lady on my arm to watch it for me. Personally, I like to take a more direct approach.” In the next second, Aidan ripped himself from Leah’s embrace and grabbed the black-haired kid’s right hand. His friends started moving forward to intervene, but Leah had already procured her new fan in hand, the blades staring each of them in the face. The black-haired kid went to punch Aidan with his free hand when he suddenly stopped. Aidan caught the punch, and the attacker stared down at his clasped palm, so red it was as if it had been sitting in a fire. He slowly glanced back up into Aidan’s eyes.

“I wouldn’t move if I were you,” Aidan replied with a steady voice. “One wrong move and I could set you ablaze.”

“You wouldn’t do that. You would be expelled.”

“So would you...technically. What’s your name?”

“Trevor.”

“And how do I know you, Trevor? You look familiar.”

“I used to be in Bailey’s class.”

“Oh yeah, that’s right. Didn’t make it past day one.”

“Everyone who isn’t there now didn’t make it past their first day.”

“Good point. But let me ask you something. Do you know what happens next, Trevor?”

“You set me on fire.”

“Is that what you want?”

“No.”

“Good. Because I don’t want to. You see that beautiful woman over there with the bladed fan?”

“Don’t ask stupid questions,” Trevor spat. Aidan raised the intensity of the heat coursing through Trevor’s hand. He winced and squinted his eyes. “Sorry. Sorry. I see her.”

“She’s my wife,” Aidan declared for all in earshot to hear. A few walking past halted for a moment in shock but then hurried forward, ready to pass along the information. Trevor, however, seemed to gain more of a reason to hit his captor.

“That’s a lie,” he said, his face tightening at the center. “And if it were true, you probably coerced Leah into it.”

“Afraid not,” Leah laughed. “It’s true.”

“But why?” Trevor asked in disbelief. Aidan took his free hand and pressed it against Trevor’s cheek, guiding his eyes from her back to him.

“It doesn’t matter why. What I want you to understand is that it’s true. There’s nothing you can do to change that. So spread the word to all your buddies and anyone else who’s been lurking in the shadows. The dreams of her secret admirers are dead. Got the message?”

“Yeah,” Trevor replied, dropping his head. “You’re married now. I get it.”

“Good,” Aidan replied, letting go of Trevor’s hand. Leah closed her fan and put it back in the holster resting on the spine of her dress. She walked up and patted Aidan on the back.

“You didn’t have to scare away all of my admirers. I kind of like the attention.”

“You’re a fool,” Trevor shouted at her as he and his two friends backed away. Leah clutched Aidan’s arm to hold him back.

“I’ll handle this,” she said. She strolled up and placed her hands on her hips, looking inquisitively at each of them. “What’s the problem?”

“Why did you...*marry* this guy? All he'll do is try to control you.”

“You got it all wrong,” she laughed, glancing back at Aidan. “I let him do all the speaking because he gets to play off the trouble-maker image that he's already established. And that works for me because I get to remain sweet and kind. But don't misunderstand me. I allow him to speak on my behalf. So next time you think of me like the damsel in distress, just remember – I've already saved myself from the danger. You're better off pursuing one of these other ladies who are vying for attention.”

“But that's the thing,” Trevor cried. “I don't want another lady. I want you. You're different from the others.”

“Why? Because I'm pretty?” Leah scoffed. She grabbed the fan on her back, whipped it open, and cut off a chunk of her icy blue hair. She threw it to the ground. “Because I'm an Elder's daughter? Don't think I don't hear the rumors. How gaining favor with my father might give you an exemption. Don't think I don't remember the days when I was anonymous, and I would barely get more than a swivel of the head. I chose that man –” she paused to point back at Aidan, “– because from the beginning, I knew that he thought of me as an individual and as a partner, not as property. He has no intention of using me to gain favor with the Elders, nor does he look at me as a trophy. I'm a woman, not a pet.”

“I don't get how he could treat you any different than we would.”

“And that,” Leah said, slamming her index finger into his chest, “is why we're not an item. You don't get it at all.”

She left the boys standing there speechless and went back to Aidan, grabbing his arm and leading him to the grand hall. Much of the crowd had already gone inside. However, nearly a hundred were still scattered around the ivory steps, leaning against the white pillars and talking excitedly amidst the backdrop of the percussion instruments. A few glances were cast Aidan and Leah's way, but for the most part, they stayed to themselves. The married couple entered the grand hall. They were nearly blinded at the sudden change from darkness to light.

Out of all the structures in Lowsunn, this building was the one that stood out above the rest. It was a futuristic-looking polished structure that looked like it had been created for the Judge himself.

The grand hall was designed as a foyer fit for kings and queens. Boasting a ceiling that stretched upward for a half-mile, it was held up by pillars carved in the shape of muscular men and women, carrying the burden of the roof on the palms of their outstretched hands. The gold that made up their bodies only further enhanced the bright lights coming from the thousand-candled chandeliers, greater in number than the people down below. The floor was of the finest polished marble, and the walls were painted with epic scenes from the stories of old scouting missions, all in refined oils and exquisite pastels.

The villagers were all dressed in their finest attire, outfitted with custom-made suits and gowns devised by Luca Lorde himself. Feeling equal to the Elders for once, they mingled with each other like distinguished guests having been invited to a royal ball. Wine filled their glasses, and pint-sized hor d'oeuvres were passed around. Here and there, villagers were flicking fingers through their hair, blushing, giggling, drinking enough wine to have flushed faces. Hiccups and fits of laughter could be heard, and the moment Aidan witnessed the atmosphere firsthand, he felt sick to his stomach. Without realizing it, he pulled Leah closer to his side. She responded with an amused grin.

The crowd and the music all stopped once they noticed the couple standing in the entrance to the grand hall, but Aidan refused to avert his eyes, no matter how exposed he felt. Leah was the one to clutch his arm tighter this time.

“Are you sure about this?” Aidan whispered. “I can already see the real threat rising to his feet.” Indeed, the couple’s eyes weren’t on their peers but rather the handsome middle-aged man in the far back. Sitting on a stage with a diamond podium were seven chairs. In them sat the seven revered Elders of Lowsunn, all of them outfitted in dark blue two-piece suits, even the women. They all had the same light brown hair, the same blue eyes, and the same icy composure. Their stares were as chilling as their reputations, and it seemed like their body compositions were more in line with the structure of the building than the villagers before them. Like statues, they watched, silent and hidden in plain sight. All except one.

Standing with his eyes facing the couple, his voice boomed throughout the foyer.

“Leah, come,” he ordered, already striking a nerve with Aidan. Though Leah moved to obey, Aidan held her back.

“I’ll go talk to him,” Aidan whispered as the crowd backed away from the invisible void between the young couple and the standing Elder. Aidan walked slowly and methodically as if he were approaching a throne, his hooded robe flowing behind him, caught in the grip of an untraceable wind. As Aidan reached the stage, the Elders’ heads rose while their faces fell, their lips sneering and eyebrows curling. Aidan’s eyes smiled as he stared at his father-in-law.

“I asked for Leah, not you,” the man stated, his disgust bridled only by his reputation.

“I wanted to speak with you in private,” Aidan replied respectfully. “So we don’t cause a scene.”

“That is rich, coming from you,” Leah’s father scoffed. “You know if it weren’t for your mentor, you would have been banished long ago?”

“I’m told that every day.”

“Apparently, it hasn’t sunk in. Otherwise, you would be more conscientious of your pitiful behavior. You would channel your energy into more productive pursuits.”

“I’m sorry...pitiful behavior?”

“It’s obvious you’re vying for attention. Perhaps it has to do with the lack of discipline you received in your parents’ absence.”

“They were murdered,” Aidan said with a heavy sigh.

“That is unfortunate...for your development.”

“I see what you’re trying to do. You want me to lash out at you.”

“I’ve schemed nothing of the sort. It is only your violent nature that brings up such barbarian notions. But I grow nauseous of this conversation. What are you doing with my daughter?”

“We’re together,” Aidan said, staring at the man. From his right, he could feel the burning stare of the other Elders boring a hole through his skull. How dare he taint one of their children?

“Together,” Leah’s father said flatly. “And what does that mean exactly? Elaborate.”

“It means that we’re in a relationship. A consensual relationship.”

“Hmm. And I take it you understand the consequences of your actions.”

“Yes. The fact is there are none. There’s no policy in place that says a villager can’t date one of the Elders’ children. You can’t kick me out for this.”

“Again, your stupidity astounds me. Of course, I can’t kick you out for that. Nor would I want to. In the past, you were just a nuisance that I was forced to endure. But now? I want you to stay here under my wings and enjoy the flavorful plans I will concoct for you. You are putting on a good show for the sake of my daughter, but I know your kind, Mr. Serafino. Even before Advent, you lived in filth. You know nothing of decency and etiquette, and I’ve just decided to take it upon myself to teach you a lifetime’s worth.”

“I like that,” Aidan said with a mischievous grin. “Planning on torturing me without a means of escape? Seeing how long I can withstand your games?”

“If you can handle it,” Leah’s father said in concern. “I don’t want the infamous Aidan to be broken and forced to run from Lowsunn of his own accord. With his tail, planted firmly between his legs.”

“Do your worst,” Aidan said boldly, looking over at the other Elders. “None of you scare me. I’ve endured more than you could ever know.”

“You are a strange fellow,” Leah’s father laughed. “And once again, you fail to understand how serious this situation has become.” He stooped down so that his face was level with Aidan’s. “Outside of these walls, everyone is just like you. And that is why you cannot know the very enemy in your face right now. Sure the wild man’s imaginations may be dark, but they hardly have the time or the patience to execute it on its optimal level. They don’t have the time to develop a plan that will bring forth the most pain and inflict the peak level of suffering. We, however, have plenty of leisure at our disposal. Thus our execution style has become tasteful and refined like aging wine. If you believe that you have seen suffering, that you have known loss, then I truly feel sorry for you. Because that means you have no idea what your breaking point really is. You may think of yourself as a phoenix, having risen from the ashes of unimaginable



turmoil. When in fact, you're just a child, spouting off words that you've only heard in the distant memories of your dead mother's bedtime stories."

Aidan grit his teeth as hard as he could, his hands clenched so tightly that they ached. Leah's father studied him with amusement, but after a few seconds had passed, he reached out, and patted Aidan on the crown of his head.

"That's a good boy," he whispered. "Know when to attack your enemy. But, don't worry, son. I won't do anything tonight. Let us savor the bloodletting. Enjoy the dance."

He shooed Aidan away with a wave of his hand and strolled to his seat with satisfaction. Aidan threw the hood of his robe over his head and turned around to walk away. It had taken everything...EVERYTHING, not to punch that man in the middle of his smug face, but as enraged as Aidan had been, he wasn't dumb. Though they were a bunch of self-righteous, smug individuals, he couldn't deny that the Elders had power. If he had hit Leah's father then, his colleagues would have jumped in, and no one, not even Bailey, knew all of their abilities. Not to mention that the whole village of Lowsunn was at the dance. He was already hated. They would have surely jumped in too. He could have been fatally wounded. Bailey's work would most likely have been put under further scrutiny. Leah would be alone, and ultimately, he would have accomplished nothing. Bailey was right. He had to learn to channel his anger. Wait for the right moment, and then turn up the heat.

"That looked intense," Leah whispered to him as the dance resumed. The music picked back up, and the crowd began laughing and playing again, drowning out their conversation. From a distance, it looked like Aidan had just been royally handed a verbal beating, and the actual punishment would be reserved until tomorrow when the festivities were over. There had to be a reason no one dated an Elder's child, regardless of a lack of policy.

"Well, he didn't say no," Aidan chuckled, taking her hands into his. "But basically, he's going to try to murder me when I least expect it."

"That sounds like my Dad," Leah said with no amusement in her voice whatsoever. "But he's not going to resort to that in the

beginning. That's a last resort. He'll try to get you to make a mistake first. It will justify whatever crazy punishment he comes up with."

"I won't," Aidan replied. Leah gave him a skeptical face. "I won't," he stressed again, gazing into her eyes. "You're too important to me. You're the only reason I didn't hit him over there."

"If there's anyone that can endure him, it's you," she said. "But just so you know, you're not alone in this. I'm not going to just sit back and watch you suffer. I'll help any way I can. I need him to know that our union was a mutual decision, not one that you forced me into."

"I can't ask that of you."

"Who's asking?" she laughed. "I already said I'm doing it." Aidan threw up his hands in surrender, and Leah grabbed them and pulled her face close to his. The smell of her sweet lexium red perfume was intoxicating, and it made his mind cloudy. She guided one of his hands to her hip and allowed him to tenderly caress the fabric. She raised his other hand and stretched it out to the side, pressing herself against his chest. Her neck was soft and inviting. He begged to kiss it, but in the presence of so many, and especially her father, he behaved himself.

"Dance with me?" she asked. Aidan nodded in obedience. Just as he was about to whisk her away into ecstasy, a tap on his shoulder booted him out of paradise. He let go of his bride and whirled around to see a blonde-haired, blue-eyed annoyance with a fake cheesy grin.

"May I cut in?" Ori asked sweetly. Aidan attempted to shove him away, but Ori pivoted and dodged the attack. He grabbed Aidan's outstretched hands and interweaved his fingers through his. "Dance with me?" he said in the same tone Leah had. Aidan grunted and tried to knee Ori in the crotch, but Ori stuck his hip out at the last second, dodging the crippling blow. As Leah cracked up in amusement, holding her sides to stop the laughter, Ori clutched Aidan's side and whisked him away through the elegance of the waltz.

"What are you doing?!" Aidan snapped, trying to rip his fingers from Ori's, but the swordsman kept a firm grip on them as they twirled around the dance floor.

“I have important news to tell you,” he whispered. Aidan’s face reddened as he saw his classmates giggling from the corner of his eye. Ori was pushing it.

“And you couldn’t tell me this in private?” he practically shouted back.

“I had to tell you now.”

“And you had to dance with me to say it?!”

“I figured you wouldn’t want Leah nearby. We don’t want her father or the other Elders to think she’s involved in our little side organization.”

“I have a mind to tell everyone here that you’re the only one involved,” Aidan said, calming down. “Watch what they do to you.”

“Dip me,” Ori ordered, and Aidan obeyed with a roll of his eyes. When Ori came back up from the dip, Aidan head-butted him in the face. “Seriously?” Ori cried out as he closed his eyes and scrunched up his face in agony. He still refused to let Aidan’s fingers go, but at least he had gotten the message. Never embarrass Aidan again.

“You know I can’t dance,” Aidan said innocently. “My mistake. Oh by the way, your nose is bleeding.”

“I think you broke it,” Ori winced as he wiggled his nose and opened his eyes slowly.

“Worst things could have happened.”

“Can I tell you what I came here for so I can leave?”

“Why so quick to leave? I’m beginning to enjoy this! Just look at all the fun we’re having with a slow dance. Imagine one with a higher tempo!”

“My face is aching for the excitement,” Ori chuckled and then groaned under the pain. “Okay, I’ll try to make this quick. I need your help tonight. We have received confirmation from that the mission selections have been made for the upcoming year. Bailey wants us to find the list and cross off those that are part of our group, replacing them with names of her choosing.”

“So we’re going to put other people in danger instead of our own? How is that fair?”

“Only the most vital will be crossed off. She knows what she’s doing. But we have to hurry. We may not get another chance. The Elders will be giving out the assignments in a matter of days.”

“I can’t leave,” Aidan said, dipping Ori again. Ori yelped when he came back up, but no forehead was there to greet his sensitive nose. Aidan laughed heartily.

“No one will miss you at the dance,” Ori retorted. “Except Leah. But I’m sure she’ll understand that something serious is going down.”

“Did you just get here? Do you not know what happened within the last ten minutes?”

“I just arrived.”

“Leah’s father knows that we’re officially together. He doesn’t have exact details on what that implies, but he’s basically threatened my existence. If I leave here, he’ll be watching me like a fly over a picnic. So as much as I would love to just leave that gorgeous woman over there for a bloody-nosed, blonde-haired eyesore, it looks like I’m stuck.”

“You need to work on your sarcasm,” Ori huffed, finally letting their fingers part. “So what you’re saying is that I’m alone in this.”

“Why don’t you get one of the others in the Movement to help you? Unless you’ve been lying to me this whole time, and there really is just the three of us. Sure would explain the lack of action.”

“There’s not many of us,” Ori said, patting his nose gently. “No, it’s okay. I would rather go alone if you’re not coming. See, if they caught you, there would be no harm done. I, on the other hand, continue to be a model student.”

“Yeah, right. As I recall, my marks are higher than yours.”

“Not in the behavior columns of the report cards. You get an N there. N for Needs Improvement.”

“There are no report cards.”

“You take the fun out of everything,” Ori sighed, shaking his head. He began walking backward as he waved goodbye to Aidan. He then blew Leah a kiss, and Aidan fought the desire to beat him to a pulp. Ori ran out of the grand hall before Aidan could decide.

Leah strode up to her husband from behind and wrapped her arms around his waist.

“I’m not dancing with another boy tonight,” Aidan joked. Leah giggled and turned him around to face her. She took his hands and placed them in their previous waltzing position. But just as she was about to lay her head on his shoulder, the song changed.

The band glanced at one another with sly looks in their eyes, gave an exchange of nods, and then bust out into a hard, blaring number. Plenty of wide eyes and lowered jaws were shot the band's way, but then they were all replaced with excited, mischievous smiles. Where once the population had been doing their best to save face in front of the Elders, they now threw all propriety to the wind, along with their wine glasses, which went flying back into the trays of the waiters. They all grabbed their partners and began gathering in the middle of the foyer, the dance having transformed from a ball into an all-out concert. The lights went off, and now the only visibility came from the colors that were exploding from the band's instruments. The crowd surrounded the wooden stage on which they played and simply danced. No rehearsed movement. No regard for the Elders. They just danced their troubles away, and within a minute, only Aidan and Leah remained behind, still in awe over the sudden transformation the village had taken on. They glanced at one another, and Aidan gave her a smirk.

"Well, this is more my tempo," he said. Leah smirked, grabbed his wrist, and yanked him into the swarm.

From the Elders' stage, Frederick Ainsley watched the couple with interest, examining every movement and evaluating every catch of their breath.



## Chapter 6 – Knock Knock



Ori staggered out of the grand hall as if he had consumed too much wine. A couple of his classmates ran over to assist, but he waved them away, saying he just needed to go home. He took out his dagger when they offered to escort him and started swinging like a madman. That was enough for them to back off.

Not long after he had cleared the steps of the hall, he heard the music pick up inside, and all of the villagers who had been outside rushed back in, eager to lose themselves in the band's hypnotic trance. He quickly came alert and darted off into the bushes at the side. Once he was sure no one was coming to investigate his strange leap, he turned around and set off towards the Elders' homes. They were located in the far north, and he wanted to make sure he had plenty of time to complete his mission and get back before the dance was over. Even after passing the girls' cabins and the houses where the adults resided, Ori still had to run five miles through the woods to reach them. Of course, those five miles included a thick wall of thorns, bristles, and hugging vines that he had to get through. He did his best not to leave a trail, though he was forced to cut through some of the organic barriers. One, if not all of the Elders, probably could part the wall with a simple utterance.

Once he hit the mansions, Ori knew he had arrived. Bailey had told him that the Elders alternated who had the lists, so Ori would have to do a trial and error and possibly search each of the homes to find them. However, one home, in particular, was the most likely place to explore: the home of Serah Thine. The oldest of the Elders, she was an outspoken person with an abrasive personality that demanded, not suggested, that her opinions be taken with the utmost compliance. Anything short would mean defiance, variance, and an all-out declaration of personal war against her and all that she stood for. She was undeniably the leader, though, in the public spotlight, she put on a good show, claiming that the board of Elders

were equals. No matter what she truly believed, however, it was certain that she would be the first Elder to have the lists.

“To Serah we go,” Ori whispered to himself as he evaluated his objective. The Elders’ mansions were all close to one another like a compound or a community of identical-looking houses, and they were all sitting in a massive crevice in the earth. He stood on the edge of the cliff above, sticking his head out just beyond the forest line to get a better view. He could enter the compound from several ways. It was surrounded by the forest, and all he had to do was navigate around the edge of the compound until he came upon the house he wanted. But once he stepped out into the open, there was no place to hide. No woods. A painfully bright full moon, lighting up their homes like a beacon. The reflective roofs on the houses only further illuminated the area. He would have to be quick as there were surely guards hidden around the compound.

Ori sighed, removed his dagger from its sheath, and made it expand until it was the size of his arm. He glanced around for the largest tree in the vicinity and noticed a great red oak a few yards to his right. He squinted his eyes to see as far up it as he could and then aimed his blade toward the tree. Cocking his arm back, he threw the sword as hard and as high up as he could. Though it didn’t reach the top, it struck the tree about halfway up; it would do.

Being bound to the blade, Ori closed his eyes, and suddenly he was able to see through its surface, facing the compound at a height he wouldn’t have been able to reach without a time-wasting climb. He studied what the blade saw, but even at the higher altitude, there was no new information he had not already received from his naked eyes. Sighing heavily, he willed the blade to return back to its dagger form. As it shrunk, it fell out of the tree and landed at its base. Ori retrieved it and tried to gather the courage to leap into the fray. This wasn’t training anymore. This wasn’t simulation or a session in the Field of Visions. If he was caught, he could be executed as a traitor. And Bailey would have to decide whether to save him or not. He was sure her decision wouldn’t be easy.

***I really wish Aidan was here to help***, Ori sighed as he took a deep breath and then leapt forward into the air, willing his dagger’s surface to extend out as far as possible. Within milliseconds it turned



into a long vaulting pole, and its tip slammed into the roof of one of the mansions. He held on to the hilt, which was now four feet long, and his momentum propelled him forward until he was vertical, dangling directly above where his blade was protruding into the roof. Immediately, he willed the blade to slowly return to normal. Still hanging on to the hilt, Ori was lowered safely onto the roof. When the pole returned back to dagger form, the hole in the roof began to make a crackling noise as the damage Ori had caused began to repair itself. He sheathed his dagger and watched in awe as he crouched down on the roof.

“Interesting,” he whispered as he looked around him. If all their houses repaired themselves, then it would be an easier job than he thought. He could make holes in the roofs, peer inside them until he found Elder Thine’s, and then be on his way.

“Ori?” Morrigan inquired from behind. Ori felt his flesh crawl as he swung around to face her. He was still in a crouching position, but she was standing tall and relaxed.

“What are you doing here?” they asked each other in unison. Morrigan’s eyes were fixed upon the hole Ori had made in the roof, just seconds away from being completely repaired.

“You’re not here to break into an Elder’s house, are you?” she asked calmly.

“Why would I do that?” Ori asked nervously. He remained crouched. “Is that what you’re here for?”

“No, I’m here to make sure some imbecile doesn’t come to steal or alter the mission selection list.” She held up her index finger and pointed to her forehead. “Which I am.”

“No way,” Ori groaned loudly, standing to his feet. “I wouldn’t call you an imbecile.”

She frowned and stomped her foot. “No, dummy. I’m the list.”

“You’re the list?” Ori blinked. “What does that even mean?”

“It means it’s all in my head,” she said. “It doesn’t go on paper until the day the assignments are actually handed out.” Ori closed his eyes and thought about his options. He couldn’t just kidnap her. Would Bailey even approve of such an option?

“I take it you’re here to steal the list,” Morrigan sneered, her bright green lipstick standing out. “You’re that imbecile I was just talking

about, aren't you? What I don't get is why."

"I was just going to see if there was anything worth taking inside their homes."

"Stop lying," she spat. "It makes you look weak."

"You're not going to hurt me, are you?"

"Why not? I'm not just the list. I'm also the guard. What do you think is supposed to happen here? I let you go because we have some kind of camaraderie? You know nothing about me. We are not friends. We are not acquaintances."

"But we're also not enemies," Ori replied. "That much is for sure."

"Off what basis?"

"I normally don't want to kiss my enemies."

Morrigan closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose like she had a migraine. "Please tell me you did not just say that right now."

"What? I'm telling you the truth."

"I hate you so so much."

"Are you sure that's hate? Are you sure that's not desire? They're both such raw emotions. I can understand you mixing up the two."

"I'm going to kill you now," Morrigan sighed, placing the palms of her hands together. Ori shot down his attempt at another joke and let his training with Bailey take over. His eyes darted past her pink tank top and focused briefly on her bare right arm. There were two seals on her skin. One light, the other dark. **She used one**, Ori thought as he frantically searched his mind for the next step, the one that came after assessing how many wishes his opponent had used.

**Be patient, but not docile**, Bailey had said. He was to learn the particulars of Morrigan's abilities in order to counter them, but he wasn't to just stand there and let himself get killed while doing so. **Be proactive, but not aggressive. Remember your endgame. Do you want to kill your opponent or simply maim them? If it's killing, then it has to be quick, before they have a chance to counter you with their other wish. You must take them by surprise too, before they get a shot to talk with the Judge. After all, you can't tell if they're talking to him internally.**

**If it's maiming, then be careful of how much pain you inflict. It is a fine balance. Make the opponent feel as if they are**

**receiving damage that is equal to what they are already unleashing. Simply what they deserve. Keep them emotional. Keep them in the heat of the moment. Not thinking. Never thinking. Thinking means strategy. Hope. Wishes. Yen being used. Your death.**

**If you are not there to either kill or maim, it is best to run. Escape.**

**But what if you have to retrieve a list that's in the head of the person?** Ori's mind screamed as a thin blue aura washed over Morrigan's body like a second skin. It hummed and pulsed as her eyes lost their pupils, turning completely white.

**Do I have to fight her to get the list?** Ori wondered in horror. **But how would that work?** He unsheathed his dagger and in an instant, transformed it into a colossal long sword, bigger in width than length. If Morrigan was impressed, she did not show it.

**She will chase me until the end,** he thought bitterly, trying to calm his nerves. Deep down he hoped that her threat was a bluff, that it was all talk, but she had never shown him anything less than a serious demeanor. There was no evidence to suggest that what she said, she didn't mean.

As if echoing his thoughts, her body pulsed once more, brighter than ever, and then a beam of blue energy, as crisp and clear in density as water, shot out towards him. It was as long and wide as her entire body, and it hit the surface of his sword with the force of a brick wall. He was immediately thrown off his feet and flung off the rooftop. The entire time he clutched his sword close to his chest.

In the middle of his fall, he willed his sword to extend into the pole once more, burrowing into the dirt below and saving him from impact. He wobbled back and forth as the sword/pole steadied. Forcing it to extend even further, it propelled him back upward, but then he stopped it just short of the rooftop's edge to think.

**She might think I'm dead,** he thought, holding onto the hilt like he was balancing on top of a stilt. **The best time to understand what hit me is now.**

Ori bowed his head and once again recalled the training of Bailey. She had hit him with some kind of energy. It definitely wasn't water. Water had a weightlessness to it even at its most dense. The

beam had been solid, more like rock. And it had come from Morrigan's body. This was obviously different from the Water Arts he had studied.

His thoughts carried his eyes towards his right arm, and he snapped his head away as soon as he noticed what was happening. **No**, he thought harshly. ***I can't use any of my wishes. I may have two left, but I'm hardly in a trouble of that magnitude. Bailey wouldn't use them.***

He thought of how the aura pulsed around Morrigan's body. ***She had charged up that blast***, he decided, re-establishing his balance on the pole-like sword.

***It would hurt like crazy to be hit by it***, he thought. ***But if she has to charge it, I can get around it...but won't I have to cripple her in order to get her to cooperate? How am I going to force her to give up the information? I certainly can't kill her...***

Instinctively he thought of the third option: flight. He could escape now while she was still wondering where –

"You survived?!" Morrigan shrieked from above. Ori didn't waste time looking up to confirm her presence. He started to tell his blade to shrink when he felt a large blue hand made of energy wrap around his torso. It lifted him upwards and above the roof as he stared down at Morrigan in shock. Her right hand was the source of the energy holding him captive. With his hands still around his sword/pole, he began to retract it quickly before she decided to break it. Or him.

"How did you survive that blast?" she asked, but Ori wasn't ready to talk. He wiggled in her grip but she just scowled and made it tighter. "Fine. If you're not going to answer my questions, I'll force them out of you."



THE BAND HAD KEPT UP the beat for nearly twenty minutes, but every ability born from Yen had its limits. After pushing for as long as possible, the band resorted to a slow vibe. The crowd was a little disappointed but ultimately grateful. Now an ensemble of exhausted men and women, covered in sweat, resorted to finding waiters and begging for refreshments. Leah nearly tripped over her own feet; she

was laughing so hard. Aidan had warned her that he didn't know how to dance, and he hadn't been disappointed. The moment she had turned her attention from the crowd back to Aidan, she had nearly collapsed with laughter. He was doing some kind of strange jig that involved his hips and upper torso, remaining stationary while his legs swung out back and forth like they were trying to kick the shins of a little person. But even then, it wasn't until she saw his face that she really lost it. His face! That sight alone made her feel like she was going to rupture internally. It was so deathly serious and stone solid that she couldn't help herself. He was just too funny, and it was apparent he was trying so hard for her benefit. Even after he stopped and crossed his arms, glaring at her with a stern scowl, she hadn't stopped laughing. Her stomach felt like she had just done a hundred abdominal exercises.

"Are you going to stop anytime soon?" he muttered, her voice still cackling over the slow rhythm of the violins and cellos.

"You might have to use a wish to force me," she cracked up, covering her red face, wiping away the steady stream of tears.

"It's called a Yen," he said with a growl. She stopped for a second to glare at him, but upon seeing his serious face all over again, she was once again burdened with a fit of the giggles. Aidan sighed and motioned for a waiter to come to their side.

"I hope you're having fun," Bailey said in his ear. Aidan spun his head and raised an eyebrow in confusion. His mentor was dressed from head to toe in a waiter's garb, complete with bowtie, dress shirt and all. Her hair was neatly wrapped into a tiny, tiny ponytail, and her lips were so wide that for the first time he could see her ivory-colored teeth.

"Why in the world are you dressed like that?" Aidan scoffed. "And please stop that smiling!" Bailey put the tray of miniature tacos in his face.

"I'm working. Unlike you."

"But why?" he asked as Leah was just beginning to recover. She leaned on his shoulder with both hands, her forehead burrowed into them.

"I think I'm going to be sick," Leah groaned as Aidan kept his attention on Bailey.

“What?” Bailey asked. “I volunteered to be here. It’s less conspicuous. What? You think I would let class out early so all of you could have fun tonight? No. I had a job.”

“And so does Ori, from what I hear.”

“He’s taking a long time,” she said as a passing villager grabbed a taco from her outstretched tray. “I hope he’s okay.”

“This is what he’s trained for,” Aidan said, wrapping an arm around Leah. Bailey glanced down at the woman on his shoulder.

“So this is Leah?”

“The one and only.”

“She’s adorable. You know I was here to witness the exchange between Frederick and yourself.”

“Isn’t that all the more reason we shouldn’t be talking?”

“I only came over to see if you had heard from Ori.”

“I haven’t.”

“Then farewell until tomorrow.” Bailey darted off to the left and was out of sight before Aidan could ask another question. She blended into the crowd so quickly, it was as if she had gotten absorbed.

“Work?” Leah asked, lifting her gorgeous eyes to his. He leaned down to give her a quick peck on the lips.

“Unfortunately,” he said, staring at her cool blue hair. The color suddenly and unfortunately reminded him of Ori - how he had not yet come back from his mission. How hard was it to find some files and cross out a few names?

“Do you have to go? I understand if you do. I’ve already had a wonderful evening.”

“I think I do,” he said with regret, hugging her tight. “Do you need someone to take you back home?”

“No, I’ll be fine. You go on ahead. I think I’ll go join a few people from my other classes. I’m sure they’ll want all the dirty little details about our relationship.”

“Tell them about how your snoring keeps me up at night,” Aidan said as he glanced over at the Elders’ stage. All but Leah’s father were enjoying the ambiance created by the band. Frederick Ainsley was not being coy. He was staring directly at them. “Your dad needs to get a life,” Aidan muttered when he suddenly heard a crash come from his right. His eyes were immediately fixated on the situation. A

young boy had run into one of the waitresses, resulting in a dropped tray and several shattered wine glasses. The black-haired boy was about to pick up the pieces when Aidan ran over to intervene.

“Hey, be careful with those,” he said, grabbing the boy’s wrist. “You’ll cut yourself.”

“I can do it,” the boy replied, staring back at him with his almond-shaped eyes. “Can you let go of me, please? I shouldn’t be here in the first place. I just want to clean this up and go.”

“Not if you’re going to –” Aidan stopped as he felt a sharp pinch on his wrist. He let go of the boy’s arm and studied the strange red bite mark, triangular in shape. “What was that?”

“That was Charlie. He bit you because you were being mean.”

“Who’s Charlie?” he asked as the little boy held up a dragon, a grey and green stuffed animal that was no bigger than his head.

“You’re saying that stuffed animal bit me?” Aidan asked in disbelief as Leah walked up behind them. Nearby the waitress stared at the three of them with a furrowed brow.

“Isn’t anyone going to help me with this mess?” she asked, and they all began picking up the pieces. Aidan glanced back at the Elders as they cleaned, but none of them, not even Frederick, appeared to notice the commotion. Instead, they were all engrossed in the band along with the rest of the crowd, admiring the light show.

“What’s your name?” Aidan asked the boy, who was still picking up shards with one hand. His stuffed dragon was held firmly in the other.

“Sawyer,” he said. “Oops, I shouldn’t have said that.” He turned to the dragon. “Shut up, Charlie, I know! Get over yourself!” Leah giggled as Aidan pressed forward.

“The youngest I’ve seen in Lowsunn was a teenager. So you’ve got to be no more than eight or nine. Where did you come from? Who are your parents?”

“I can’t tell you,” Sawyer said. “I’m not even supposed to be here.”

“Why? Where are you from? Do you even live in Lowsunn?”

“Of course I do,” he said, rubbing his greasy little fingers through his black hair. “Once you go outside the shield, you can’t come back

without an Elder's permission. Everyone knows that. Geez. Charlie! I'll stop talking when I want!"

"Charlie's pretty angry, huh?" Leah asked, patting the stuffed dragon on the head. "It's okay, little guy. We're not going to hurt your friend."

"Charlie says he likes you," Sawyer relayed to her. "He says that you're beautiful and...Charlie, no! I'm not going to say that! Be nice!"

"Sounds like Charlie's getting fresh," Aidan chuckled. Sawyer glowered at him.

"He says that he wants to bite your head off, but it would ruin the party." Leah laughed as Aidan's face fell.

"Well, I think Charlie's very handsome," Leah said, rubbing the dragon's chin. "And so is his human friend here." Sawyer blushed and clutched the dragon tightly to his chest.

"Gotta go!" he shouted out.

"Hey!" Aidan retorted, grabbing Sawyer's sleeve. "I have a few more questions!"

"Let go!" Sawyer yelled, tugging back with uncanny strength and ripping his long sleeve in the process. He ran off into the crowd with his sleeve still in Aidan's hand, but Aidan could only wonder about what he had seen branded on the young boy's arm.

There had been only one seal.

And it had been blackened out.

"Leah, did you see that?" Aidan whispered, pointing toward where Sawyer had gone.

"No, what?"

"He only had one seal, and it's been used already."

"Are you sure?" she asked, trying to find the little boy amongst the crowd.

"Positive."

"Unless he got an exemption or he's a special case like Zorin, I don't see how that's possible. There's no way he would be here with zero wishes left."

"Then why is he here? He must belong to someone."

"I don't know. There has to be an explanation. Maybe I can bring it up to my father the next time I—"



Her words were cut short as the foyer's foundation beneath them suddenly lost its front half. The entire infrastructure cracked and caved forward in an instant as the crowd was literally swept off their feet. Trays clanged on the marble floor. Glasses shattered, and the chandeliers crashed into one another. The band collapsed into their instruments and slid off the stage. A booming sound was heard from outside the building, and the lighting suddenly went dark. An incantation was heard from someone in the crowd, and a miniature sun appeared in the center of the room to give off a dim but sufficient light.

Aidan had caught Leah before she lurched forward, but his attention was solely on the Elders for an explanation. But he couldn't help but be overwhelmed with a sense of dread once he saw that they had cast away their stoic faces...for expressions of fear. They stood to their feet and searched frantically for the cause of the destruction. Everyone else remained still, waiting for the culprit to reveal himself. Suddenly a shout broke through the silence.

**"PEOPLE OF LOWSUNN! COME OUT! YOUR DAYS OF LUXURY ARE AT AN END!"**

The villagers in the crowd cried out and hugged each other, whimpering over the foreign voice's command. An intruder had somehow broken through their impenetrable shields. Many had come to challenge Lowsunn in the past, but not one had been able to break through. How had this man done it? How many wishes had he used? And why was this happening tonight of all nights?

**"YOU DON'T HAVE TO DIE LIKE THE ANIMALS YOU ARE!"** the voice roared again. **"YOU CAN COME OUT BEFORE I AM FORCED TO COME IN!"**

The villagers looked to each other for answers. However, Aidan only glared straight at the door, which was still closed and acting as the only barrier between them and the stranger that sought to crush them. But, of course, this was happening now. When he was finally beginning to entertain the idea of accepting the luxury around him. He already had less than a year left before he was kicked out. Couldn't the loudmouth outside have waited until then? Did he really have to be woken up when he had just begun to dream?

“IF NO ONE COMES OUT IN THE NEXT TEN SECONDS, I WILL BURN THE GRAND HALL TO THE GROUND!”

“Oh, hell no,” Aidan snapped, violently letting go of Leah’s embrace. No one made a move to stop him as he skipped over the rubble of the caved-in front half, marched to the double doors, slammed them open, and walked right out into the open.



## Chapter 7 – I Heard You the First Time



“**Y**ou can stop shouting now,” Aidan said as he took his time walking down the grand hall’s front steps. The intruder’s eyes widened in shock. He had not expected anyone to come out, and especially not just one defenseless villager. Was this guy insane?

“What do you want?” Aidan demanded. “And why are you here?”

“Where are your Elders?” the stranger asked, his deep voice echoing even when he was speaking at a normal volume.

“I’m an Elder,” Aidan declared. “Right here. Address me.”

“You’re not an Elder. You’re too young.”

“Then you know of our laws. Who are you?”

“A resident of Lowsunn,” the stranger said through clenched teeth. Aidan examined him as the words sunk in. He was a few years older than the intruder, but from the tired, worn look in his eyes, the grime on his face and on his clothes, the scars, the filth, the smell...he had been on the outside for quite some time. His eyes were so dark and bloodshot that there was no way to tell what the natural color was. His hair was caked in so much mud that it had lost all of its shine. Whoever this man was, he was desperate.

And desperate men were unpredictable.

The double doors opened behind Aidan, and Leah stepped through them. Frederick was close behind her. He grabbed his daughter’s arm and tried to pull her inside, but she fought against his grip with all her strength.

“I belong by his side!” Leah shouted. Frederick yanked her back once more when his eyes inadvertently shifted towards the intruder. They shined with recognition.

“Duncan,” he said, maintaining his grip on Leah. “You shouldn’t be here. Leave now before you do something that you’ll regret.”

“Elder Ainsley,” Duncan smiled. “The bastard still lives on the backs of slaves while I have to fight to the death for scraps. Do you

have any idea what I've had to do out there?!"

"We can discuss this."

"I want to discuss this inside. With the rest of the Elders."

"That's not going to happen."

"Your village has the shields, not the buildings. You think I can't blow it to pieces with a simple thought? You think I can't pop you like a grape when I so choose? Let me inside, and you can choose your fate."

"That's not going to happen," Aidan snapped. "You're in our home. We make the decisions here."

"Aidan, shut up," Frederick replied. Duncan ignored the Elder and turned his attention to the robed young man.

"And who are you?"

"Someone who's seen the same things you have," Aidan said, letting the words permeate the air. "I know the anger you must be feeling. But taking it out on these people won't solve your problems."

"You think you belong here?" Duncan scoffed. "That this is just one big happy family? Are you kidding me? They don't care about you. They're just using you. You're a number to them. You're not a person. How could you stand there and protect them if you've truly seen what it's like out there? They're...they're evil."

"But there's still a mutual respect. They may be using me, but I'm also using them, for their shelter, their food, their water."

"But you're protecting them. That goes beyond following the program. If you just step aside and let me do my work, then you would be free. Lowsunn could be ours."

"For how long? A few weeks? A couple months? They may be pompous jerks, but they understand how to run this place. What would you and I do differently? We would have this place reduced to dust in days. Get real. You say you lived here. I assume you were kicked out because your seals were used up."

"Not used," Duncan spat, lifting his long sleeve to reveal two darkened seals. "TAKEN!"

"How did they do it?"

"That is none of your business," Frederick replied. Aidan shot him a cold stare and then turned back to the intruder.

"Tell me."

“If this man...” Frederick seethed, trying to hold back his rage. “If this man tells you about any of our sensitive work, you will be punished. You do know that, don’t you? We can’t allow this information to spread around the village.”

“How is that any different from what you’ve planned for me already?” Aidan said darkly. Leah looked up at her father and then back at Aidan, wondering what she should do next.

“I want everyone to hear this,” Duncan said.

Frederick shook his head. “That’s not going to happen.”

“Fine, have it your way.”

***He’s going to attack!*** Aidan’s thoughts buzzed as he instinctively thrust out his hands and engulfed himself, Leah, and her father in a bubble of fire. In the next second, Aidan was hit with a force like he had never felt before. It burst the bubble altogether and sent them all flying back through the double doors. The three of them skidded across the broken floor as the crowd gasped in horror.

Still lying on the floor, Aidan searched for Leah and saw that she had landed next to him. She began to move to stand up, but his eyes ordered her to remain still. Better to play dead for now.

As much as Aidan hated being in a submissive position, especially with his back turned to his foe, he knew that it was the only way to formulate a plan under the circumstances. Duncan wasn’t going to stop until he had his say, and Aidan was curious to hear it.

As long as Leah wasn’t hurt.

As Aidan heard Duncan’s footsteps coming methodically from behind him, he kept his breathing at a minimum, using the precious seconds to consider his next attack. Duncan had said that the Elders took his Yen, but there wasn’t a way to know for sure until they were already in the heat of battle.

More likely, they had taken just one Yen from him, and he had used the other himself, ostensibly on a power that was strong enough to destroy Aidan’s fire shield and propel the three of them forward in one hit. It couldn’t be an element per se. The wind he would have felt. Water, lightning, and earth he would have seen – but there were definitely destructive properties involved. The

collapse of the building's foundation. The overpowering of his defenses. Waiting was the key to unlocking this mystery.

"Good evening," Duncan said, stepping around Aidan's and Leah's fallen bodies. He walked past them to address the villagers as they backed up further into the foyer. Frederick had decided to not play dead and was now standing front and center with the audience. Duncan cleared his throat.

"Forgive me. It's been so long since I've been in the presence of kings and queens. Oh wait, that's right. You are none of those things. You sure act like it, though. Pretending as if Lowsunn is a kingdom high above the world while the rest of us serfs suffer."

"Duncan Crow," Elder Borne shouted from the stage. "You are a disgrace to –"

His voice was cut short as his body suddenly erupted. A small pop echoed across the room, as his body was reduced to a fine ash, falling off the stage and into the cracks of the floor below. The other Elders kept their mouths shut.

"Until I'm finished," Duncan replied. "There will be no more interruptions. Am I clear?" The crowd nodded as he smacked his grime-caked hands together. "I want you all to know that I think you are all horrible, horrible people. Not because you enjoy the luxuries given to you. I understand that. I did the same. What I can't forgive...is how you believe the words of these liars." He pointed to the Elders. "They fool you with every word that comes out of their wrinkled, cankered lips. Think about this. They tell you. They TELL YOU that you're going to have your Yen extracted for the greater good at the end of your fifth year. Now...it's bad enough that you just mindlessly go with the flow, but do you actually think they're going to wait until the end of that fifth year? Nooooooooooooo. They're going to take you halfway through those five years and then take your Yen because they know you're all going to run away before your five years are up.

"Now I...I am no threat to you, as long as you listen. The Elders...they're the ones that have everything to lose if we rise up against them. Even now they could use one of their many personal Yen to kill me right here, but they won't. They won't because they're greedy, and they want one of you to do it. They're just waiting for one

of you to make a move. It's so sad. They didn't even care when Elder Borne died. So what do they care about you?"

The crowd remained silent.

"I don't want you to be afraid of me. So I'll tell you everything. My name is Duncan Crow, but on the outside, they call me Combustion."

A few worried murmurs went throughout the crowd, and Duncan smiled.

"Oh, good. Some of you have heard of me. Yes, I remember the survival training and how we used to study the 'threats,' but I'm telling you right here and now. Those classes do nothing to help you. Nothing. They give you little wisdom like quotes on a piece of paper, but they don't prepare you for the outside world. Those quotes and nuggets of advice have never kept me warm. They've never put food in my mouth. It's not until you're out there that you see...you see how real it is."

Elder Grier began whispering to one of the other Elders, but Duncan caught the movement. With another poof, Lowsunn lost another one of its leaders.

"But...I'm getting ahead of myself," Duncan said, folding his hands. "Let me explain how I got inside. We all know that the shields of Lowsunn were created by using multiple wishes, right? C'mon, we all know this. An individual, or a group of individuals, could go before the Judge. Where he would have denied one wish, in particular, we could offer up many our seals to him as a sacrifice, and he'll make it happen. I mean, if we wanted, if we got enough of us, we could bring people back to life!

"But no one's going to do that. No one cares about the people lost in the Cataclysm. Only what they got out of it. Again, I don't blame you, I would have done the same. I have done the same. But because Lowsunn doesn't prepare you for reality...once I was out there, I realized just how much I wanted back in. So I did things. Killed a lot of people. Eventually, I got a decent reputation. Got some weak people to follow me, and I used them the same way the Elders use all of you. I had them chip at the barrier, just at one spot in particular. Took a while. Many Yen used. But finally, it was enough to get through."



Aidan tried his best to stay still. Duncan had many Yen at his disposal, and all he could think about was breaking back into Lowsunn?

“You thought you were so safe and secure,” Duncan mocked them. “Do you have any idea how angry the people are out there? They want to drink your blood! They want to feast on your souls. And I’m inclined to let them. Unless you’re willing to make me the sole Elder. Grant me that honor, and I will teach you all how to survive this harsh world.”

“May I ask a question?” Elder Serah Thine asked. Duncan nodded. Aidan found it interesting that her interruption was not worthy of death.

“How will you protect us?” she asked. “How will you prevent others from entering our village in the same manner you just described?”

“The game of Yen could go on forever,” he replied. “You waste them to reinforce the shield. We waste them to take it away. The problem is that there are far more of us out there than you have in here, and people are desperate. They are willing to sacrifice their pitiful lives for an attempt on yours, just to see that smile disappear. How will I put a stop to this? I have information on the legendary artifact.”

Based on the Elders’ gasps, the crowd was even more intrigued.

“One and the same,” he smiled. “The legendary artifact known as Choate. With it in hand, any human, natural or reborn, could make one ultimate wish and have it granted without the permission of the Judge himself. With Choate in hand, one can theoretically make Lowsunn immortal.”

“You’re lying,” Elder Thine said, a waver in her voice. “How could you have come by such knowledge?”

“I don’t have the artifact itself,” Duncan said, dodging the question. “Nor am I close to retrieving it, but if the villagers of Lowsunn can become my soldiers, I can prepare them for battle and fight our way to it. I hear it is guarded by an army that no Yen can break. We would have to defeat them with our abilities.”

“You desire an army of your own.”

“Yes. But I need your blessing.”

“And if we refuse?”

“Then I will take what I want,” he said, clenching his fists. “With your deaths, the people will succumb to my will.”

“We could kill you at any moment of our choosing,” she said. “All we would have to do is wish it.”

“Yes, but don’t think I came alone,” Duncan said with a grin. “When my colleagues learn of my death, they will confer and plan out your assassinations.”

“Or they will do the exact same thing you say the people of Lowsunn would do. Fall to a new leader.”

“You’re really going to use a Yen against me?”

“No,” she said, sitting back down in her chair. “There’s no point. Especially since you no longer have any to counter. I think having you executed here and now will suffice with what we already have at our disposal. No use of Yen required. Unfortunately, you underestimate the power of Lowsunn, and for that, you will fall. We will venture out and get the artifact ourselves.”

“You old fools,” Duncan sneered, backing away. “If that’s how you want it...”

“NO!” Aidan shouted, rising to his feet. Duncan stared back at him in shock as Aidan brushed himself off and approached the Elders.

“Aidan, I swear –” Elder Thine began, but Aidan stretched out a palm towards her.

“NO! YOU LISTEN!” he shouted. Everyone, including Duncan, stepped back in shock. “You need to let this man go! If he’s lived long enough to make it this far, including getting others to join in his cause, then he’s far more dangerous than you’re willing to admit. Don’t be blind. Let him leave or kick him out. Use a Yen to reinforce the shields while we prepare for his return. Attacking him now will only end in death for us. We don’t know who else is hiding in the village or just beyond our borders. Let’s leave this in peace while we at least consider his proposal. We all have a lot to gain from this.”

“The boy speaks the truth,” Duncan replied. Elder Thine stuck up her nose.

“Duncan is a liar and a bad one at that. There are more than enough soldiers here to put him down. We stop him now, locate any

of his men within the shield, dispatch them, and then move forward. Allowing him to live is not an option I'm willing to entertain."

"They are not soldiers," Aidan shouted, pointing at the crowd. "We like to claim they are, but they know nothing of the battlefield. Out of everyone in this room, there will only be a few of us engaging this man. The rest will run, hide, and keep their Yen for themselves because they understand the storm that's headed our way if you attack him!"

"Yes, only a few of you will defend us," she said, pointing directly at him. "The headstrong. The hotheaded. The foolish. What loss is there if you, and anyone bold enough to say they're your ally...dies right here."

"You can't mean that."

"If you believe in his ambition so strongly, then you can join him in the execution."

"You tried your best, friend," Duncan replied, glaring at the Elders.

"Don't call me friend yet," Aidan replied. "I still stand with Lowsunn."

"What? After everything you've just said? After all you've heard?"

"It's complicated."

"Because you make it so," Duncan replied. He looked to the Elders. "If I am to be executed, then we will do this outside, where I can enjoy the fresh air. And so you can witness my power in all its glory."

Duncan stretched his hands out towards the roof, and Elder Thine pointed at him and screamed.

"Kill him quick!" A few villagers sprinted towards him, but he was already done unleashing his dark powers into existence. A booming sound was heard from above. The contents of the ceiling were sucked into the middle as if it were at the center of a black hole. The residue left showered down onto the audience with a rain of fine gold, diamond, and marble dust. Then the walls on all four sides followed suit in the same manner, one at a time. Before anyone could react, the entire grand hall had been reduced to nothing more than a cracked foundation and a few scattered pillars. The first scream started a chain reaction as the crowd began scattering in all

directions, running for cover in the forest. Duncan laughed as Aidan stayed where he was.

As he watched Duncan cackle in delight, Aidan knew that he should act now, if ever. When his opponent was off guard. But he was so sick of hiding. This man had been a product of Lowsunn, and yet he had amassed a following. How was this man any better than he? He who had spent nearly half his life outside the village's shields?

"A fine lot," Luca Lorde muttered, brushing the dust off his clothes. "Running from a little magic trick."

"That was no magic trick, my friend," Duncan replied. "I'm just getting started. In a few minutes, your precious village will be nothing but ash. And don't be fooled by what has been displayed so far. The implosions were only when I was casting with concentration. See what happens when I'm in the heat of battle." Duncan snapped his fingers, and one of the muscular pillar statues was blown up in a fantastic explosion, sending shards flying in all directions. Duncan turned back to the master weaver. "Now imagine if I did that to a person."

"I imagine it would be quite messy," Luca admitted, backing away. "But I'm a man of technicality. So excuse me if I don't stay for your...performance." He turned and ran away, leaving only Aidan, and a still-pretending-to-be-dead Leah in what used to be the grand hall. Even Frederick had run off.

"Shall we begin?" Duncan asked him. Aidan responded with a swift punch to the man's face. Sending him reeling backwards, Aidan planted his free hand on Duncan's abdomen and sent a burst of fire from his palm. The flames spread over his clothes and engulfed him. He stepped back and screamed in pain as he fought to remove his clothing. When he realized that he wasn't succeeding, he stopped for a second, and then the clothes burst into dust, putting out the fire in one swift move. Aidan took note.

***Like everyone else, he thought. His abilities have no effect on him. But I can't sit back and watch. I have to keep his mind on the pain, and not on where to aim.***

Aidan cast several fire shields around him and sprinted forward while Duncan recovered from the little fire that had singed a bit of his

skin. He was now shirtless and covered in soot, but Aidan could still see a smile spread across his lips as he approached.

Duncan snapped his fingers a few times at Aidan, eliminating a few shields just before they collided. Aidan tackled him to the floor and tried to set him ablaze again, but with a push of Duncan's hands, he was sent flying, straight up into the air and further upwards than the roof had once been.

"Just die," Duncan said as he reached out towards Aidan. He held his hand out palm-up like he was going to receive a gift and then closed his hand like he was crushing a bug. Aidan summoned as many fire shields as he could, but once the explosion came over him, he knew it was far too little. It was like a bomb had detonated in the sky, so enormous that it sent a shockwave throughout the night sky, rocking the foundations of every building within a five-mile radius. The remains of Aidan fell at Duncan's feet in a cloud of dust, ash, and smoke. Duncan laughed as he waved a hand through the soot, but then he stopped altogether.

There wasn't just a pile of ash and dirt like he had expected, but a cocoon of dense rock. Once it hit the floor, it cracked, and inside was an unconscious Aidan, having safely been cushioned from the bulk of the attack. As Duncan took a step forward to investigate, a large ice spike, the size of a pipe, rammed through his stomach. He immediately reduced it to ash with a finger snap and created miniature explosions around the wound to cauterize it. He looked past the rock cocoon and saw his attacker clearly.

The girl.

Leah was encased in an armor of rock, a web of lightning forming between her outstretched fingers.

"No one messes with my man," she declared before sending a lightning bolt straight into Duncan's heart.



"IS THAT YOUR DOING?" Morrigan asked as the shockwave streaked across the sky. Ori stopped struggling and took a heavy sigh.

"It's not."

“Then what is that?”

“How would I know?”

“You’re telling me that the village is under attack...right as I was about to kill you.”

“Stranger things have happened. Maybe it’s fate. Maybe destiny is saying, ‘you two were meant to be together forever. Don’t crush his spine.’”

“I don’t believe in fate.”

“Well, something’s going on. And it’s not me. We should go check it out.”

“Yeah, right. Like I’m going to let you go.”

“Our village could seriously be under attack.” Morrigan stopped to consider it. Ori decided to keep it up. “We have to go help. This is beyond you and me.”

“Tell me why you wanted the list and who you were looking for so I can tell the Elders. You tell me that and I’ll let you go free.”

“We want to control who goes on the missions, that’s all. And as far as who I’m working for...it’s Aidan.”

“Aidan’s behind all this?”

“Yep.”

“Hard to believe he could organize a heist of this caliber.”

“What heist? I got caught in seconds.”

“Good point,” she said, letting him drop from her grip. The blue aura was still around her body, but at least he was free. He rubbed his neck and placed a hand on his dagger.

“Now that I’m free,” Ori grunted. “I have to tell you the rest.”

“What is it?”

“I just lied about everything,” he said, sticking out his tongue. Morrigan fired off another beam of energy from her body, but Ori made the surface of his sword so large that it became a shield. He dug his heels into the roof as she pushed, and once he felt the pressure disappear, he transformed the shield back into a sword and lunged forward. Morrigan didn’t expect that, and just as he had hoped, her large energy releases had to be charged. In close proximity, she wasn’t as powerful. She fired off little beams from the tips of her fingers, as thin as pencils, but he parried them off his blade with ease. Once he reached her, he crouched down, swept her

off her feet, and caught her in mid-air with one smooth move. His sword still in hand behind his back, he held her in place, staring deep into her chocolate brown eyes.

“Until we meet again, my love,” he whispered to her lips, and then he head-butted her in the face. She was knocked out immediately, and he let her gently down onto the rooftop. Once he was sure she was safe, he shrieked and clutched his forehead, dropping his sword to attend to his wound.

“No more head-butts,” he whispered into the cool night air. “No more head-butts.” He closed his eyes, picked up his sword, and sheathed it once it had shrunk back to dagger size. Then, glancing back at where the explosions had come from, he sighed and prepared to investigate.

***There’s no point in bringing her back with me***, Ori figured, glancing back at Morrigan. ***If the village truly is under attack, the mission list will change drastically. There’s no telling who will still be alive to go on it.***





## Chapter 8 – Rupture



**W**hen the lightning struck its target, Leah realized she should have unleashed more of it. Duncan fell as he should, collapsed lifelessly as one who had just been struck would...but the smile on his face. It was not one of someone who had just been defeated. It was a terrifying, maniacal smile, so wide that it was as if he had enjoyed the electrocution. She thought she heard a shout, and she turned around to see Aidan pounding through the rock cocoon. She released him with a wave of her hand, and it crumbled. He fell to his knees and coughed. She ran over and helped him up, but his mind wasn't anywhere near securing their safety.

"Where is he?" he demanded, his voice harsher than she ever heard. "Did you kill him?"

"No – I –"

"Stand back," Aidan huffed, gently shoving her behind him. "I hope we're not too late." He placed the palms of his hands together. He concentrated, summoning the liquid fire within him, boiling it, making it fester and rise to a point where there was no holding it back. The sensation was undeniable. It had to be released. It had to consume, and Aidan had the perfect victim. Once he was sure it had reached its maximum temperature, he let one arm fall to his side, and extended the other directly at Duncan's fallen body. He grit his teeth, accumulated the surge of energy into the middle of his palm, and then released it.

Nothing visible shot out of his hand, but Aidan felt it leave him all the same. In the next second, Duncan's lifeless body exploded into flames. A pillar of flames shot out from the center of his body and up into the sky, spreading slowly over him, covering his legs, the tips of his fingers, his feet, his hair. The pillar of flames stayed there as long as Aidan kept his hand towards the body, the heat growing feverishly, devouring even the trees that hung nearby. He wasn't sure how much would be enough. How much this man could endure.

All he knew was that Duncan's body was not being consumed. And that meant something was still keeping him whole.

"I need you to help me," Aidan ordered Leah, who stared at him in surprise.

"What do you need me to do?"

"Fire. As much as you can summon. Right at him."

"Okay," she said, beginning to concentrate when two hands suddenly spun them around. It was Bailey. Back in her plaid shirt and jeans.

"What are you two doing?" she barked.

"Stopping him," Aidan said. Bailey shoved them away and out into the grass. The pillar of fire that had been on Duncan vanished.

"You didn't think it all through," she snapped at them, still pushing them away. "That's a valiant effort, allowing everyone to escape, but all you're doing is weakening yourselves at this point. You think he would just allow you to set his body on fire and just lay there like he was getting a tan? You were feeding him."

"How could that be?" Leah asked, as Bailey shoved them behind a tree, far enough from the hall to be hidden but close enough to see what Duncan would do next.

"Aidan, what did you notice about your brief encounter with him?"

"I hit him and blasted him with fire. He took some of my shielding. I set him on fire again. He took away more. He nearly killed me, and then..."

"You're feeding him," Bailey nodded. "After every attack, he performed an even bigger one upon you. He can make things explode all right, but not after getting a healthy dose of energy from someone. The energy he used to take down the grand hall was probably what he walked in with. Remember. No one's ability is unlimited."

"How much do you think I just gave him?" Aidan asked lowly.

"Hard to say until he gets started," Bailey sighed, peering out. Duncan was just beginning to yawn and stretch. "But don't beat yourself up over it. Your effort was more than anyone else was willing to give."

"I was so concerned for the others that –"

“Did you just hear a word I said?” she snapped at him. “Forget about it. Keep your head.”

“Right.”

“Do you think he’ll leave now?” Leah whispered.

Aidan shook his head profusely. “Not a chance. I saw that smile on his face. He’s turned.”

“You really think so?” Bailey asked in concern, snapping her head towards Aidan. “Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“What does that mean?” Leah asked.

“It means he’s no longer planning out his actions,” Aidan said. “He’s acting off of pure emotion and the raw power lying inside of him. There’s no thought. There’s no reason. It’s just pure instinct. A predator focused only on one goal: to consume everything in its path.”

“You must have hurt him bad,” Bailey said to Leah. “He probably felt like he was on the brink of death. His survival instincts kicked in.”

“What do we do now?” she asked.

“We wait for the right opportunity to chop off his head. That’s the only way.”

Aidan began forming his magma sword as Leah unsheathed her bladed fan. She leaned in and examined Bailey closely.

“What’s your ability?” she asked. Bailey glanced back her and smiled.

“I don’t have any.”

“None? Then that means –”

“Yeah,” she said, lifting up her long-sleeve, revealing three seals, all of them still giving off that lively, glowing hum. “All three Yen, still at my disposal.”

“And you were on the outside?!” Leah said in shock. Aidan chuckled under his breath.

“I’m unstoppable,” Bailey said, giving her a wink. “Now, no more questions. Watch.”

“I want Leah to stay out of this,” Aidan spoke up, but Leah put a finger on his lips.

“If we’re going to have a life on the outside, I’m going to need this.”

“The girl has a point,” Bailey said, signaling for them to hide further. Duncan stood to his feet and huffed, taking a step out into the open, the residue of Aidan’s attack still crackling beneath him.

He made no move to address the people this time. His intentions were all over his tense shoulders and clenched jaw. He just wanted to hurt someone. He took another heavy sigh and then cleared his throat.

“1...2...3...4...” he began reciting rhythmically. Bailey sighed.

“I assume you’ve all played hide and seek,” she said.

“Of course, why?” Leah asked.

“Because we’re about to be in the middle of it, whether we want to or not. Keep your heads down. Aidan, if we do get a chance to strike, I want you to maim him. Keep him alive for questioning if at all possible.”

“That doesn’t sound possible considering his ability. But I will try. I still want Leah to stay back, though.”

“We may need her,” Bailey said. “But Leah, so Aidan can focus, I must ask you to only intervene if absolutely necessary.”

“Okay,” she said, glaring at Aidan.

“28...29...30,” Duncan said. “Ready or not, here I come.” He stood there in the grass, listening for the sounds of hiding villagers. There was only silence. But this did not deter him. He took a couple steps to the left and started looking around when a whimper escaped the throat of someone nearby. He snapped his fingers in its direction, and a scream pierced the air. A woman fell out into the open from behind a tree, clutching her shoulder. Duncan looked down at her with disdain and snapped his fingers once more. Even Bailey turned her eyes from the sight.

Duncan decided to turn around and proceed to the right, walking a few yards past where Aidan, Leah, and Bailey lay. When he didn’t hear another noise, he swung his arm towards the north and blew up a cabin in the distance, sending it into a flurry of splinters and wood beams. A couple of cries proceeded from his right in the woods, and he dispatched those villagers quickly.

“Are we just going to stand here?” Aidan whispered, and Bailey shushed him.

“Wait for the right time,” she said, watching as Duncan killed two more.

“I’m sick of this game,” Duncan muttered and turned his sights to the brewing stand nearby. With a flick of his wrist, it was reduced to ash. A few more homes. Luca’s clothing store. As if he had just had an epiphany, he swiveled around and faced further north, looking towards where the Elders’ homes were situated. He placed the palms of his hands together and began concentrating, but it was only for a second.

Sensing danger, Duncan stepped aside as Ori appeared, swinging his blade down at the intruder. Duncan dodged it in the nick of time. Pivoting backward, he snapped his fingers at the swordsman, but Ori turned his sword into a shield at the last second and blocked it, reverted it back, and kept swinging, keeping Duncan on his toes. They continued this exchange, neither one gaining the advantage until they came across a couple of villagers hiding behind a tree, a mere yard away. Duncan snapped his fingers at them, and Ori jumped in the way with his shield activated. The explosion sent him flying off his feet and into the villagers.

“Now,” Bailey snapped. Aidan wasted no time. He sprinted forward and headed straight for Duncan’s back with his magma sword held at his side. But he knew he wouldn’t make it in time to save Ori and the other two villagers. As he ran, he stretched his arm towards a small flame at Duncan’s feet and made it erupt vertically. It flashed into a wall of flames which blocked Duncan from his prey and subsequently blinded him in the process. In the moment that he covered his eyes from the flare, Aidan’s sword plunged through his back.

What he did not expect was the chain reaction that followed. As the sword entered Duncan’s body, a strange, red aura shot out of Duncan like a giant claw and reached out to grab Aidan. Aidan activated a couple fire shields just as the claw pressed up against him.

And then he nearly blacked out.

Whatever energy was laced into the claw, it was far more explosive than anything Duncan had revealed earlier. His shielding was instantly destroyed, and he was consumed in an explosion so

powerful that he lost most of his robe and some skin and muscle. Thrown backward, he hit the grass screaming. It was all he could do. Just scream at the insane amount of pain erupting over his body like geysers. His back contorted, and he arched his back as he fought against the crippling sensation. Duncan approached him on wobbly legs, the magma sword still lodged within him.

“That’s my defense,” he whispered. “An explosion equal to the damage you just inflicted upon me. You can’t escape it, just like you can’t escape your death.”

“STOP!” Leah shouted from their right. Duncan turned a weary head and glared at her. Elias, who had been watching the fight from afar, snuck towards Aidan’s body and began healing him from a safe distance while hiding behind an oak tree.

“Don’t kill him,” Leah said. Duncan nearly staggered, but he caught himself.

“I’ll do whatever I feel like,” he muttered. He began to turn back to Aidan when Leah hit him with a bolt of lightning. Duncan clenched his jaw and stuck his hand out towards her. Her attack ceased instantly, and she froze in place.

“Enough!” Duncan shouted. “You’re so weak that I don’t even need to hit you from the outside. Rupturing your organs from within should suffice.” He squeezed his hand, and a sickening pop was heard from within her. Leah dropped to the grass, face first, and didn’t get back up. Ori’s blade sliced through Duncan’s neck the very next second. No claw reached back to grab Ori – his cut had been the finishing blow.

Bailey came out of hiding and rushed to Leah’s side, pressing her fingers against her skin, searching for the damage. Elias continued to heal Aidan. The pain had finally subsided enough that he could think somewhat clearly and form coherent thoughts. As soon as he had the strength, Aidan swatted Elias’s hands away and staggered to his feet. He thought he had heard Leah shout out, but he wasn’t sure.

But once he saw her lying face down in the grass and not moving...he couldn’t stop himself from trembling. His eyes welled up with tears, but they never got the chance to stream down his face. They evaporated as soon as they touched skin, and even Ori and

Elias had to stand back. No words entered his mind. No sorrow gripped his heart. It was just the rage. He fought against the deep tear in his stomach, a sensation so intense, it was like his soul had been violently sawed out of him. His fists sought out retribution. His bloodshot eyes sought a target. And in that moment, in spite of everything that had just happened – he hoped that Duncan was still alive. Decapitation wouldn't do. And if he was truly dead, then his accomplices would suffice.

Aidan screamed, and the dining commons exploded in a pillar of fire. Ori tackled him to the ground.

“Aidan, stop! It's over! It's over!”

“His friends are here!” Aidan roared as he kicked Ori off of him. He climbed to his feet, and Elias put him into a chokehold. Ori ran over and placed a hand on his friend's chest.

“We don't know that,” Ori said. “Please stop. You'll kill someone. There's been enough of that today.”

Aidan couldn't keep it in. He fought against the restraint, closing his eyes and trying to kick Ori away. The swordsman had enough. He clutched the back of Aidan's head and slammed his friend's forehead into his own, ignoring the searing pain that scorched his skin.

“FOR LEAH!” Ori roared into Aidan's face, and immediately Aidan felt the anger leave him as if his body had been rinsed in water. Ori maintained his hold on Aidan until he saw recognition and sanity in his friend's eyes. Only then did he release his grip and nod to Elias. His robe began to repair itself only then, manifesting new fabric where it had been blasted away. Seeing the transformation before them, Ori and Elias let Aidan go. He immediately rushed over to Leah's side just as Bailey was waving over a couple of bystanders.

“We need to get the Elder's daughter to the infirmary immediately,” she ordered. “Send someone with transport or teleport capabilities to get her over there. I don't want to move her.”

“What happened?” Aidan cried, his trembling hands hovering over his wife. “What happened, Bailey?!”

“I told her to stay back, but she jolted me and ran out. She was going to help you no matter what.”

“Is she going to be okay?”

“I don’t know. I...I overheard Duncan saying he was targeting organs. Which organ he ruptured exactly, we won’t know until we look at her.”

“Elias!” Aidan shouted back. “Get over here! We need you!”

“I won’t be much help,” Elias said with downcast eyes. “I put wounds together like a puzzle. Unfortunately, I can’t recreate the pieces.”

“I don’t care, just heal her. Please.”

“I’ll do what I can,” Elias sighed as he hovered his hands over her. “But I don’t even know what I’m focusing on.” As he worked, Aidan glanced up at his mentor, staring hard at him.

“Are you going to be okay?” she asked.

“If she will be, then yes. But, if she dies...no promises,” he said, wiping a tear from his cheek. “We did everything we could, right? There wasn’t anything else we could have done?”

“We killed Combustion,” Bailey said. “A feat that no one on the outside could accomplish. We should be grateful.”

“No one with the power to do it thought Duncan was worth their time,” Aidan said, waiting for Leah’s face to move. “What class was he, anyway?”

“Are you sure you want to know?” she asked. Aidan nodded. “He was a low-level C class. Just above D, and N.”

“Then he was nothing compared to what else is out there,” Aidan said, caressing Leah’s cheek. “He was nothing...and we were nearly annihilated.”



THE INFIRMARY WAS A madhouse, but it had been designed for a wounded army. Nurses, healers, and doctors ran back and forth, doing what they did best. The nurses took care of the superficial wounds. The healers patched up the bulk of the damage, and the doctors, all specializing in extensive surgery, tended to those on the brink of death. A labyrinth of long hardwood floors and gigantic bay windows, only the staff knew the layout precisely in case there was a threat, external or internal. But today, all it did was cause more confusion. As families gathered in droves to the south to see their



loved ones, no one could provide directions. Many were forced to navigate the maze on their own, calling out to their fallen by name. This only caused further frustration as staff and visitors shouted over one another.

Thankfully, because Leah was an Elder's daughter, it was easier to find her.

"Where is Leah Ainsley?" Bailey demanded a passing nurse, grabbing her arm.

"It's Serafino," Aidan retorted, but Bailey shot him a "not now" look. The nurse stammered for an answer but finally gathered her wits.

"She's on floor three in critical watch."

"Why isn't she in surgery? I heard that one of her organs ruptured."

"No, no, she's fine. She'll definitely live, but she's quite shaken up. Very understandable, you know...since she lost the baby."



## Chapter 9 – Turned



The walk up the stairs was as hazy and disorienting as a dream. Aidan's legs wouldn't work right, and his palms were sweating profusely, to the point that he slipped twice when he leaned on the banister. Eventually, Bailey and Ori each took an arm and half-carried him up, unsure if allowing him to see her was the smart move. Aidan didn't say a word. He didn't think anything. He wallowed in the pool of sorrow that he had visited so often beyond Lowsunn's walls. Everyone put up a good façade when they were in the company of others, especially on the outside. A bout of bravery. A shout of courage. A smile of confidence. These were all childish tactics that somehow worked even against strangers who had experienced far worse than he. But there was no denying the spirit that came over him when he had been alone, hiding in the night high up in a tree or barely peeking his nose and mouth out of a coffin of thick mud. Under the still blanket of night, when he had to keep quiet or suffer the fate he had seen befall so many – that was when his thoughts overtook him.

They were relentless and unforgiving, telling him that tomorrow, he would be killed. That it was better to just take his life that night. No matter how afraid he was, the agony would be far less than if he was taken captive. Just sink down into the muck and don't come back up for air. So simple right?

And yet, no matter how much his thoughts berated him, slapped him, shoved him down – he always resisted. He renewed his vigor each morning and fought and won another battle. When his family was murdered, when old friends perished and were forever etched in the legendary walls of his memories, he alone survived and moved forward.

But this...this was far different. He had been careless. He had played a hand in the death of his own child and in the wounds of the unborn's mother. He had denied his instinct. He had allowed

Lowsunn to get under his skin and put out the fires of his hate and rage. He had allowed a new one to be kindled, one that was not as bright, not as strong, not as hot. It was one of warmth and peace, symbolizing the forbidden love he had for the people of his new village.

Though he had fought against their ideals and their sickening, foolish optimism, he couldn't deny – there was something precious and magical and innocent about them, and he envied this to his very bitter core. No matter the odds against them and the hands of death scratching at their shields, they were somehow able to forget.

And he so longed to forget.

But it was not his destiny to cast the yoke from his shoulders. He had not made a mistake in deciding to fight Duncan. The people of Lowsunn were too afraid and inexperienced. Where he had faltered, where he had failed Leah, was that he had not given in to what he knew. What had kept him alive for so long.

He had not turned.

Perhaps it was because he didn't want Leah to see what he was like when he was at his worst. Maybe he believed that he was innocent and pure like the villagers around him. But he had been delusional. He had held back his power, what he felt he needed to do – and for that, his budding family had lost one of its petals.

***Never again***, he swore. ***Never again will I deny what I am.***

When he came to his disturbing conclusion, he shook the help of Bailey and Ori off of him and strutted of his own accord. They didn't question it but followed with a cautious, watchful eye. As they hit the third floor, Aidan slammed the staircase door open with authority and marched down the hall, past the throngs of concerned men, women and children, to find the girl that still had his heart under lock and key.

He didn't ask for her room number. He didn't want to talk to anyone else but her. At the end of the hall, past a line of the moaning injured and the silently damaged, he found her, sitting up in a plush bed in her hospital room, her eyes staring off into space as she kept her hands folded gently across her flat abdomen. Her icy blue hair had fallen into her eyes and lips, but she made no move to cast them

aside. No one was there attending to her, and Aidan could only imagine the things she had said to get her visitors to leave.

He watched her for a moment, her lips moving slightly, saying a silent prayer, to whom or why, he didn't want to know. He could only marvel in how strong she appeared. With the news of their loss, he had been broken. But she, she was already rebuilding foundations. Where did this strength come from? Surely not Lowsunn.

He knocked gently on the side of the wall, and her head shot up at him. Once she saw his face, she forced a smile, but her eyes were tired and worn. Finally, she unfolded her hands and reached out to him. He didn't dare turn down her request.

It took everything within him not to tackle her. No matter how quick he reached her side, it wasn't fast enough. The distance felt like days, but once they embraced, the world fell apart, and he felt at ease again.

"I'm sorry," she whispered in his ear, and he closed his eyes to combat the sorrow that was trying to bubble back up within him.

"I told you to stay back," he heard himself say, and immediately he regretted the words. He stabbed himself a thousand times in his mind for that. No matter how he tried to recover. No matter how hard he tried to erase what he had just uttered, it was too late. They had already planted a seed within her, with roots so deep that only she could remove them.

"I'm sorry," he said quickly. "I'm so, so sorry. I didn't mean that at all."

"You don't have to lie," she said, which nearly made him collapse in self-loathing. She had already been thinking the same thing, but now that she knew he also believed it, it was over now. No matter what he wanted, this day would become a part of her.

"You saved my life," he said, embracing her tighter.

"But not the baby's," she whispered, her face burrowed in his shoulder. "If I had stayed back, you both might be alive."

"We don't know that. You did your best. I would have done no different."

"But you wouldn't have been pregnant."

"Leah..."

“It’s like you said, I’m not ready for that world. I don’t know anything.” Her hands went limp and folded back into her lap as he continued to hug her. “I’ll just hold you back, Aidan. I thought...I thought that we were equals, you and I. We both had the same goals, and we were willing to do what it took to achieve them. We trained hard to improve ourselves. To be prepared for situations like this. But I’m not ready...you go on without me.”

“I’m not going to do that.”

“Then I’m going on without you,” she said, beginning to sob. “I won’t be responsible for your death. I won’t be responsible for anyone else’s. Just leave me alone. Our baby’s death was enough.”

“Leah, I –”

“LEAVE ME ALONE!”

Aidan released her. He stood to his feet and backed away, unsure of what to do. He...he couldn’t leave her. He could never leave her. She was his wife, his best friend, his soul mate. She was his sanity and strength. The rage...the rage was just a childish strength. It was a shallow pool that he could only draw from in spurts, but Leah, she was like a pillar of rock, a beacon of hope, a mountain of solidarity. Maybe they needed to work together more, perfect their technique, train harder...but they weren’t a mismatch. Their union wasn’t a fluke, and to think that it could now be broken...it was unbearable. They had told each other long ago that the only way their marriage could be annulled was if one of them decided it was done. He knew that he could never...but she wanted it now. Who was he to deny her?

But how would he live on? Who could walk alone once they had known true love?

“NO!” Aidan screamed, not to Leah’s request but to the agony welling up within him. No one in the vicinity could tell the difference.

“Hey, that’s enough,” Ori said, grabbing his wrist. “We should leave.”

“Stop touching me,” Aidan spat in disgust, ripping his arm away. “How many times do I have to tell you to keep your hands off me?”

“My mistake,” Ori said, throwing up his hands in surrender. “But you’re not in a great state of mind here. We should really go.”

“I agree,” Bailey said. “Be strong, **Tallawah**.”

“What’s all the commotion?” a doctor asked, walking in the door. He looked at each of them and then turned his attention to Leah. “You should really be resting.” Leah leaned back onto her pillows as he addressed her visitors. “I’m going to have to ask you to leave. There’s too much going on in the infirmary right now, and we need to be able to work without distraction.”

“I’m her husband,” Aidan said, but the middle-aged doctor was unimpressed.

“No disrespect, but that doesn’t sound right, considering the young lady’s status and who her father is.”

“I’m telling you the truth,” he retorted. “It’s just been a secret. Don’t ask me to go.”

“I’m sorry, but even related family members are asked to leave their loved ones. This kind of attack is unprecedented in Lowsunn. We’re doing all we can. But for the good of everyone, you must go.”

“I won’t.”

“Sir, there’s no reason to worry. Leah is in great hands, and the worst is over.”

“The worst of it?” Aidan seethed, clenching his fists. “You mean when she lost the baby?”

“How did you – listen, sir. I didn’t mean to sound apathetic. What I mean is that...I can’t explain it without coming across wrong, so I’ll leave it at that. Just know that everything is going to be okay.”

“Okay?” Aidan spat in his face. The doctor nearly fell over onto the nightstand. “OKAY?! How is it going to be okay? Huh? My wife doesn’t even want me around anymore, and my child is DEAD! And everything’s just going to go back to normal?”

“Aidan, stop this,” Bailey pleaded, but Aidan refused to listen.

“Are you going to do something about this?” Aidan screamed, grabbing the doctor by the collar. It began to sizzle under the heat of his hands. “Are you going to use one of your Yen to bring my child back to life?” He reached over to the doctor’s right arm and ripped off his sleeve. “You have one seal left! USE IT!” Bailey reached for Aidan, but he pushed her away and turned back to the doctor. “USE IT! WISH FOR MY CHILD TO COME BACK TO LIFE! NOW!”

The doctor shook his head violently as Aidan stuck his face further into his.

“USE IT!”

“You do it,” Ori said to Aidan from behind. Aidan threw the doctor into the corner. He fell into a crumple, trying to catch his breath.

“What did you say?” Aidan said, turning around slowly.

“I said you use it, you bully. You have two left. You do it.”

“You’re really going to talk to me like that?” Aidan snapped.

“Like what? Like you lost your mind? Yeah, I am,” Ori said, standing tall. “I know you’re hurting, but that doesn’t mean you get to shove people around.”

“What are you going to do about it, Ori? What have you ever done about it?”

“Don’t go there,” he warned. “Don’t start saying stuff you don’t mean.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that if the lady asked you to leave, you should go. It’s her child too, you know.”

“You’re really going to stand there and act like you know what we’re feeling? You’re going to accuse me of being insensitive? Of not knowing that it’s her loss too?”

“You’re the one yelling.”

Aidan took a swing at him, but Ori leaned his head back, narrowly dodged the blow, and responded with a swing of his own, catching Aidan square on the right side of his jaw. Ori hit him so hard that Aidan went flying through the cheap wood of the closet doors. As Aidan scrambled to his feet, Bailey ran into the hallway.

“I need a teleporter right now!” she screamed, and a young girl in braids ran from two rooms down.

“Yes?” she asked, and Bailey pointed to the two boys.

“I need you to take them and me to the Field of Visions right now before they hurt somebody.”

“No problem,” she squeaked, focusing with her palms firmly placed together.

“Thanks, Nicey.” Bailey replied. She blinked, and they were in the middle of the field. For the first time in Lowsunn’s existence, it was completely empty. Bailey turned back to the little girl. “I appreciate this. Now please leave us.”



Nicey vanished into thin air, and Bailey turned her attention back to the boys. Ori hadn't moved, but Aidan, his head no longer bound by the closet door, stood to his feet slowly, rubbing the side of his jaw. Bailey sighed and took a few steps back. She wasn't sure what was going to happen next, but it had to be done, now, before they could move forward in any capacity.

The night sky was tranquil and clear, showing off its abundance of dancing stars, and revealing the power of the full moon without restraint, illuminating the waving grass and the two young men who were on the brink of battle. Bailey averted her eyes back to the earth.

"Ori, you know what to do," she said. Ori nodded from where he stood. Aidan caught none of the exchange. But, even from a distance, she could tell that Aidan was on the brink of turning.

"Aidan, we should –" Ori began, but he cut his words short to dodge the wave of fire coming his way. He rolled out of its path and turned his dagger into a sword as Aidan unleashed his magma blade. Aidan threw it at the swordsman, but Ori wouldn't fall for the same trick twice. He ran to the side and away from the thrown sword. When it exploded, he was clear of every shard, but Aidan wasn't done. Not even looking at Ori, he began casting tiny embers all around them in the field, no bigger than a flower, sitting upon the grass, waiting for their master to demand they bloom. Ori didn't want to wait for them to sprout, so he took the offensive. He ran at Aidan, who was still busy casting the embers, and he was just about to swing his sword down into his friend's shoulder when Aidan suddenly grabbed the blade in mid-air and bare-handed.

No, not quite bare. Aidan's hand was so red and hot it was as if he had let it sit in the fire for an hour. He used the heat to protect him from the blade's sharp edge. Before Ori could recover from the shock, Aidan activated a fire bubble around his body, bouncing Ori backward. Ori's eyes lit up in amazement as his sword remained in the hands of his opponent, who was now throwing it to the side as if it were a stick. With Ori now ripped away from his weapon, Aidan began the torture.

It was not Ori before him anymore. It was just another face. Another face to match the wound, and the damage was very, very deep. Aidan sneered, his emotions taking over completely as he

prepared to do to his so-called friend the same thing he would do to an enemy. This was how it had to be. No friends. No family. No love. None of those things existed outside of the dreamland that was Lowsunn. Why should he have them now? All it would do was lessen and cripple his potential. It would make him weak.

Duncan was right.

It was too late to join him now, but maybe once he took care of Ori, and Bailey...no, not Bailey. Bailey deserved to be spared...wait, why not Bailey? Why did she have to live? Wasn't it better to just end her life now? Before she too was taken by the monsters outside the village? Then there would be no opposition. He could follow through with Duncan's plan. Train the village. Overthrow the Elders. Find the Choate. He could –

“DO IT!” Ori screamed from a few yards away. Aidan responded with a fireball from his right hand. It shot towards Ori like an arrow and burst right on his abdomen. The swordsman fell to his knees as the wind was knocked out. Aidan sucked his teeth. How dare this weakling interrupt his train of thought? Aidan ordered the ember closest to Ori's feet to burst. It was a magnificent explosion, reaching six feet high before it died out completely. It had only brushed up against the swordsman, but it was enough to make him cry out and clutch his leg. Aidan waited to see what Ori would do next. He would probably run towards him, try to retrieve his weapon. Maybe he would ask Bailey for help. Or run. That would be nice.

But he did none of those things.

He climbed to his feet, even with his leg burned, and raised his head until his eyes were level with Aidan's. And then he waited.

Was he using one of his Yen? Aidan glanced over at Ori's right arm, still exposed from the fight with Duncan, and saw that his three seals hadn't changed. Two active, one dark – the dark seal was the wish he had used to become a master swordsman, even though he had previously had no skill whatsoever in Sword Arts.

Why was he just standing there?

Aidan allowed another ember, one that was a little further away, to burst. The ember seemed to glide across the grass this time until it was right under Ori's gaze. It exploded, and hit him square in the chin, knocking him onto his back. He groaned and clutched his face,

whimpering at the burning sensation, but then he cleared his throat, climbed to one knee, and returned to his feet, resuming the stare.

**If he wants to die, then fine**, Aidan decided, ordering the embers to hit Ori. They glided towards him and converged, forming a bigger and more deadly flame. And yet, throughout it all, the swordsman refused to move. Aidan shook his head, and ordered the execution.

The explosion nearly lit up the night sky, and even Bailey had to shield her vision from the light it created. When the smoke and flames subsided, there was no evidence of Ori's existence, but that was expected. What Aidan did not expect was a hand smacking the middle of his back, precisely where his spine was located. He turned around in surprise, and Ori was there, smoking, but very much alive. Ori put the tip of his dagger under Aidan's chin as he grabbed the pyromaniac by the throat with his other hand.

"Even if you set me on fire now, you will die," Ori said, and Aidan believed him. Even after he nodded, Ori still didn't let up. "Do you understand what just happened, Aidan? Do you realize just how badly you've lost?"

Aidan didn't know what to say. Suddenly he didn't feel so angry. He was just confused and tired. Ori glared at him with his cold blue eyes.

"All this time, I've held back too," he said, ensuring the words sunk in. "I may not be as skilled as you. I may not have the destructive power. But I can take damage better than the rest of them. My stamina is far greater than yours, and I could equal myself to you with a simple utterance to the Judge. Your attack back there. The one that was supposed to kill me, right? Guess what? It didn't work."

Aidan said nothing.

"Bailey asked me to not go all out because we needed that rage dwelling deep inside of you. You were a weapon just begging to be used. But with the village in turmoil, that's the last thing we need. You have to be rational and work with us until we figure out exactly how many enemies are out there and what their abilities are. Once again, we need you to keep your emotions in check."

Ori took the dagger away and sheathed it, but his grip stayed on Aidan's throat.

"We're bound to one another," Ori continued. "Whether you like it or not. We're both brothers of the wild. Yes, that's right – I'm from the outside too. And as a loving sibling, I allowed you to hurt me, to take out the rage that would have consumed us all. Because I love you. And I know you needed it. You feel better, don't you?"

"I do," Aidan said in shame. He wanted to run and hide in the mud.

"There is nothing wrong with anger. It's a part of all of us. But how you use it, is entirely up to you. You can already scald someone with boiling water. You don't have to let it continue festering until all of the water's spilled out over the side."

"I'm sorry, Ori," Aidan said, wearily looking at his friend. Ori released his grip.

"The healers will tend to my wounds," Ori replied, "but I had to show you how much we need each other to survive what's coming. I hit you on the back with my hand to let you know that it could have easily been my blade."

"I understand."

"Hey, listen. Don't start going distant on me now. We're still friends."

"But I just tried to kill you."

"Yeah. So?"

"Didn't you hear me? I just tried to kill you."

"Yeah, what are friends for?" Ori laughed. "One minute, they hate each other's guts. The next, they're back on the playground. Don't worry about me. Our tantrums may be a little more destructive and painful than the natural kind, but I'm still alive, aren't I?"

Aidan smirked and made his second vow for the day: to never hurt his friends again.

"I want to say sorry to you too, Bailey," he said, turning to her. She approached the boys with a smirk, reached out, and gave Aidan a hug.

"It's okay," she laughed, patting him on the back. "Just don't do that to us again. Next time we'll really defend ourselves."

“I have a lot of soul searching to do,” Aidan admitted. “To be completely honest, I don’t know who I am anymore. I kept thinking that I was still the boy outside of this village. But I don’t even know if that was living at all. I try to imagine myself as a villager of Lowsunn, but I realize that I’m not entirely that either. I belong nowhere.”

“No, you belong right here,” Bailey said, drawing a circle between the three of them with her finger. “As Ori said, we are bound together by fate, survivors of the wild. When you don’t know who you are, come to us and ask, and we can tell you.”

“Well, then who am I?” Aidan asked abruptly. Bailey chuckled and folded her arms.

“You are a child of both the wild and Lowsunn. Of the earth like we all are, but also of fire. The only time you lose yourself is when you lose sight of those facts. You can’t sway too far one way or the other, between the earth and the fire. Move with the ebb and flow of life, take each situation as it arises, and you will never falter. Don’t let yourself become so much earth that you get trampled underneath others’ feet. Don’t blaze so bright that your fire goes out.”

“I feel like I’m in the middle of a fairytale here,” Ori laughed, rubbing the soot out of his hair. Aidan nodded at Bailey and gave a heavy sigh. She was right. There had to be a balance. The villagers of Lowsunn were too afraid to act. They needed the Aidans of the world to fight on their behalf – someone who could withstand the opposition and protect them. But he couldn’t become so enraged that he embodied a spirit like that of Duncan’s either, treating the very people he shielded as his underlings. No man was made to control another.

“Ori, let me take you to the infirmary,” Aidan replied, placing a hand on his shoulder. Ori winced and shook his head.

“Nah. It’s all superficial burns anyways,” he winked at him. Aidan attempted a smile and did something unexpected. He gave Ori a hug.

“I’m sorry,” he said into his friend’s shoulder. “Forgive me.”

“Already did,” Ori groaned. And Aidan let him go.

“I still can’t believe you were part of the wild, though. I thought you grew up here in Lowsunn.”

“Mostly I did, but remember that every one of us has a story and an old life before Advent. In my case, I happened to spend the first two years after Advent on the outside. In the shining city of Siren. Heard of it?”

“No.”

“It’s very far away, along the coast of this continent, surrounded by tall mountains and vast valleys, so one would have to travel very far to stumble across it. It’s where the Peacekeepers live.”

“I have heard that term used before. On the outside, it’s a derogatory term for someone who died trying to talk down a threat.”

“Yes, my people coined the term, and everyone else defiled it. No matter what you may think, they’re not a bunch of touchy-feely types. They’re a group of free individuals with a common goal – that everyone in the city of Siren should be able to use their wishes as they see fit, as long as it’s to add to the world and not take away from it. It’s not like here in Lowsunn, though it sounds similar. In Siren, there is no council, no ruling body. Just a community of creative, free-thinkers that are helping each other rebuild.”

“Sounds magical, but why aren’t you there now?”

“Like anything good in this world, you eventually must fight for it. We were invaded at the two-year anniversary of Advent. A band of treasure hunters known as the Slayers heard rumors that the Choate artifact was hidden in our city. I don’t know who started the rumor, but given that the artifact has yet to be found, it was more than enough information for the hunters to investigate. We were peaceful with them and willing to let them scour the city to look for it. When they found nothing, they demanded compensation for their time. They wanted bodies to help with their menial tasks while on the road, particularly those who had already used their Yen so they weren’t threatened. Cooking, cleaning, fact-checking. That sort of thing. We drew lots and I and three other boys lost. Before I left, I made sure to take a hot poker, in the shape of our seals, and sear my flesh with it, to make it look like I had already used my three seals. I made up some story about –”

“You went willingly?”

“It was either that or start a fight. If you had seen Siren, you would know that ensuring its integrity was of the utmost importance. I

sacrificed for them. And so, I left with the Slayers. I traveled with them for about a year across the land. I didn't learn much. They never spoke in my presence unless giving me an order or telling me to eat. They were never cruel, but I knew that it was only a matter of time before I was no longer useful. All of the boys from Siren were kept separated so we never got a chance to plan or talk except in glances. But it was scary to wake up periodically and notice that one of us was missing, and no one knew why. I realized that I had to make my escape, and so, I used one of my Yen to become a swordsman. I had seen the Slayers work, and there was one that had always caught my eye. He went by the name of Trident. Tall. Strong. Fearless. His skills with a sword were incredible. We were often attacked on the road, being a small group, but he always volunteered to dispatch the intruders. He was so quick that our attackers couldn't even use their Yen against us. Quicker than thought. That's how I remembered him.

"I escaped when they were sleeping, and to this day, I don't know how. With all the power that emanated from them, I was sure I would be caught and immediately executed. But I left, so easily that I'm sure they allowed it. Why? I may never know. But one thing was certain. I struggled without their protection. It was only three days after my escape that Bailey found me on one of the scouting missions. Given her reputation with the board, she was able to get me into Lowsunn easily, and thankfully I was younger than twenty-one then, so my five-year clock hadn't started until around the time you arrived...Do I look forward to going outside the shields? No. But I know I'll have to one day. And that is why I'll soon be using my second Yen. Another ability to prepare for the inevitability."

"Of what?" Aidan asked.

"Of war," Bailey declared with a heavy sigh. "Whether Duncan was bluffing or not is irrelevant. This new information about the Choate, rumor or not, will spread quickly. It won't be long before someone, maybe even the Slayers, seek to learn the truth. The threat of more conflict looms over us regardless of whether or not Duncan has friends nearby."

"Not to mention the tear in the shield, wherever it may be," Aidan replied.

“Even if someone used their Yen to fix it, which is unlikely at this point, anyone on the outside now knows that we are disorganized and wounded. If I were to attack Lowsunn, I would do it now when we’re at our weakest.”

“What happens from here on out?”

“We prepare,” Bailey sighed. “And more importantly, we investigate the validity of Duncan’s claims. If the Choate is attainable, and we manage to retrieve it, it will ensure that Lowsunn will be protected forever.”





## Chapter 10 – What’s Eating You?



**A** liquid, melting, sucking sound woke her up, but it was the burning smell that made her shoot up in bed. Once she found the source, however, she felt at ease. It was Aidan, melting the glass window to get inside. It didn't matter that it was the dead of night.

“How did you reach the third floor from out there?” she whispered. Aidan pointed below him.

“I have George helping me. Wind Arts.”

“Who’s George?”

“I’ll introduce you later,” he said, climbing over the window sill. He waved goodbye to George and she could hear the sucking sound of boots trampling through mud. Leah examined her husband, outfitted in a Lowsunn uniform of baggy pants and a yellow shirt. It was soaking wet and his hair matched the ensemble perfectly in form. Drops of rain dripped onto his nose from his spiked hair as he cleared his throat and grabbed a chair from the corner. He placed it next to Leah’s bed and sat. In the dim light of the moon, he looked sadder than ever, but she didn’t want to interrupt whatever he had to say. She folded her hands and waited.

“I don’t blame you at all for what happened,” he said. “I blame myself.”

She didn’t say a word.

“And not because I think that I should have forced you to stay back or anything like that. It’s because I haven’t treated you with the respect you deserve...I was so quick to yell at you for getting involved in the fight, but when I look back on it...I realize that you saved my life twice.”

He glanced up at her with tear-stained eyes.

“You are my partner, and my equal. Not just in marriage, but in battle as well. We both need more training to face whatever’s ahead, but when we were together...we kept Duncan away from those

villagers. Without you, I would have died, and who knows how many others.”

He paused to gather his thoughts.

“I’ve done you wrong. I considered you weak, and treated you so. I thought of myself as a man who knew the realities of the world around us, and that you were just a Lowsunn girl. I couldn’t tell you what I believed with my words, but it was all over my actions. The way I couldn’t trust you to help me. The way I would train on my own in the dead of night instead of asking if you wanted to come along. And I was so, so wrong. I’ve been hiding who I am lately, when I should be more exposed. I should give my weaknesses to you, so you can mold them and harden them into something I can use. I’m nothing but clay, and I can only be transformed into a greater vessel if you shape me. I believe it’s the same way with you. We’re a team, and we can do great and wonderful things together. It’s part of the reason I fell in love with you so fast in the first place. Because when I met you, I felt like I had found my equal. And after tonight, even after my foolishness and unbelief, I realize...I was not wrong.”

Leah didn’t know what to say so she let him continue.

“But it’s more than that. I don’t just admire your tenacity and strength. You have this uncanny ability to not let fear consume you in the midst of conflict. It definitely consumed me tonight. So much so that it eventually turned into a consuming rage. But you were able to face Duncan without letting your emotions cloud your actions. I love that about you. I love how no matter how hard you train, sweat running down your face, your hair all messy – you still look just as beautiful as when you’re walking to class at dawn. You maintain this glow that just awes me. How you stay so collected...I just can’t understand why I can’t be like that. I know you can teach me to –”

“That’s enough, Aidan,” Leah whispered in the darkness. He stopped short and took a sigh. “I know you didn’t mean what you said last night,” she continued. “When I asked you to leave, it wasn’t because I was done with us, and I’m sorry for that. You’re not getting rid of me that easily,” she chuckled.

“Then what was it?” he asked.

“I was just hurt that you didn’t trust me enough to handle myself. I had no idea I was pregnant...if I had, I wouldn’t have jumped in...no,

that's a lie. I'm not sure what I would have done. All I know is that I saw you writhing on the ground, your flesh torn from your body, and I realized that if I didn't intervene, I was going to lose the only human that can make me smile. You are what I live for, Aidan. Your very presence transforms the dark, rotten, corrupt world around me in an instant, making it delicate and breath-taking and elegant. A mere word from your lips hypnotizes me. Your kiss makes me lose control and just by your standing next to me, I can see the future. Where I once lived day to day, your very presence makes me dream and hope and feel like a child all over again. When we met that day, you awakened me. Not the Elder my father wanted me to someday be. Not the Lowsunn villager. Me...

"So what happened in the infirmary," she swallowed. "What happened to our child...it was like a crack in the fantasy we had achieved. But...I'm not sad anymore, and I feel like all is as it should be. I look at this as a way for both of us to improve. To reach a new level of intimacy. We couldn't take our relationship higher if any mistrust was between us, or we didn't believe in ourselves. But we can change that. Starting now. We can get back on the path we somehow lost."

"I agree," Aidan said after a pause.

"Do you love me?" Leah asked.

"I do," he said. "As much as any monster could."

"Don't say that," she said, reaching over and lightly slapping his face. "You're no different than any of us."

"I have to tell you one last thing," he said with a sigh. "I...I almost killed Ori tonight. I was so angry over you nearly dying, and the death of our...I was so angry that I lost myself. I turned, Leah. I turned on one of the few friends I have and nearly murdered him in cold blood. What kind of a person does something like that?"

"One that needs help, just like the rest of us," she said. "Aidan, you're not a monster. We're all capable of such acts. But you have to decide what kind of man you're going to be from now on. You can't change what happened between you and Ori any more than I could have saved our child, but where do we go from here? That will determine if we grow. And we can only do that with each other."

“Yeah,” he said. “I realize that now. I’m just tired, Leah...so tired of being angry all the time. I don’t know what to do with Ori.”

“Is he okay?”

“He’s fine. He forgave me and everything.”

“Then leave it at that.”

“Just like that?” Aidan scoffed. “That simple?”

“Either that or you can go make it more complicated and awkward. It’s up to you.”

“Sometimes I feel like it’s simpler on the outside than here in Lowsunn.”

“That’s the art of blending into a community,” she laughed.

“Community Arts,” he chuckled. “Imagine that being an ability.”

“With how hard it is to form a good one, it might as well be...I’m sorry, I have to ask, why are you wearing the Lowsunn uniform? I don’t know whether to laugh or cry.”

“Oh, you like?” Aidan asked, standing up for Leah to see.

“It’s hideous on you.”

“I wore it to show just how sorry I was, and how low I’ll go to make it up to you.”

“That’s pretty low,” she nodded. Then she smirked. “But I think you’ll just have to take me dancing sometime. That should be a good apology.”

“Done.” He smiled as he shook his head and sat back down.

“So what happens now?”

“Hardly anyone’s getting any sleep tonight,” he sighed. “Many are keeping watch. Took forever to get over here. But I guess we wait to see what the Elders will say in the morning. Besides that, we train. You and me.”

“There will be time for that,” she said, “but for now, I want you to lay next to me for the night.”

“The nurses will find me in the morning if I don’t wake up in time.”

“There’s a gaping, melted hole in the window. You left a big signature.”

“Good point,” Aidan said, throwing off his damp shirt and pants and climbing into bed next to her. She scooted over so he could sit up against the pillows and then she leaned her head on his chest, falling asleep within seconds. Though he was tired, he stayed up and

remained vigilant, sorting through the events of the day, the damage caused by Duncan, and the damage caused by his very own hands. But even these thoughts didn't disturb him as much as what Leah muttered in her sleep, just as the sun was beginning to peek its head over the horizon:

"My baby, where are you?"



AIDAN MANAGED TO JUMP off the bed on the first round of knocking, grab his clothes on the second, and leap out the window fully dressed on the third. He hit the ground running, shielding his eyes with his forearm as the local birds chirped their morning hellos. The clean-up crews and master carpenters had already been at work, rebuilding the homes first before they tackled the larger and more frivolous structures. The rhythmical knocking of hammers on nails and wood, the distant murmuring, the exchange of soothing, delicious potions – it was an almost pleasant, relaxing morning.

But once he hit the center of the village, he realized just how tense the atmosphere was. Passing by a few conversations, he learned that the shield over Lowsunn had been reinforced, but that wouldn't hold back anyone searching for the Choate. It was on everyone's mind, and they looked to the Elders for answers.

Now short two members, the remaining five took to the stage that the master carpenters had built, situated on top of the demolished grand hall. There wasn't the usual murmurs and excited talks of the morning. There was only an eerie silence as the villagers attended with folded hands and sunken faces. Even the local birds had ditched the meeting, having opted for the reconstruction of their demolished homes instead.

Aidan did his best to ignore the poignant stares as he politely pushed his way through the crowd. He thought that the people would have been too busy hiding to notice his outburst the night before, but that was apparently not the case. No matter. He was ready to move forward and protect Lowsunn, with or without their approval.

"Order," Elder Exil shouted. "The honorable Elder Thine wishes to address you all in light of last night's horrific encounter. I know the

wounds are still fresh. But this isn't the first time we have come against opposition, and it will not be the last. Elder Thine has information on our next course of action."

He bowed and stepped out of Elder Thine's path as she took the forefront. Silence greeted her even after she said hello. Unmoved, she began her speech.

"Winter is cold, bitter and unforgiving," she said to the crowd's puzzlement. "But there is always a change of seasons. As sure as life and death will each pass through our lives, the seasons come and go. The rivers are never full. The oceans never spill. There is an order. A cycle that all humans have learned of, whether through experience or innate understanding. We realize that there are some things that cannot be changed...and many of us have forgotten this. We thought Lowsunn to reside in the clouds, amongst the Heavens, where flesh could not hope to touch its gates. But we are children of the Cataclysm. We are still amongst others that have not been as blessed as we."

The crowd nodded and a few sobbed.

"But does this mean we give up?" she asked. "That we abandon our homes for the outside, knowing that it is just a matter of time before another Duncan appears? Before his supposed friends arrive? Before those who hate us try to claim what we have spent so many Yen for? No...no...we can't do that. We have to be strong, and just as the frost melts away into spring, so will our suffering. Even last night, a silver lining revealed itself...I speak of the Choate."

The crowd murmured amongst itself as Aidan gave a heavy sigh. Next to him, Ori appeared and placed a friendly hand on his shoulder. Aidan glanced at him and nodded. Ori gave a cheesy grin in return. All was well between them.

"The way Duncan spoke," Elder Thine continued. "...the Elders have conversed through the night of his words, and we believe, unanimously, that he was telling the truth. That this artifact of legend is truly out there. And though there will be much more loss before there is gain, we believe, that we should take a chance, and try to retrieve this item for ourselves."

"Are you insane?!" Zorin Crane roared as the people next to him joined him in shaking their fists at the Elders. A few of the other

villagers were shaking their heads, while others closed their eyes to find comfort within themselves. The Elders watched and waited for the information to sink in. Aidan turned to the swordsman.

“So we’re to carry out Duncan’s plans after all,” Aidan scoffed with folded arms.

“Hmph,” Ori replied. “He must be turning over in his grave.”

“There is no way these people are ready to search for this, even if it exists.”

“The Elders have probably been dwelling on this for quite some time, even before Duncan’s arrival. They must realize that now is the time to demand their cooperation, while their anger is still fresh. If they allow this calamity to simmer, eventually they will become complacent, and fall back into routine, believing the lie once again that their village is safe, and that Duncan’s attack was a rare occurrence.”

“Do you think the Elders allowed Duncan inside?” Aidan asked. Ori brought a hand to his chin in thought.

“It’s crossed my mind, but it would have required a great deal of planning to orchestrate it, especially in ensuring that Duncan didn’t kill them in the process. Well, at least all of them. A couple Elders did lose their lives.”

“Elder Borne and Grier were pushovers. But that’s no reason to assassinate them.”

“If they even were assassinated. Maybe they weren’t pushovers...maybe they were. We still don’t know much about what goes on in their secret conferences.”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Elder Thine interrupted their individual conversations. “I know this may sound unsettling. I myself shudder at the thought of what could happen by venturing further out into the world. We’ve only had a few scouting missions this year and with very little success...but from here on out, there will be major changes. We must find the Choate. Our lives, and the future of every family under this shield, depends on it. Starting now, we are going to implement something that is unprecedented – we are going to remove the expulsions, and the banishments.”

The audience gasped. Even Aidan had to hide his shock.



“The Discipline Squad will still be around, but punishments will be handled by the Elders alone, and on a case-by-case basis. No more strikes. No more expulsions. No more Fifth Years. Every villager in Lowsunn under my voice at this moment is a permanent resident.”

Someone started clapping, but Elder Thine held up her hand for silence.

“But remember that every gift comes with a price. Though you are now free to stay here for as long as you live, we are slowly going to be transforming this village into an army. The classes will be more rigorous. The survival training more strenuous, and within the next couple of days, we’re going to start handing out assignments for upcoming scouting missions. I won’t lie to you. There will be a lot of people on those lists, and the primary objective is to get any information we can on this Choate. I don’t know how far we will have to travel, or how many we may lose. But in the end, if we are able to procure this artifact, we will be safe, and secure – forever.”

The crowd began clapping reluctantly. The villagers were both excited and apprehensive over Elder Thine’s words. Aidan looked around him and saw that Ori too was deep in thought.

Lowsunn.

A village of unprepared children, led by the infallible Elders. It was not his place to say whether or not the Elders were corrupt. He didn’t have the evidence. Bailey seemed to think they were, but it was possible that she hadn’t come across any proof yet simply because there was nothing there. Either way, he certainly didn’t trust their grand mission of retrieving the Choate for the people. There had to be more to it than that.

The way they lived so luxuriously. The way they stuck their noses up at the commoners. Their private dinners and rich speech – they didn’t see themselves as villagers. So the question begged to be answered: if they found the Choate, could they resist the temptation to use it for themselves? They could wish for anything, **anything**, without the Judge’s approval, and while permanent shields for their people was admirable, Aidan doubted it would happen in the end. And if the Elders were going to go back on their promise, and the villagers weren’t willing to fight for their rights...then he sure was going to fight for his.

“Classes will be in session today,” Elder Thine shouted, breaking thoughts across the grass. From her red face and stern eyes, it was apparent that she had said it a few times before the words had sunk in. “We can’t waste any time. We must begin preparations immediately. Please attend your sessions at the schoolhouse and in the Field of Visions as normal. At this time, the Elders will retire to their quarters in order to prepare the lists for the scouting missions. Given that we have already been up for over 24 hours, we will have to refrain from answering questions for today. Thank you.”

The Elders exited to the left and proceeded in a line off of the stage and towards their mansions, leaving the villagers to talk amongst themselves. Ori sighed and patted his friend on the shoulder again.

“And I was hoping for classes to be cancelled.”

“Hey, kid,” Zorin interrupted, pointing at Aidan. “How long were you on the outside?”

“Nearly six years,” Aidan said, taken aback. Though there was no reason to fear Zorin, the big man’s impressive stature had always instilled a dose of healthy respect from others.

“There a lot of people like that Combustion fella out there?”

“Worse,” Aidan admitted. He noticed several people were openly eavesdropping on their conversation. “Especially since people start throwing out Yen like bombs once they feel they can no longer win a battle. Duncan felt in control most of the time last night so it didn’t get as bad as it could have. Not to mention that he had no Yen to spare.”

“You’re the one that killed him, right?” Zorin shoved a thick index finger into Ori’s chest. “Well? Are ya?”

“I am,” Ori whispered, closing his eyes. “But it was only because he was distracted.”

“I’m going to the Elders tonight and request I get signed up with you two.”

“What makes you think we’re going on missions?” Aidan asked. “Especially me.”

“Are you kidding?” Zorin guffawed. “You two and that Leah girl were the only ones to engage that fella. Wasn’t for you, we might all be kissing worms right now. You have to go! ‘Sides, there’s no strikes now.”

“True,” Aidan said, wondering what mission he would be sent on. Espionage? In order to work on his affinity for violence? Perhaps they would just throw him into battle because it’s what he was best at? Diplomacy? Cave exploration? Dungeon hunting? Excavation?

“Besides, somebody’s gotta watch your back,” Zorin laughed, patting Aidan hard on the spine.

“We don’t follow,” Ori said.

“You kiddin me?” Zorin said, pointing to Aidan. “I saw what you did after Duncan had fallen. You think the Elders are just going to let a powerful spell caster like you go wild? No, you’re going to get a special assignment. One you might not come back from. Think on it.” He winked and began walking off towards his destroyed shop as Ori and Aidan stared at one another. The eavesdroppers slinked away. As the crowd dispersed, a girl with pink pigtails emerged with fists on her hips.

“You lucky bastards,” Morrigan said, punching Ori in the cheek. He fell in a crumple, clutching his face with both hands. She turned and cocked back a fist to hit Aidan, but he pointed a finger towards her right shoulder. A tiny flame rested on it, just swatting away at the ends of one of her pigtails like a kitten and a toy.

“Hit me and you lose all your hair,” Aidan said with a pleasant smile. She sneered and holstered her fists into her pant pockets.

“How come you get pants with nice pockets?” Ori winced, a hand still on his cheek as he examined Morrigan’s clothes. “Is it because you’re the Elders’ watchdog?”

“Watch your mouth,” Morrigan snapped. “I’m not finished with you by a long shot.”

“What did I do?” he whined.

“Are you serious? Do you not remember last night?!”

“What happened last night?” Aidan asked with a raised eyebrow. “Oh I get it. You were in the middle of a date when Duncan appeared.”

“Are you really cracking a joke right now?” Morrigan scoffed. “People died!”

“And crying about it isn’t going to change anything. Lighten up.”

“You wouldn’t be saying that if Leah had died.”

“HEY!” Ori said, shooting to his feet between them. “I think this is the longest conversation the three of us have ever had together! How about we celebrate over a potion of strawberry nectar? I hear it’s only around for the rest of the month. Zorin can set up a table! You think his shop getting destroyed is going to stop him?”

Morrigan punched him in the face again, sending him right back to the spot he had come from.

“I’m on to both of you,” she said to Aidan while pointing at Ori. “Between this one’s horrible attempt at getting the Elder’s files, and your defiance of the rules, it’s only a matter of time before one of you makes a mistake that neither of you can wiggle your way out of.”

“This one has a name,” Ori retorted. “And who’s wiggling?” Morrigan raised the back of her hand at him and he waved his hands in surrender.

“The reversal of the expulsion rules wasn’t our doing,” Aidan replied, opening and closing his fist. “Neither was giving everyone permanent residence. That was the Elders. We weren’t involved.”

“There’s more going on than what you’re telling me,” Morrigan snapped. “Even before today, you were bailed out –” Ori snickered in the background. “– and you escaped the Discipline board. You either have pull with the Elders and they haven’t told me about it, or you’re working something behind their backs and I have a mind to tell them!”

“What do you care? You’re not one of them.”

“I could be.”

“What? If you suck up to them long enough? Right. No villager of Lowsunn has ever become an Elder.”

“That’s because Lowsunn hasn’t been established long enough to need new management. In time, I will take my place by their side.”

“Not if they get the Choate,” Ori said. “They’ll probably wish for immortality or something like that.”

“You can use a Yen for that now,” Morrigan retorted.

“Invincibility then,” Ori said, climbing back to his feet. “Or maybe they’ll take the Judge’s place. Who knows? Either way, I’m sure their intentions aren’t pure.”

“I’ve never seen them do anything wrong.”

“You can’t be serious,” Aidan scoffed.

“Don’t get mad at me. I’m telling the truth.”

“You’re telling me you actually believe everything they’re saying?”

“Don’t you believe your boss, or whoever it is that’s pulling your strings?” Morrigan shook her head in amusement. “We’re just two sides of the same coin. Whether it’s one side or the other, we’re still serving masters that want the same thing.”

“Maybe neither side knows what they really want,” Aidan said to Ori’s surprise. “Maybe it’s us three right here that could really make a difference.”

“What makes you say that?”

“You beat up Ori.”

“Hey!” the swordsman retorted, but Morrigan was intrigued.

“You mean just now?”

“No, I mean last night,” Aidan laughed. “Before he arrived to fight Duncan, his face was already bruised. Based on the dim aura radiating off his wounds like glitter, I figured it was you.”

“You know my power?” she asked, her face softening. A rare sight.

“I figured you out over a year ago. You’re a Summoner, aren’t you?” Ori stared at Morrigan in awe as he went over their fight in his mind.

“That can’t be,” Ori retorted. “I didn’t see anything besides her.”

“It’s a giant bird made of blue-colored energy,” Aidan said. Morrigan’s face confirmed it. “It lives within her, and she can use its power and channel it as if it were her own, or she can have it fight separately from her. I figure we haven’t seen it because it’s as big as a house, and letting it walk around the village is bound to bring unwanted attention, which of course, she absolutely hates.”

“How do you know all this?” Morrigan whispered, her eyes wet. “Who told you?”

“I frequent the Field of Visions often. Especially in the dead of night. Sometimes people don’t see me arrive.”

“We won’t tell anyone,” Ori said in concern. Morrigan blinked suddenly as if she had just woken up from a dream.

“I don’t care,” she whispered, putting a hand absent-mindedly to her chest. “Just watch yourselves. And think about following the

rules for once.” She sprinted past them and disappeared into a thicket.

“Why didn’t you tell me that sooner?” Ori asked. Aidan turned to his friend.

“Because she values her privacy, and I respect that. These days, when someone can just rip open your whole life like a book, a secret or two is as valuable as lost treasure. Plus, she’ll leave us be in the meantime.”

“If only she understood that all we want is what’s best for Lowsunn, she might join us.”

“Ori, can I ask you a question? A serious one.”

“Sure.”

“Do you think Bailey’s doing the right thing? Trying to uncover the Elder’s secrets? What if they’re private about everything so they don’t worry the people? Or make them panic unnecessarily? I’ll admit that it’s right for everyone to know what’s going on, but that doesn’t mean the present is always the right time to dish out the truth. Out there...I wish I could have taken back some of the things I’ve seen.”

“I think she knows what she’s doing.”

“Can I tell you a story?”

“If you’re in the mood,” he laughed. Aidan sat down in the grass and Ori followed suit. There was no one in ear shot to overhear them as the villagers were going back to their usual business as best they could.

“There is a land, not too many miles from here, called Old Black. A reference to the era long gone I figure. It’s a small town, much like Lowsunn, but far less impressive. It’s barely held together but there’s a community there. Being in the middle of a massive valley, it’s mainly a town to pass through in your travels. The people welcome everyone that comes there with open arms and lavish gifts. I think most of the resources that could be spent on fixing their shacks and dusty huts are used for the tourists. The reason is because it’s a town of naturals. Not one resident to my knowledge has a Yen, and knowing that they could be wiped out in a moment’s notice, they decided to practically worship anyone who visits. I guess it works. A few times while I lived there in hiding, the town would be attacked by

a psycho who had heard of them, but there was always a stranger with Yen to save the day and protect them all. I never had to get my hands dirty. Despite the humble shelters and plain food, it was a pretty peaceful life.”

“Then why didn’t you stay?”

“Because eventually I did put my hands in the dirt,” Aidan said, giving his friend a look that Ori had never seen before. It was a glossed-over stare that had seen horrors.

“Many children passed through the town in the six months I was there. Most of them without a guardian. Just confused and wandering around Obsidian, looking for purpose and safety. It was very rare to find a lost child who hadn’t used up all of their Yen already, having defended themselves from others for so long. Anyways, there was a man who took them in named Ionin. Didn’t matter if they had abilities or not, he was like a father to each of them, and being that I had lost family myself, I was drawn to him as well. I decided to become a partner to him, and he was the only one I told my secret to – that I had the Fire Arts at my disposal.”

“Was he killed?”

“No. Worse. All the children were. One by one they began disappearing and Ionin was sure they were running away, but I saw the way they looked up to him. The way they were so eager to hold his hand in public or jump on his back playfully whenever he was engrossed in a book. They loved that man. And so I started keeping a watchful eye, waiting to see what was happening.” Aidan paused over what he was about to say next.

“What was it?”

“Ionin was eating them,” he said, bowing his head. “Being a natural, he thirsted for the power of the seals, of the Yen, but he didn’t come to the acceptance many of his kind did. He believed that he could somehow take the power from another, and so, he would devour the children one by one, like something out of a dark fairy tale, hoping to absorb either their abilities or their Yen. He told me all this when I caught him in the act...”

“That’s horrible,” Ori said, a hand to his mouth. “What happened to him?”

“I killed him,” Aidan said, brushing his hand across the grass. “And the children came with me to travel across the land. After seeing what he did...I didn’t want to stay in that town a moment longer. But the reason I tell you this story is because I was fooled. As great of a person as he appeared to be and as much as I loved who I thought he was – he was just as evil, if not more so, than anyone else I had met in my travels. I understand his need for power, but surely there had to be another way...”

“And so you think Bailey might be like Ionin?”

“My instincts say no, but then again, who am I to trust them? All I know is that when one pursues power, there is usually more to their cause than honor and nobility. Power and doing the right thing don’t seem to be able to exist together.”

“I would have to agree with you on that,” Ori muttered. “If you like, I’ll take a closer look at Bailey.”

“And get caught like you did with Morrigan? No. Don’t bother.”

“So what do we do? Just wait until things are too late?”

“I don’t know...perhaps we should just be careful.”

“I don’t get you sometimes,” Ori laughed. “One moment you’re telling me this story to make my trust in Bailey waver, and the next, you’re saying we should just follow her commands.”

“Perhaps I’ve just realized that I’m tired of people getting hurt.”

“Is that what happened to the children?”

Aidan stood up suddenly and looked down at his friend, who was still waiting for the answer.

“What else happens to everyone around me?”





# Chapter 11 – Substitute



“I can’t believe you’re here,” Samantha replied as they walked into the schoolhouse together. Aidan chuckled and walked her to her seat.

“Stranger things have happened.”

“Now that the expulsion rule has been lifted, you’re ready to become tame?”

“Perhaps I believe in what the Elders are doing for once.”

“If that’s true, then the apocalypse is upon us,” she laughed. “Again.” She put down her backpack and was about to start rummaging through it for a utensil when a strange sight in the front of the room caught her attention. She nodded towards the man by the teacher’s desk. “Do you recognize him?” Aidan glanced up.

“We will begin class shortly,” the sweaty man with the large paunch said aloud. His voice was airy and shallow. Aidan didn’t like him already.

“Where is Bailey?” Aidan asked. The large man with the tussled hair smiled with his eyes.

“She’s not here.”

“Yes, I see that. Still doesn’t answer the question.”

“Aidan, sit down,” Samantha urged him. “If she’s out, there’s a good reason. Be patient and wait for the explanation.”

“Fine,” Aidan huffed, walking over to his seat and slamming down his posterior. The desk slid over a few inches, scraping the floor loudly, and then settled. The large man was not amused and blinked at the class rapidly as the last of Bailey’s regulars took their spots.

“My name is Eugene Balthasar,” he said, folding his massive hands. “Usually, I work in the Elders’ camp, but with our heightened level of fear in place, they have asked me to take over for Bailey while she is tasked with more important matters. At this moment, she is speaking with the Elders themselves, advising them on what their

next steps might be, based on her time with past scouting missions. I will be your teacher while she is away.”

“A substitute,” George scoffed from the corner.

“No, not a substitute,” Eugene corrected, holding up a meaty finger. “A substitute means there is an assumption that the replacement is equal to the original, and I assure you, I am far, far superior.”

“A bold claim,” Samantha replied. Aidan smiled. Eugene had even offended Samantha with his high and mighty talk.

“Don’t ruffle your feathers yet, young miss, we’re just getting started.” Eugene walked in front of the desk and stood before his new class. “Let me ask you all a question about Advent. Which of you believe it was a random event, and which of you believe it was planned?”

“What’s the point?” George asked.

“Just because you’re blind to a point, doesn’t mean it isn’t there,” Eugene said smugly. Aidan shook his head at the response and laughed under his breath. The substitute turned his attention to him. “What do you believe, young sir?”

“That it was planned,” Aidan said. “There is the Judge. It was probably him.”

“Was it now? Any other thoughts?”

“I can’t speak for everyone,” Elias said. “But when I was before the Judge...it didn’t feel like he was in charge. I mean, before him we had the same conversations across Naropa, didn’t we? Whether there was a Maker or not. No matter what someone believed, no one could provide concrete evidence and we were left to our opinions and personal experiences. But...all of a sudden, Advent happens and this Judge reveals himself when we make a wish? Why? Who is he? I mean, I used to think about what the Maker might look like, and it wasn’t anything like what the Judge looked like. And if the Judge was the Maker, why would he reveal himself now?”

“You pose interesting questions, young sir,” Eugene said, sitting on the desk. It creaked horribly under the weight. “Perhaps the Judge and the Maker are the same, but he did something bad. Maybe there’s a world beyond our sight that is full of Makers, and

they had a war. A war that resulted in our world being altered significantly.”

“Still, it’s all conjecture,” Elias retorted. “You don’t know that.”

“It’s true,” Eugene said. “I don’t know, and neither do you. And yet we speculate. We assume. We believe. And all of this affects our community in ways we can’t even fathom. What we must remember from here on out is that in Lowsunn, we are to follow orders, not act off wild notions and imagined scenarios. The Elders are here. They are among us, and they have looked out for our interests since the beginning. No matter what you believe about the outside world: Yen, the Judge, a Maker and everything beyond that...what you can have your faith in – is the judgment of the Elders.”

Aidan snickered and all eyes rested upon him.

“Is there something hilarious, Mr. Serafino?” Eugene asked politely. Aidan fidgeted in his seat.

“I believe the Elders’ actions can speak for themselves on whether or not they have good intentions. I don’t think there’s any need to send new teachers amongst all the classes to prep the village – to get us to fall in line with whatever they decide. I’ve learned that if someone talks long enough, everyone listening begins to start believing their crap.”

“You can’t be seriously bringing up the whole ‘actions over words’ mantra,” Eugene said accusingly, folding his hands as he arched an eyebrow at Aidan.

“Why not? I’ve done nothing wrong.”

“In your simple peanut-sized brain, no, you didn’t. But as your words flow out of your mouth like rapids, you forgot that we were all there last night. We remember the damage you caused. The lives that were lost. The Elders had a plan to execute the intruder without any collateral damage, but you had to speak for him. You had to fight him. You had to fan the flames.”

“You’re lying,” Aidan said boldly. “I acted when the others didn’t. The Elders didn’t have a plan. You’re just trying to twist things. Make it seem like I’m a liability. The Elders were perfectly fine letting me risk my life to save them, but now that the battle is over, they want to make sure it looks like I’m not to be trusted. What better place to start than amongst the few people who respect me?”

“You think too highly of yourself. You act as if you have all the answers, but if so, then Elder Ainsley’s daughter would not be in the infirmary. Duncan wouldn’t have had time to get so angry and play his sick hide-and-seek game. You are a nuisance, Mr. Serafino. A hindrance to the potential of the rest of us. A blight on Lowsunn’s legacy.”

“No, you’re the one that’s wrong,” George of the wind spoke up, standing to his feet.

“Young sir, please sit down.”

“No, not until I’ve had my say,” he snapped back. “Aidan may be a lot of things. But we can’t deny that he acted when we were all too scared to lift a finger last night. I don’t believe the Elders had a plan because they wouldn’t have allowed Duncan to enter the grand hall in the first place. We could have all died last night, but you all are too proud to accept it. Aidan did the best he could, and he saved many of our lives. Why are you trying to put him down?”

“It’s like I said,” Aidan said, still in his seat. “I’m a threat. To the Elders I’m probably another Duncan. They’ll use me as a weapon for a cause and then have me killed first chance they get. I don’t care what anyone says. You can’t fake love. I see that now. You know, when the Elders announced that we were all permanent residents, I couldn’t believe it. No matter how negatively I had thought about them, I couldn’t deny that it was a gesture so insanely positive that even I was willing to see where it went. You almost got me to climb on board. But I see now. That gesture was for everyone that would comply in the future. The rest of us? Who knows what will happen?”

“You’re paranoid and rash,” Eugene said.

“And you resort to labels when you can’t articulate yourself.”

“Like you’re one to talk,” Eugene muttered.

“Weren’t you listening? I just did.”

“Class dismissed,” Eugene barked. The class jolted back in shock as Eugene scanned the room. “I said...class dismissed. Get out. All of you. Except him.” He pointed his index finger directly at Aidan’s head. “You stay right there.”

Aidan sighed and turned around just enough to nod to his classmates, signaling for them to leave. He couldn’t help but see the concern in their eyes. As they exited one by one, he tried to stare

through the thick fabric of Eugene's long sleeve shirt. How many seals did this man have? What abilities were at his disposal? He decided to hold himself back as much as he could. Because of the way the teacher had lashed out at him, Aidan knew he had the advantage.

"I am your enemy, Mr. Serafino," Eugene stated, folding his arms. "I hope you realize that."

"It's not exactly a secret at this point," Aidan said. "What do you want?"

"Just kidding!" Eugene guffawed, unfolding his arms and placing both hands on his bouncing belly. "That was quite the show, wasn't it?"

Aidan raised his eyebrows and looked around the room. What kind of trickery was this?

"Sorry for that," Eugene said, sitting on the teacher's desk again. "I had to do it. Bailey's orders. You know once she tells you to do something, you'd better follow it like you would an order from the Judge himself."

"Um, okay," Aidan replied. He didn't know what to say to this jolly, apologetic man. The change disturbed him.

"I work with Bailey behind the scenes. I understand that she wasn't revealing to you who was involved in the Movement because she wasn't sure if you could be trusted. But after last night, there are no doubts. I don't expect you to believe me at this moment. But my legitimacy will come to light soon."

Aidan said nothing.

"Bailey has taken a more background approach because she wants to find out what the Elders' endgame is as soon as possible, and she has asked me to relay some information to you in the meantime." He reached behind him into his back pocket, and produced a crumpled, stained piece of paper. "On here are a list of names involved in our resistance."

"And I'm supposed to just carry this around?" Aidan scoffed.

"Silly, you're supposed to memorize it then burn it before you walk out the door."

"Mm-hmm," Aidan muttered as he scanned the list. More than half of them he didn't recognize, but he easily committed them all to

memory.

“It’s vital that you recognize friend or foe,” Eugene replied. “She could be wrong, but Bailey suspects that you, along with any other threats to the Elders’ plans, will be put on scouting missions in the next announcement. Should you be paired with anyone on the list, don’t acknowledge their involvement with us, but just understand that if you’re in a horrible situation, they have your back.”

Aidan listened, but he wasn’t sure if he believed. So, he was just supposed to assume that these strangers were going to save his life in a time of need?

“Do you have any questions?”

“Just one. What’s your role in all this again?”

“I don’t see how that’s pertinent.”

“If we’re all allies now, I would like some clarification.”

“I already told you that I work closely with the Elders.”

“Then why didn’t Ori know what he was getting into at their compound?”

“I don’t get to just peruse around their homes, go inside and make myself a sandwich. I’m more of a secretary if anything. They give me orders, I obey. And occasionally, some interesting information comes across my eyes that I think can be used to further our cause. I gave Bailey everything I knew.”

“Well, for the record, I don’t trust you,” Aidan said flatly, rising from his desk.

“Not surprising,” he laughed. “You don’t trust anyone.”

“Not true. I trust Bailey. I trust Ori...but not some guy that I’ve just met who says he’s part of a resistance.”

“Why? Because I humiliated you in front of the class?”

“Humiliation would imply that I allowed such a thing to happen, which I didn’t. I’m not embarrassed at all. But you should be.”

“What? Why?”

“Because if Bailey’s told you anything about me, it’s that I’m wary about everything, and your actions didn’t ward off any of my suspicions. Bailey’s my mentor, not you. If there’s anything else you would like to say to me, give her the message.”

“But I already told you. She’s – ”

“Yeah I know. She’s not here right now. And I’m going to find out the real reason why.”

“Geez, we told her that it was too soon to take you into the fold. You still got a lot of growing up to do.”

“Don’t we all?” Aidan replied and walked out the doors.





## Chapter 12 - Leah



**C** *an I do this?* Aidan wondered, as he walked through the Infirmary. *Is this possible?*

A cry of pain interrupted his thoughts but he was able to rein his attention back to the task at hand. The Field of Visions had been full that day, and normally it would have been his next stop after class, but he wasn't in the mood to play with his Fire Arts. Today, he was thinking of a different kind of wish fulfillment, and so he decided to head for the Infirmary.

The commotion around him acted as a wonderful white noise, preventing the villagers from catching wind of his taboo thoughts. ***Raising the dead is not impossible***, he thought to himself as he turned a corner.

It had been done countless times since the Cataclysm. Though Aidan had not seen it happen personally, there were too many eyewitness accounts to dismiss the notion. Still, there was an unsaid rule against it. He could see it in the faces of the listeners whenever a resurrection account was detailed. Not that it mattered to him what others generally thought, but Leah...what would she think? Especially since he would need her help to do it. Raising the dead with the Judge...it was a tall order, requiring no less than three Yen in exchange. Aidan had two, and Leah might give up one, but was it the right thing to do? He still wanted to make the Judge pay for murdering his family, but could he do it without backup Yen?

Aidan sighed and examined the palms of his hands, watching the liquid fire pumping through his veins. There was no doubt greater heights he could reach in power. New techniques. But it would take time, and things were beginning to move in a direction in which there would be little leisure. For now, he would have to rely on his abilities. And his good judgment.

Turning into Leah's room, all of his worries disappeared once he saw her smiling face. She immediately brushed back her hair and

wiped her face with the blankets that were draped over her legs.

“Am I beautiful?” she batted her eyes playfully. Aidan chuckled, strolled over to her bed, and leapt upon it, making it creak under the weight of the two of them. Leah patted his leg as he fixed his gaze upon her. He didn’t need to ask. He could tell she had been crying.

“How is my warrior today?” she asked, finally meeting him face-to-face. He kissed her before she could utter another word, so hard that it rocked her head back. She smiled from beneath his lips and reciprocated, kissing him back several times in rapid succession.

A creak of the door interrupted them as their heads swiveled to the entrance. A glimpse of a nurse’s gown flashed and then vanished behind the closing door. Once it clicked shut, they both burst out laughing.

“Are you feeling better?” Aidan asked, turning to her with a concerned look. She patted his cheek.

“It’s a little different from a normal miscarriage,” she said, maintaining her smile. “And it helps a little that I didn’t even know I was pregnant...but...I could be better, I guess.”

“Has your father come to see you yet?”

“He’s sent over some flowers, but I understand he’s busy.”

“Are you going to be in here much longer?”

“They want to keep an eye on me for a couple of days, but I can request to go home whenever I want.”

“Are you?”

“Not yet,” she said, turning her head towards the window. “If you don’t mind.”

“Of course not,” he said, looking at the door. “You know, the Elders are going to be handing out assignments for missions shortly. Part of me was kind of hoping you were going to join me in one. We don’t have a say in the team composition, but there’s always that chance.”

“You really think I’m ready to go out there and fight again?”

“Are you?” Aidan asked, facing her again. She smirked and tried to smack him playfully in the face, but he caught her hand.

“You know I am,” she said with a wink. “You think I’m going to just let you have all the fun?”

“You don’t have to put on a strong face for me. I just want to help you out in any way I can. Just tell me what you need, and I’m there.”

“Just don’t leave me behind,” she said. Aidan could tell immediately by the hardening of her face and the disappearance of her smile that this was what she wanted most. Not their child resurrected. Not to become an Elder or have a wonderful life free of conflict. It was this.

For Aidan to not leave her behind.

And he would do his best to honor her wish. Though they had been married almost a year, they had only known each other for about the same time. They were still learning and teaching each other, and it was only recently that Aidan had realized just how much Leah needed him – he had previously only known how much he needed *her*.

They had met in gym class, back when the Elders in all their superior wisdom had thought that throwing thirty young villagers together in the Field of Visions to spar was a good idea. It had been chaotic, but to this day, the youth of Lowsunn discussed the glory days of when gym had still been on the class roster. A simpler time, they say.

Nevertheless, it was no accident that the day Aidan met Leah, it was also the day he received his first strike towards expulsion. He was still unsociable then, not even talking to Ori and barely uttering a grunt to Bailey. Since he had a knack for fighting, Bailey had asked him to join the gym class to not only gain favor amongst his peers, but to also show that he was in Lowsunn for a reason. Reluctantly he had joined, and he mainly just stood around, watching his classmates play in the grass and casually spar. He sat there in his robe with the hood on, just listening to the occasional clash of swords and the spurts of giggles and cheers. He didn’t dare get involved in their play, more for their sake than his. Even the teacher understood that. She stayed next to him to ensure he didn’t cause any trouble, but she took no action towards getting him to participate.

He had been debating on whether to take a nap or walk away altogether when Leah had first caught his eye. He remembered a flash of blue. And then a literal twelve-foot wall of dirt had sped past his face, nearly smacking him in the side of the head. Startled, he

shot up to his feet and followed the dirt wall's path with his eyes. It continued barreling forward until it smashed into a student, sending him flying off balance a few yards from where he had once stood.

Aidan swiveled around and found the source immediately.

She was already drawing forth another dirt wall from beneath the ground, and she was cackling like a witch the entire time.

"Leah, cut it out," the teacher yelled. "It's not fair to them!"

"What's not fair?" Aidan asked beside her, making the teacher shriek in horror. She jumped and put a hand to her chest as he removed his hood and let his spiky hair flow. "What's not fair?"

"How she's overcoming the others. She's received special training from her father, and they haven't, so it's quite unfair."

"And why does that matter?"

"Her father is an Elder of Lowsunn."

"Oh, is that all?" Aidan said aloud, glaring at the teacher. The words had clearly carried to Leah's ears, for she immediately turned towards him with a scowl. He tried to deny the churning in his stomach when she did. Was this another one of her abilities? Being able to paralyze someone? To make someone fall under some kind of hypnotic spell? He shook his head and looked back at her again, but the feelings were still there. She was so beautiful that it could be nothing but sorcery. She had an elegance to her like royalty, as if she was propelled forward with the breeze. How did she manage that?

Nevertheless, she was approaching him fast, and as she got closer, the effects were only getting worse.

"And who are you?" she asked, pointing a finger in his face. Aidan swatted it away absent-mindedly, and she gasped in horror. She faced the teacher immediately. "I want him to be my new sparring partner."

"Um, we're not going to do that," the teacher said, glancing back and forth between them.

"Why not? Because he's from the outside? What difference does that make?"

"He might not be able to control himself." Aidan rolled his eyes at the remark. Did she remember that he was standing right there?

"I can handle him. I'm ready," Leah said, examining Aidan up and down. He snickered and stepped away from the two women, walking

out into the open field. He was more than willing to prove that she wasn't.

"There's a lot of boys around here that think they're tough," the blue-haired girl explained, pacing around him. "They talk a big game just because I'm a girl when they're the ones that end up on their butt."

He didn't hear much of what she said. He could tell she was speaking, but all he could see was her face. It was cute when she scowled.

"Are you listening to me?" she finally screamed. He shot his head up to attention.

"Who me?" he asked. "No, not really."

"You're just like the rest," she spat, extending her palms to the ground. "You're going to regret underestimating me." The other students in the field backed away and let Aidan and Leah have their space. Leah smiled and called forth another wall of dirt, which emerged from the grass and reached further and further up into the sky. Aidan stared in awe as its top reached beyond the clouds and its borders extended so far out that he couldn't even see Leah and the rest of the field anymore. Before he could ask what she intended to do with the wall, he got his answer. The wall flew forward as fast as a punch, and he had little time to react. Instinctively he threw up a fire shield, but he knew before the sphere completed around him that it wouldn't be enough.

To his surprise, the wall stopped just before impact and exploded into chunks, each the size of an adult hand. The chunks hovered around him as if pondering what to do next and then decided to form back together again. Except this time, they enclosed around him like they were part of his own fire shield, encasing him inside a gigantic shell like an oversized cocoon.

Trapped, he began preparing to blow his way out of it when he heard the first crackle of electricity. His eyes shot upwards, and he narrowly jumped backward in time to dodge the lightning bolt. Aidan heard three more crackles from beneath him, and he decided to stop playing around.

Clenching his fists tight, he summoned all the power he could muster from within his body, jumped into the air, and then unleashed

it like a bomb. The walls around him exploded and crumbled to the grass. While he was in mid-air, a sharp pain suddenly shot through one of his ribs. He clutched his side instinctively, and his hand wrapped around a shard of ice jutting out of his torso. He landed to his feet and narrowly ducked under a shower of ice shards soaring toward his head. As he sprinted away, he locked his eyes on Leah, feverishly summoning every trick in her playbook to put him down. More dirt walls. Ice showers. Fire waves...

If she was summoning fire, was she immune to his attacks? He scowled and dropped to one knee to avoid a bolt of lightning, which grazed his spiked hair and made it stand up even more. With tiny streams of electricity sizzling across the spikes in his hair, Aidan decided to stand slowly to his feet. He couldn't help but smile once he saw the shock on her face. The intimidation had worked. It must have looked like the bolt had struck his forehead, and still he had risen, unharmed, and ready for more.

He thrust his hands behind him and formed his hands into claws, calling forth the flames from them, feeding them with the will to hurt. He didn't want to harm her gorgeous face, but he couldn't back down once provoked – not from anyone. Through the soles of his feet, the liquid fire poured, crawling across the ground and spreading like a web in all directions. It extended out for half a mile, cracking the surface and preparing the terrain for his ultimate attack. Once his hands were as red as blood, he slapped them together. The ground made a booming sound and a tsunami of fire roared from the cracks, heading straight for Leah.

She had long sensed the danger coming from behind him. The several rock walls, all covered in thick ice borders were a testament to that. But it made no difference. Living in Lowsunn, she was used to leisure and rest. But he would never let his fire die, and that became evident the moment the tsunami of flames smashed into the first rock and ice wall.

It consumed it like it was made of fire and proceeded to devour the rest, showing no sign of slowing. What made no sense to him, however, was what Leah decided to do upon her inevitable fate.

She didn't run.

Instead, she met it head-on, running forward as if it were a veil. The two forces collided, and it appeared that the flames had claimed another victim.

But then she emerged from the tail end, still sprinting forward, and to the horror of everyone watching the fight, they saw that she had emerged completely naked.

The fire may have consumed her clothes, but not her. And certainly not her will. With a wave of her hand to the right, the dirt flowed around her body from beneath and encased her in armor of rock, covering everything from the neck down. Aidan blinked and tried to think of how to react when she was suddenly right in front of him, a fist encased in rock at his face.

He could only see quick images as she began hitting him without mercy, rock and all. When he fell to the grass on his butt, she used one hand to grab him by the collar of his shirt and used the other to send a stream of fire upon his abdomen. He knew what she was trying to do – burn his clothes as he had hers, but it was a bad move. She should have finished him off, not just tried to humiliate him.

Aidan kicked at her legs and rolled out of the way as she fell face-first into the grass. She tried climbing to her feet, but Aidan tackled her quickly, pressing his body weight on top of hers. He placed a hand on the back of her head and shoved her face further into the grass.

“Cut it out. You’re done,” he said as he heard crackles all around him. He glanced down and saw her right arm feeding the ground beneath them, creating a network of electricity underneath him the same way he had with his fire. Before she could allow it to manifest, he grabbed a fistful of her hair, pulled her head up, and then slammed her face into the ground as hard as he could. He felt her body go limp.

The stampede of footsteps behind him caught his attention.

“I didn’t kill her,” he said quickly, rising to his feet and facing the incoming crowd.

“You hurt the Elder’s daughter!” the teacher screamed. Aidan shrugged his shoulders.

“Why should she get special treatment? We’re all going to be kicked out of this place.” The teacher began to reply in protest when



she cupped her mouth once more. Aidan turned around just in time to catch a fist to the jaw, encased in even more rock than before. Leah grit her teeth and went for another blow, but Aidan was faster. He head-butted her in the forehead, and she staggered back, clutching the crown of her head as her legs wobbled.

“That hurt,” she muttered as she put up both of her rock fists and shook her head to gather her thoughts. “But that’s not going to be good enough, little boy.”

“What are you made of?” Aidan asked in exasperation as the teacher stepped between them.

“That’s it! That’s it!” she shouted. “We’re done here! Both of you are going to be brought to the detention center immediately! Any objections, and I’ll make sure you’re given another strike on top of the one you’re already getting.”

“What?” Leah exclaimed. “Why do I get a strike?”

“Because you went too far,” she huffed. “You especially should know better! Now both of you come with me now. And no talking until we get there! For the rest of you, class is dismissed!”

Aidan sighed and followed, knowing that getting one strike was bad enough. Leah stomped along with them, keeping her rock armor on. The other students dispersed quickly.

“This is for your own good,” the teacher snapped as Aidan yawned from behind. They walked in silence until they reached the infirmary. Aidan snapped his head toward Leah and examined the bruises on her face. She wasn’t hurt THAT bad. No need to worry. She was still pretty. Just more of an unpleasant dream than a lovely fantasy.

The three of them marched down the labyrinth of halls, passing by the meager number of doctors and nurses until they reached an off-white door in a narrow dead end. The teacher pressed down on the handle, and a whooshing sound could be heard from the frame. Aidan stepped inside the room, curious about how it had made that noise, but all wonder vanished when he heard the door slam and click behind him. He had been thrown inside, all alone.

Aidan pressed a hand against the door’s surface, but nothing came from his palm. He looked at his hands and tried to see through them to the liquid fire, but all he saw were his palms. A click was

heard from above him, and he spun around. The room was about thirty square feet long and the ceiling was about the height of two of him. It was bathed in lily-white and composed of glossy, spotless walls. The air had a slight chill, and there wasn't a single piece of furniture or decoration.

Looking at the room around him, Aidan almost preferred getting an extra strike to this. He wasn't used to confined spaces and lifeless rooms. And worst of all, his Fire Arts had disappeared...how was that possible? No one in their right mind would use a Yen to take away his ability. Only those with deep vendettas did that, and he hadn't been in Lowsunn long enough to acquire any enemies.

Another click and whoosh was heard, and the door sprung open. He rushed it, but Leah met him head-on. Literally. She head-butted him in the forehead on purpose, and he went sprawling onto his back, grunting at the sudden sting above his eyes. Leah smirked as the door closed and locked behind her.

"What is wrong with you?" Aidan shouted as Leah chose a corner of the room and sat up against it. Aidan crawled over to an opposite corner and dabbed at his wound.

"You're not bleeding," she said. Her voice echoed, and the extra vibration made him wince.

"You can stop looking at me now," he said.

"But you're so big and strong. I just can't control my feminine desires. What will I do with myself locked in a room with you for 24 hours?"

"24 hours?!" he yelled, meeting her eyes. One was a bit swollen. "There's not even a place to go to the bathroom. They can't do that!"

"Excuse me," a voice reverberated throughout the room. Aidan raised an eyebrow and looked for the source, but Leah didn't appear concerned, so he settled down quickly. "Aidan Serafino. Leah Ainsley. The two of you are being detained for 24 hours for the excursion that occurred in the Field of Visions. During this time, your abilities will be taken away from you. This room was designed for prisoners but given that we are in a time of peace, it has been designated for detention purposes. While here, all natural bodily functions will be inhibited, including your need to eat, drink, sleep, and go to the bathroom. You are to reflect upon your actions and

discuss a civil and mature way to get past any conflict between the two of you. Any, and I mean any physical fighting will result in an increase in the time of your stay. Enjoy.”

Another click was heard and the voice was gone.

“Hey!” Aidan shouted at the ceiling, but Leah laughed at him.

“They can’t hear you. It’s a one-way speaker.”

“We’re here for 24 hours, huh?” Aidan said, examining his palms again. “That’s a long time.” Leah said nothing. “I noticed that you got a change of clothes.” Leah looked down at her standard Lowsunn uniform and then back at him.

“Yes, my rock armor wouldn’t have worked in here, and it would have been very inappropriate to leave me in here in such a vulnerable state.” She flashed him a false smile. “Sorry to disappoint.”

“I like you better with your clothes on, actually.”

“Why’s that? So, you can concentrate? You can slam girls’ faces into the ground better?”

“Would you have preferred that I treated you differently because you’re a girl?”

“No,” she said, brushing a hand against her jaw. “Just hurts.”

“Yeah, getting hit does that. A cause and effect thing.”

“Speaking of cause and effect,” she said, pointing at him. “What’s up with the robe? It didn’t burn.”

“It’s special,” he said, casually looking away.

“How so?”

“I would rather not talk about it.”

“This is the most I’ve heard you talk all year. Why stop now? We’re going to be here for a long time. More time if I happen to walk over there and head-butt you again.”

“I wouldn’t get more time. You would.”

“Right. Like you would be able to contain yourself,” she laughed.

“For an Elder’s daughter, you sure are a lot different than I thought you would be.”

“He’s my dad, not my Majesty. I’m free to form my own opinions, you know.”

“Your beliefs include punching a bunch of weak villagers in the face?”

“Thank you for that,” she said. He snickered at the response.

“For what?”

“You said the other villagers were weak, implying I’m not.”

“It’s not saying much.”

“Is that how you view the people here? Weak? A waste of time?”

“I just don’t think any of the training they’re receiving will help.”

“Says the man with the busted face.”

“I’m a man now and not a boy?” he smiled. “Well, thank you for that.”

“You shouldn’t thank me,” she said with leery eyes. “It’s unbecoming of bad boys. Your spell over me is weakening with every soft answer out of your plain and undesirably flat lips.”

“My lips happen to be grade A material.”

“Sorry,” she scoffed. “But I think we’ll have to stop here. I don’t usually flirt with guys who head-butt me when I meet them.”

“Yeah, but you said yourself, you don’t want to be lumped in with them,” he said, pointing outside the door. “You want to be different, right?”

“I want to be the best fighter here,” she chuckled. “Not someone’s girlfriend.”

“Who’s asking you out?”

“Well, it kind of sounds like you are.”

“If I was asking you to be my girlfriend, I would say so.”

“Right,” she said with a smirk. “I forgot. You’re that kind of guy...so I take it we’re friends now?”

“Why would you want to be friends with me?”

“Because we did good out there. We have a lot to learn from each other.”

“You caught me off guard by not dying in the fire. And then running at me butt-naked. I hardly call that a strategy.”

“Hey, you never know. It might save you someday,” she winked. He tried his best not to laugh at that one.

“In any case, I don’t have time to train anyone.”

“Why? You busy right now? Doing what? Brooding?”

“It’s a 24-hour job.”

“I won’t hold you back.”

“I see that,” he said. “And I respect what you were able to do to me out there. But...I’m not good with people...I have a temper. Sometimes I get emotional and just lose it. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Ha,” Leah scoffed. “And that, ladies and gentleman, is the irony of the day.”

“I’m serious.”

“Why? Because I’m a girl?”

“No.”

“Because I’m just a Lowsunn villager?”

“No...I already said I respected your style.”

“Then what is it?”

“Everyone I’ve ever loved died,” he said suddenly.

She paused for a second, cleared her throat and gave out a long sigh. “Tell me what happened,” Leah said in concern. Aidan shook his head and threw his arms over his knees.

“I won’t,” he said. Leah jumped to her feet and began marching over to him with clenched fists. He threw up his hands in surrender. “Alright. Cut it out. I’ll tell you. Just don’t force me to be in here any longer than I have to.”

“Agreed,” she said, plopping down beside him. “But I want to hear everything.”

“You can hear just fine from the other corner.”

“This corner is comfier,” she said, scooting closer to him.

“Besides, it’s cold in here.”

“Don’t expect me to take off my robe and give it to you.”

“I don’t expect you to be a gentleman at all,” she said, punching his shoulder. “Now hurry up. Tell me.”

“I just told you that everyone I’ve ever loved has died. Don’t you think it’s something that might take me a little bit of time to talk about?”

“Yeah, but that’s not you,” she said, looking at him. He refused to look back. “One of the reasons I was so happy to face you today is because you wear your heart on your sleeve. Don’t get me wrong. You’re a jerk to people, and—”

“— I get it,” he snapped.

“You might want to work on that,” she laughed. “But you’re the type of man that when you love, you love strong. You fight strong.”

You believe strong. There's no wishy-washiness –"

"– wishy-washiness?"

"– and there's no deception or games. Who I see, is who you are. Being an Elder's daughter – that's something I appreciate more than you know. And you know what? I know now why you don't want to tell me what happened."

"Why?" he asked out of curiosity.

"Because you have feelings for me," she said with a smile. "And they must be pretty serious. If you didn't want to tell me at all about your past, you would just yell at me or bark some orders, or go crazy. But you're not. For you to even admit that you've lost loved ones tells me that you want to open up to me. You're just not sure of how far to take it because, as you said, you lose anyone you love. Still, you care."

"I head-butt you in the face today," Aidan snickered, finally meeting her eyes.

"And I tagged you back, you jerk." The way her green eyes sparkled only made the churning in his stomach worse.

"Sorry about that," he said, clenching his jaw. When Leah didn't answer, he continued. "When the Cataclysm came..."

"Cataclysm?"

"My word for Advent or whatever you people say. Can I continue?"

"Only if you don't throw a tantrum. I only wanted a bit of clarification."

"Anyways," Aidan muttered, "there was a firestorm. It hit my village and killed everyone there. Except for me."

"Your village must have been on the edge of the Land of Bones."

"Yeah," he said, staring out into space. "We were one of the closest civilizations to ground zero. The firestorm was just the shockwave. I didn't know that for years though. The only thing that saved me was the Yen I received. Saw the Judge for the first and only time. Got the warning, like we all do...and I kept moving."

"What about your family? Did they get caught in the storm?"

"No, I found them quickly actually. My mother, father and little sister. They had taken her on an educational trip far away from the village before the firestorm hit. When we met up, they said they had

seen it in the distance and hurried back. Even then, I was so happy to see them, but I was so angry. Even more so than I am now. Being out in the wild taught me a little patience. But back then? I just wanted to hurt someone. The type of man I was, I didn't care whether I was right or wrong. Someone had to suffer for the injustices I saw around me, even when I wasn't personally involved. You stole fruit from Mrs. Cobbler's perch? You started whining about planting crops? I had to be the judge, jury, and executioner. Though there wasn't much questioning involved...I was always an angry kid, looking for an excuse to lash out."

"But why? Did something happen to you when you were younger?"

"No, I don't think so. I had a pretty good childhood. Maybe no one ever taught me how to handle my emotions. My father and mother were there, but they weren't involved in a sense. They taught me about the world, but nothing about myself. It was more like an education than nurturing. But I don't blame them. That's just who they were. I don't want to pretend that I'm not responsible for my actions. I hate people who do that...believe it or not, no one gets more pissed at me than I do when I lose myself. But it's hard to handle."

"Practice helps," she said with a nod. "I'm sorry. Go on."

"My father naturally took the lead as we searched for a new home. Between the four of us, we had six Yen, not counting the one I used for my Fire Arts. That was pretty much an army at that time. People were so scared...we went to the closest town that hadn't been destroyed. Place called Tri-till. We had been there a couple times in the past. Very hospitable people. But before we even reached the borders, we were approached by a band of thieves. There were six of them. They wanted our clothes, our property, everything we had on us. My father ordered us not to interfere as he used his one and only Yen to increase his strength by ten men. Don't know why to this day he didn't wish for more," Aidan laughed. "He had no imagination...anyways, he fought them, but didn't even cause one to fall. One of the bandits had the ability to paralyze others, making their bodies completely useless. All it took was a wave of his hand and my father was helpless. They made quick work of him."

Aidan sighed and glanced over at Leah. She nodded as she wiped her eyes with her sleeve. He couldn't believe his eyes. Was she actually crying? After everything she had just done to him? After all her talk? After their big battle? She was reduced to tears over a story?

Still, there was something beautiful about it. The world had hardened him, and he was so afraid of what he might do if he felt again that he kept his emotions in an impenetrable shell; but she hadn't been changed. She could fight against the horrors of the world, and still let the tears flow as freely as the cleansing rain.

"The three of us left were paralyzed and brought to our knees," he continued. "They searched us and didn't find much and my sister and I looked to the next in charge in our family for answers, but my mother had none. She was as terrified as we were, and I was forced to think of options. The bandits discussed what should happen to us and it was decided that my sister and I could be their slaves, but my mom might cause trouble. She was too old, and probably too stubborn to be broken they said. They took a knife...and before they killed her...they...she used one of her Yen on me. This robe –"

He pulled at one of his sleeves.

"It can't be burned, torn, or taken from me without my will. I don't know what she wished for exactly, or what she and the Judge talked about...all I know is that this robe is bound to me. She probably made the wish out of urgency and figured it was better to use one than lose them altogether."

"Your mother had more?"

"Three," he said, lifting up his sleeve to reveal his three Yen. Two light, one darkened. "Just like me. I think that to get the Judge's attention, you have to get the whole sentence out either in word or thought. You have to say what you're wishing for, and it's kind of locked in."

"Is that why you think your mother couldn't use her other two?"

"I have two theories. One is that she thought the first wish, went before the Judge, it was granted, and then they killed her before she could utter the next. Or, she tried to stay with the Judge in his chamber to avoid death, and he took away her other two, leaving her helpless."



“You don’t think someone could make multiple wishes in one sitting with the Judge?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t tried. And given the warning he issued, I doubt anyone is willing to risk their Yen asking him any probing questions.”

“And anyone who has done it already aren’t about to admit it. Especially if they lost their Yen in the process.”

“Exactly. It’s like advertising that you’re defenseless.”

“What happened to you and your sister? Did you two escape?”

“I killed the bandits in order to,” he said matter-of-factly. “The exact same way that I tried to hurt you. While they were interrogating my sister, I set it up, envisioning a way to consume them all in one move while I was still paralyzed on the ground, especially since I had no idea what abilities they had. When I finally unleashed the tsunami, it took them off guard. It took out five of them but the last one used a Yen to protect himself at the last moment. He was about to kill me with the same knife he had used on my mother when my sister used her only Yen to be granted Water Arts. With the man who could paralyze us dead, she was able to drown the last bandit by keeping a bubble full of water over his head. The man had used his only Yen to protect himself from fire, but not water.”

“So where is she now?”

“Diana was killed three weeks later. And after that, I swore off attaching myself to people and communities for as long as I could. I somehow got persuaded to check out a few more places before I ended up here, and they all turned out bad. No matter how good they aspired to be, the communities all fell apart. A change in leadership. An uprising. The death of someone great and inspiring. Whenever I found hope, it was threatened and taken away like the dirt of my hands in a streaming river. And it’s usually not even a serious threat. It’s usually an evil minority against a good majority, but the problem is, the majority aren’t willing to fight for what they know is right. That’s the real tragedy. That’s why the outside is so dangerous. There is far more doing good than evil, but because the evil deeds are left alone and unchallenged, they outdo all the beauty and wonder that these Yen offer. It’s why...it’s why I would rather not deal with people. Because you’re right.”

He turned to look into Leah's eyes.

"I do love hard. Too hard. And I know that at some point, someone will want to taint all the beauty around me. Some bastard will want to unravel the magic, and I'll have to fight, and no one will help, and I'll be forced to watch what I love most get trampled on and slaughtered over and over again. That's why I crawl into myself. That's why I have my distant, hardened shell, and I lash out at anyone that dares to drag me back into their horrendous reality."

"I get it," she said, wiping her sleeve across her face. "But just like the people who won't do anything for the greater good, letting yourself be lost and alone does nothing to improve your personal life. Maybe no one will help you fight the evil out there, but you can fight the evil in front of you. You're very powerful, and yes, you're probably stronger than most, if not all the villagers here. But that doesn't mean you can't improve."

"How so?"

"When you're in the heat of battle, you're not level-headed, so you either lash out at your opponent like a hurricane, or you fall back on old techniques. There had to have been a hundred ways to see if I was immune to fire or not without bringing out your best move. You did consider my immunity to fire, didn't you?"

"I did."

"Then you did it all wrong. We would like to think that what we manifest is limitless, but that's not true. There are limits. The Yen we use becomes a part of us. We may not know how yet, but it's clear that there is an end to our output. Otherwise, you wouldn't have been so tired from that technique that I was able to step and beat on you."

"You're trying to get me to train you again," he smirked. "You make it sound like you have some hidden knowledge that I'll only get if we spar together."

"That's right," she laughed. "I have the goods. And while we're at it, if you happen to impart a few tips my way, that would be much appreciated."

"I don't know what I could teach you."

"I already learned a lot by listening to your stories. You told me about a few abilities people have on the outside. That's vital

information that could save my life one day. And you were out there for years! There's a lot I can learn from you."

"If we train together...I don't want to hold back."

"I wouldn't ask for anything less. I only want one thing."

"What?"

"Don't leave me behind."

"What are you talking about now?"

"You're going to get stronger. I know it. I've seen you outside late at night in the Field. If there is one thing you dedicate yourself wholly to, it's getting stronger. I want to be right there with you. Today was exhilarating, and I want many more days like that. I don't want you to train so hard on your own that you surpass me, and you start looking down on me."

"That won't happen," he said with a smile. "Who do you think I am?"

"You might not do it intentionally," she said. "But there might come a time when we're training less and less together. A scout mission might go by where you're taken, and I'm not. Eventually, you'll start thinking of me as baggage. As a liability, and not a partner. I don't want that. Side by side, the whole time. That's my condition."

"Condition? You're the one getting most of the training!"

"See? It's started already. You're thinking that you'll be coaching the whole time and not learning anything. That's not true. I can show you a lot! Or do I need to shove an ice shard through your ribs again?"

"Speaking of...I should get that looked at," he said, glancing down. "Does this room heal?"

"Don't change the subject! Are we going to train together or not?"

"You still want to partner up with me even after I told you how everyone around me dies?"

"You forget one important detail. I'm not defenseless. I can handle myself, or at the very least, someone as strong as you. I'm on your level."

Aidan thought about it for a moment and then snickered at her words. ***Perhaps...perhaps she was right.***

“Before I completely agree to this, you have to answer a couple of questions for me first.”

“Sure,” Leah said, turning her body to completely face him. “Hit me.”

“Are you attracted to me?”

“Is this a serious question, or are you massaging your ego?”

“A little of both. Just answer before I say no.”

“I am,” she said. Her face flushed, and her cheeks reddened. Her shoulders perked up towards her ears and her lips pursed together in embarrassment. Aidan smirked and then wiped his smile away. He wanted to keep this serious.

“And I can tell you that I’m very attracted to you too, if you’re wondering.”

“Are you sure you didn’t catch a cold?” she giggled.

“Next question. What happens if you surpass me strength-wise?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t leave you or anything,” she said casually. “Now that we’ve had the opportunity to talk, I see that you’re not so bad. You’re like a wounded puppy.”

“And when we leave Lowsunn?” he asked, ignoring her.

“You mean a mission? Or the expulsion?”

“Expulsion. What happens to us on the outside?”

“I would imagine we would travel together. If we work well, why would we break that up?”

“I was thinking the same thing.”

“Where is this going?”

“Final question.”

“Okay,” she said, no longer smiling.

“Marry me.” Her eyes searched his face, but he remained concrete. Twice, she opened her mouth but didn’t say anything. Finally, she scowled, blinked a few times and spoke.

“That wasn’t a question.”

“You know what I mean.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I love hard,” he replied, taking her hands. “I already told you that.”

“But you don’t love me,” she scoffed. “You have a crush, or you think I’m pretty. That’s not love. That’s not worth getting married over.”

I don't even know how someone gets married around here."

"Doesn't matter. I want the commitment. If you're not going to take this seriously..."

"We were trying to kill each other earlier."

"And we may again. But that doesn't mean we can't get married."

"Do you hear yourself?"

"I'm going to just break it down to you straight."

"Oh, here we go," she said, rolling her eyes.

"I find you so beautiful that it makes me forget who I am. I can't think straight. I can't breathe right. And I could see it in your eyes too. You want me."

"Why is this happening to me?" she muttered, shaking her head but still leaving her hands in his.

"There's no getting around it. We're going to end up doing things that go well beyond training. It's just going to happen. I'm too passionate. You're too passionate. Things happen."

"Uh-huh," she muttered, rolling her eyes again. "Things happen, he says."

"But our marriage would be more than that. It gives the two of us assurances. By making this commitment, it lets us both know that we're serious about each other. We train together. We fight together. We go through life together. We're partners through it all. Not one leaves the other behind. This is more than just physical. We won't even do anything unless you allow it, if that makes you feel any better."

"Then why get married? Why can't we just date?"

"We don't have the time. Listen, Lowsunn has strong defenses, but it's not impenetrable. There will come a time, whether tomorrow, or years from now, that we'll have to fight for our lives. When that happens, I don't want any doubts about where you stand with me, and you shouldn't have any about where I stand with you. You should know that I've got your back and vice versa. No question. And also, by getting the formalities out of the way now, we can focus solely on our training, not just dinners, and games."

"Dating or not, if we fall in love, we're not going to be able to focus on training all the time, no matter how much you think that's how it's going to be."

“In that case, I may not get stronger, but I’ll have you. I’ll have a family again. Someone, something...that I love in this world again.”

“You could just be saying all this.”

“Every relationship requires risk. Even dating may end in heartbreak. You wanted to make sure that I didn’t leave you behind. Marry me, and I can ensure you that I won’t.”

“But you could easily ‘marry me’ and still leave.”

“Others might do that, but I won’t. It’s up to you what you want to do.”

“So you’re not going to train with me if I don’t marry you?”

“I will. We’ll still be friends. But it won’t be the same.”

“I don’t understand. I...this is crazy,” she muttered to herself.

“How do I know for sure you’re serious about this?”

“If you understand who I am as much as you say, then you already know how I feel about this.”

Leah searched all over his face for any sign of deception. The softness of his eyes, the crinkle in his forehead. The looseness of his lips. All she needed was a sign. A twitch. A tick. An itch. Anything to alert her heart before it uttered her final answer.

But she could see him.

She wasn’t like so many others her age, and she knew it. She could play the game well enough. The dressing up, the make-up, the charming talk. But she could see through the costumes and masks of her peers as if they were wearing a sign across their chests: fake, phony, liar, back-stabber. It was not in their words but the way they moved. It wasn’t in what she saw but what she felt.

But with Aidan...he wasn’t a sign. Instead, he was an all-out display. An exhibit for all to see. People would laugh and mock the young man who didn’t even have the decency to hide what he was. They cackled at his naked heart and jabbed at his tortured soul. And out of the crowd of hurtful jeers and head-shakes, she emerged. Standing before him, she watched and considered. And she saw the heart of him. Finally, she realized what lay beyond the surface, and it was so magnificent that she wept. For the first time in her life, she had found another human that was not corrupt or greedy.

He just wanted to be loved.

To find such a romantic soul, to find such raw passion not yet darkened by the world, was nothing less than a miracle, and he was no less than a masterpiece, despite all his flaws.

She couldn't yet say the words.

But she felt them.

And he could say the words.

For he knew them.

He was the one that needed the commitment.

Not her.

But she sure was ready to embark on this journey.

Even if he wasn't.

So before his eyes lost their shine,

Before the shell could shut her out.

She took his face in the palms of her hands.

Stared into the mirrors of his emblazoned soul.

And said yes.





## Chapter 13 – Moving



“A year ago, I made a promise,” Aidan replied, holding his wife’s hand tenderly. “And that’s a vow I intend to take to the grave. I won’t leave you behind.”

“I know,” she said. “But that doesn’t mean we haven’t been slacking off. When I get out of the infirmary, we have to start training again.”

“Sure,” he said as the door behind him opened. Eugene stepped in quietly with his head down as if he had just walked into their private home. Aidan turned back to Leah to gauge her reaction, but there was no recognition in her countenance.

“Aidan, I’m sorry to interrupt, but may I speak with you privately?”

“Can it wait?”

“It cannot,” he said, bowing his head towards Leah. She gave Eugene an unsure, curt wave and then an ecstatic one to Aidan, letting him know that she was okay with him leaving.

“I’ll be back as soon as possible,” he promised, escorting Eugene out the door. Once it was closed, Eugene held up his index finger to insinuate that they should be silent.

“We can’t speak here. There are too many ears. But I do have a message for you, and we shouldn’t leave here together.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a crumpled-up piece of paper. “Read this and then burn it.”

“Can I read it here?”

“It should be okay. All I ask is that you please don’t do anything after you’ve finished. This is merely a warning. Not approval to take action.”

“I understand,” Aidan said. He began reading the letter as Eugene slinked away.

***I don’t know what was said to Morrigan to get her to reveal secrets concerning the mission selection list, but Bailey was able to retrieve the information this morning, and it is as we***

***have feared. Your name, as well as many others, have been added to a number of high ranking missions of B class or higher. Ori and Bailey have also been added as leads. We believe that the Elders are using many in our underground movement to accomplish their dirty deeds while killing off a few in the process. This is just a warning so that you may prepare for the inevitable.***

Aidan burned the message instantly, reducing it to ash in the palm of his hand.

“Inevitable,” he said to the air, glancing back at Leah’s door.

He then stormed out of the infirmary and headed straight for the Elders’ compound, knowing that the whole village would notice. Boldly he marched past the girls’ cabins and the adult homes toward the village leaders. But before he fully arrived at his destination, he came across several adult villagers standing guard amongst the trees. Since Lowsunn had been attacked, this would indeed become the status quo. Aidan sighed and tried to think of a way around them that didn’t involve fire tsunamis, but nothing came to mind. Maybe this was what Leah had talked about. Situations like this in which he had to rely more on tact than all-out raw emotion. Especially if he wanted a specific outcome.

Well, he only needed to get to Frederick Ainsley. Once he was in his presence, he was sure his wife’s father would have plenty to say to him. Aidan snapped his fingers to the right of him and a tree caught on fire, catching the attention of the sentinels. Inexperienced and still nervous, they ran to investigate while a couple stayed behind, quivering like they were standing in the midst of winter.

Aidan circled around them, taking his time by hiding behind one tree and hopping to the next until the edge of the cliff was only a few yards away. Finally ditching the stealth, he sprinted forward and leaped just in time to see the astonishment on the guards’ faces. The drop was further down than he had imagined, but he wasn’t afraid. Just before he hit the narrow streets below, he shot a wave of lava from his hands and had it settle right underneath his feet. The lava formed a small pool, but large enough to congeal and break his fall. He splashed into it as if it was a kiddie pool, bobbing up and down in cartoon fashion. Once he was sure he was safe, he dismissed the

lava, and it sunk into the ground like water. He looked around him and tried to determine which house was which when a door slammed open above him. Out onto the balcony that Aidan had narrowly missed stepped the man he was looking for. It was appropriate that he had a perch to look down on Aidan from.

“What is it you want, cretin?” Elder Ainsley declared.

“You don’t look surprised to see me,” Aidan said, hearing guards coming behind him.

“I was looking out the window to admire the scenery. Instead, I witnessed a tower of lava falling before my eyes. Hardly natural. I assume you’ve come to see me.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“Because you’re the one that killed my grandchild.” The words were so thick and vengeful that Aidan had to do his best to keep his anger in check.

“I didn’t kill anyone,” he said finally. Elder Ainsley scoffed, grabbed the banister with both hands, and leaned over to peer down at Aidan. It was almost as if he were getting ready to spit.

“But you did. If you had listened and not intervened, we could have figured a way out of the mess. But you had to feed your insatiable appetite. Your actions resulted in the wounding of my daughter and the loss of her child.”

“That child was mine too, you know.”

“Debatable. Your kind devours your own children like rabid animals. Not in touch, but surely in word and nurturing. The demon you would have raised would have been no different than the cattle we slaughter for our sustenance – lacking in reason and unfit for its place in the hierarchy of species.”

“You can insult me all you like,” Aidan seethed. “It’s done.”

“Why? Because you want it to be? Isn’t the fear of repercussions the reason you’re polluting the air I breathe at this very moment?”

“I know that the mission selections will be given out soon,” he shouted. Elder Ainsley held up a hand, and the five guards behind Aidan maintained their distance. “I’m curious to know where I stand.”

“Are you looking for a spot?”

“Not really.”

“Well, if you are chosen,” Elder Ainsley smiled, “we will ensure that your placement will be most appropriate and best suited to your abilities.”

“What does that mean? That I’ll be given one of the highest-rated missions?”

“You would be lucky to even get a mission at all, given your record, but if you happen to be blessed with such a privilege, you can assume that will be the case.”

“Why?”

“Have you forgotten already? Out of our entire population, you were the one to engage Duncan directly. Such courage and tenacity are the qualities of a great future leader. What better way to polish your skills than in the heat of battle once more? You should be honored.”

“It sounds like you’re trying to kill me off.”

“If that’s the way you want to look at it. How unfortunate.”

“Either way, no matter what happens, I want to explain something to you. You might think that I’m a savage or an insect –”

“– insects have purpose, Mr. Serafino.”

“– but I love your daughter,” Aidan grit his teeth. “As a parent, I’m sure you want what’s best for her, and I want the same thing. And I’m telling you, if you’re trying to kill me off, you’re hurting her far more than you ever could to me. I’ll be dead, and you’ll find some satisfaction in that. You won’t have to see my face anymore. But you’ll see hers every day, and you’ll know the source of her tears. Do you think you can live with that?”

“First of all, I have no idea what you’re talking about. Secondly, I know my daughter more than anyone. Certainly more than a self-centered child who’s barely been in her life for what, a year? She’ll get over you as easily as wiping the residue from dishes. You don’t miss the fallen crumbs, do you? You don’t wonder where they’ve gone or how they’ve contributed to the aesthetic and complete fulfillment of your stomach, do you? No. You rinse your plate and let the dregs fall away without concern. That, Mr. Serafino, is what you are to me and what you will be to her when your corpse has barely had the time to grow cold.”

Aidan didn't reply. He took a heavy sigh and glared at the dirt path, trying to keep his emotions in check. Elder Ainsley wasn't impressed at all.

"I'm sorry, I didn't offend you, did I? That would imply you have a soul."

Aidan turned around to face the guards behind him.

"What's the best way out of this place?" he muttered. A bald, clean-shaven man in a Lowsunn uniform stepped forward and motioned for Aidan to follow him. Aidan left the compound silently, and the guards escorted him without a word until he was back in the village hub. Standing in the middle of Lowsunn, he wasn't sure what to do.

Harming Elder Ainsley was what he wanted most, but it was far from the solution. And it would just cause Leah more suffering. Bailey would have the answers, but she was busy making sure the Movement survived. Ori was no doubt helping her. But Aidan had to do something, and his options were limited. The announcements were probably going to be made tomorrow, and the missions would be put into effect not long after, possibly even that very day. He could leave Lowsunn that night, but Leah wasn't ready to travel. He couldn't fight against the announcements publicly, or else he would be made into a villain.

But surely just waiting couldn't be the answer. Go on the mission and hope for the best? Knowing that it was suicide from the start? He had to talk to someone, and the only person available was Eugene, whom he was still unsure about, but given the circumstances, he was his only option. He decided to check the schoolhouse first, although it was unlikely he would be there since Bailey's class was already over for the day.

However, Aidan found Eugene outside, sitting by the entrance in a slump as if he was on the brink of dozing off. Aidan tapped him lightly, and he awoke from his stupor, coughing and blinking rapidly. Once he lifted his head and recognized who had interrupted his slumber, he pursed his lips in concern. Not at all what Aidan was expecting.

"Not glad to see me?" Aidan asked. Eugene groaned as he rose to his feet.

“I overheard that you made a visit to the Elder compound.”

“Word spreads fast.”

“Why would you do that? That’s not going to help matters.”

“If they already know about us, then there’s nothing we can do. We might as well fight back openly in any way we can.”

“I take it you got confirmation?”

“Elder Ainsley wants my head on a stake,” Aidan admitted, clenching his fists. “It took all I had not to kill him. What he’s doing – it jeopardizes all of us, and I don’t just mean Bailey’s crew.”

“I know,” Eugene sighed. “But there’s not much we can do besides trying to take over the village in a coup. Which I doubt would work.”

“I came to the same conclusion myself.”

“So, what did you want to talk to me about?”

“It’s a request to take further action. If you think Bailey would be okay with it.”

“What did you have in mind?”

“The mission that I’m signed up for...what kind is it?”

“A C-class mark. A hunt. We’re not sure of the particulars of his abilities, but apparently, he’s been hanging around the tavern down the hill, in the tiny town of Otalli. Whoever this man is, he’s been killing off potential members of Lowsunn before we have the opportunity to ask them to join. You can only imagine how disconcerting this is. We aren’t able to increase our numbers of bodies and seals; simultaneously, he is scaring away any potential clients.”

“Are you sure it’s just one man? Not a group?”

“You know as well as anyone that people don’t travel in packs anymore. It’s extremely rare.”

“So the Elders are sending me after this man because they think I’ll be killed?”

“Either that, or they’re trying to catch you off guard. Make you nice and comfortable until they throw a real threat your way. It’s hard to say. May I ask what you intend to do with this information?”

“I want to assess this man before the mission starts. Learn what his abilities are so I can get an edge.”

“That would require a lot of risk,” Eugene sighed, cupping his chin in thought. “But I understand where you’re coming from. How do you intend to get outside the shielding?”

“I was just going to ask you that. You’re not going on any of the missions, are you?”

“Me? Oh no,” he laughed. “My abilities aren’t suitable for the world. I wished for a tactical mind.”

“What’s important is that the Elders still trust you. If they didn’t, you would be packing up to go too, regardless of your abilities.”

“True.”

“Since you’re behind the scenes, I figure that you must have heard of a way to get outside. I know the Elders can leave at will, but there has to be another route.”

“Bailey figured it out a few months ago,” Eugene whispered, leaning in. “There was a weak spot created, about the size of a child. If you crawl through that spot in the shielding, you will be able to exit and enter undetected. However, once you’re out, if you so much as brush your sleeve anywhere on the shield, the Elders will know of your departure. I believe there’s a record logged of those that have touched the perimeter.”

“Do you think that’s how Duncan got in?”

“Doubtful. With all his talk of wishes to break down the shield, I assume that’s what he did.”

“Unless it was all a lie, and he found the weak spot.”

“If that’s true, then another attack is imminent.”

“I’ll see if I can find out anything else about it when I’m on the outside. You know where this spot is, right?”

“I do,” he said slowly. “You don’t want to go now, do you?”

“I’ll go tonight when everyone’s asleep. Being out of my bed will be nothing new.”

“I have to ask that you take Ori with you.”

“Afraid I might slip up and do more than assess?”

“Precisely.”

“Where is he now?”

“He and Bailey are remaining hidden in the tops of the forest, discussing the mission list. But I’ll relay the message to them and ensure that Ori meets you in time. How about midnight?”

“Fine.”

“Alright. Meet me at the north end of the Elder compound. Take the long way around through the forest and don’t be seen. You’ll see us when you’ve arrived at your destination.”

“I’ll see you then,” Aidan said, trying to decide whether to follow Eugene or not when he went to deliver the message. It was unusual for Bailey to not be around to guide him, even with a busy schedule. Perhaps the attack on Lowsunn had really ramped up her plans.

Aidan still hadn’t decided whether he should follow Eugene or not when the older man grunted abruptly and slumped back down into his napping position.

“I’ll do it later,” Eugene yawned. “See you tonight.”

Aidan snickered and walked away. If Eugene was playing him, he had undoubtedly made the right move. Fortunately for the professor, Aidan needed sleep and a moment to say goodbye to Leah. There was no way he was going to wait around.



AIDAN HAD NEVER SEEN the moon so bright. He had spent the rest of the afternoon and evening sleeping, choosing to slumber in his room rather than the Infirmary. He couldn’t tell Leah he was going outside Lowsunn. Not yet. She would have done anything to go with him, and he didn’t want the distraction. Ori would provide enough of that on his own.

Taking to the shadows behind the cabins, Aidan slinked his way from the south to the north, as he had done many times before when he had traveled to the Field of Visions in the dead of night. This time, however, he had to be more careful. He couldn’t risk getting caught now. The information he was about to search for was vital to his upcoming mission.

Once Aidan hit the forest, he ensured his body temperature was kept in check. He didn’t want glowing hands giving him away. He obeyed Eugene’s advice and stuck to the outskirts, stooping down low and taking his time to get around the compound. He figured his vision was no better than anyone else’s, and he didn’t want to risk running into any guards – whom he probably wouldn’t see until it was



too late. Once he hit the north side of the compound, the forest increased in range, stretching much further into the distance than it did anywhere else in Lowsunn. Aidan traveled further away from the Elders' compound and deeper into the forest.

After a couple of miles of heading north, Aidan saw them sitting with their legs crossed at the edge of the woods. Aidan approached from the front so as not to startle them. It was a good move, for he saw Ori's grip on the hilt of his dagger relax once he recognized the intruder as a friend and not foe.

"Welcome to the edge of Lowsunn," Eugene said. Aidan continued moving forward without a word, making sure he didn't go beyond where the two men stood. Ori smiled and slapped his friend on the back. He knew what Aidan wanted.

To see the outside once more.

But the shielding continued to make the view hazy and fogged. No matter how hard he squinted, Aidan couldn't make out what was beyond the rolling hills and unfiltered moonlight. With this being the edge of the forest, it was already a brand new world that lay just ahead, and yet it was a familiar one at the same time. He couldn't believe the sudden pang that shot through his heart at the hazy sight. He was homesick.

Since he had entered Lowsunn, Aidan had refused to go back to the shield's edge for fear he would try to burn it down. And he would have been right. Outside the village's confinement was his true home, and it was right there, just a few measly steps away—the open expanse. The wilderness.

"Are you ready for this adventure?" Ori asked. Aidan nodded, and Eugene pointed to a spot in the shielding.

"Listen closely. This will be very hard to identify on your way back, but there's no way I can make a marking of any kind. This tree right here," he slapped a hand on the tree. "If you look very closely, you can see that some of its branches hang a few inches lower than the others. Horizontal to this tree is the opening. A precise line. I've already tested the height against Ori. If you crawl, his back will be two inches lower than the top, and his arms, placed straight under his shoulders, will only be three inches from the sides. Anything goes

beyond those parameters, and you'll be found out. You won't receive any warning either. So please be careful."

"That tree will be hard to find," Aidan said. "Won't Lowsunn look hazy to us once we're out?"

"That's why it will take you a while. Maybe even an hour or so to guarantee you have the right one. I wouldn't spend too much time down below."

"We've received word," Ori said, turning to his friend. "The mission selections will be announced at dawn, and everyone will be leaving at noon."

"They're not wasting any time," he replied. "And neither will we."

"Remember, this outing is to gather intel," Eugene admonished. "No fighting. No talking to others unless it's indispensable. If anyone discovers you were out, the Elders will want to know why."

"Understood," Ori said, patting his dagger and tucking his Lowsunn uniform shirt into his pants. "Ready?"

"Yep," Aidan said, lining up his body with the tree. He dropped to his knees and began crawling on all fours, making sure he kept his limbs tight. Once his upper half was beyond the shield, the veil over his eyes lifted. The world opened up in majestic grandeur. It was spacious, it was free, and it was full of life. Thousands of fireflies hovered in the air, blinking with all colors of the rainbow. Shooting stars clashed against each other like a war was being waged in the heavens, and the hills were teeming with sleeping creatures Aidan had never witnessed before. The child in him was salivating at the playground before him. He had dwelled on the horror for so long that he had long forgotten the wonder.

What didn't catch his attention was the fifty-foot drop that lay mere inches in front of him.

"Ori, hold on, there's a –" But Ori didn't hear him in time. He began crawling through the hole in the shield, bumping into Aidan's legs hard enough to send him flying. As soon as Aidan was sure his legs were free of the shield, he summoned a lava cushion to break his fall. Ori turned his dagger into a pole and rode it down to the ground.

"You think Eugene would have warned us about that drop," Aidan replied, dismissing the lava.

“The topography might have changed,” Ori said, but he wasn’t looking at Aidan. His eyes were transfixed on the landscape before him. Dots of blues, reds, yellows, and greens blinked at him like flashlights. The rolling hills were tranquil and still, but the beasts resting upon them were mystical. Herds of all different shapes and sizes. Lambs with the bodies of lions. Boars with the bodies of leopards. Small rabbits with the wings of large bats grazed in the moonlight, and through it all, the sound of laughter and cheerful music rode the winds into their hungry ears. On the horizon, they could see traces of smoke and bright lights. Ori smacked Aidan on the back playfully.

“That has to be Otalli,” he said, sprinting forward. Aidan grabbed the back of his lapel.

“Hold on there,” he whispered. “Don’t you see the beasts?”

“They’re sleeping. There’s nothing to worry about as long as we remain quiet.”

“Are you sure? Have you learned anything from our training session? What if they’re really eyes for a predator, using beasts for their surveillance? What if those beasts are far more dangerous than they appear? What if we attract the attention of some bandits?”

“Do you know what you are, Aidan? You’re scared. You hide it well enough, but I see right through you. How can you not look out and see the same thing I do? That this is a land of opportunity and wonder!”

“Wonder doesn’t come until morning,” Aidan muttered. “But since this is your first time out, I’ll let you show me how it’s done.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Does to me. You’re saying that all I’ve told you about the outside doesn’t warrant caution, so go ahead. I’ll be your backup.”

“You sure you’re not going to whistle or something and get me killed?”

“It’s tempting, but no.”

“Because Leah would be quite angry with you if you got a friend killed.”

“Can we not talk about her right now?”

“Hey, Aidan,” Ori asked. He waited for him to answer. Aidan shut his eyes, gave out a heavy sigh, and then took the bait.

“What is it?”

“You get those butterflies yet?”

Aidan reached out to grab him, but he was already sprinting away. Aidan clenched his jaw and then half-yelled, half-whispered into the air. “I don’t get butterflies!”

“Liar,” Ori whisper-yelled back. Aidan shook his head and couldn’t help but chuckle.

Ori avoided the sleeping beasts at first, but then he really began testing the waters, hurdling over their bodies one after the other. He looked back only once to ensure that Aidan was following suit. He was, but he was also making sure his liquid fire was at the ready. His hands grew hot and became as red as a blacksmith’s unfinished blade. All it would take was one mistake for Ori to wake the herd.

But nothing happened. And it was all so strange. As the wind whipped through their hair and snapped at their clothes, he allowed himself to take in his surroundings. His nose picked up the fact that several roasts were being seared in the town nearby, and it wasn’t the kind created from one’s imagination. It was all-natural, and this made him salivate. The music was also getting louder and the laughter more jovial. How was this all possible? Did Lowsunn keep a tight leash in Otalli as well? Was it also shielded in some manner?

Once they hit the final hill, they stopped to take in the sights. Their eyes lit up once they saw the town. The homes were more like dollhouses than cabins, painted with bright, vibrant colors and decorated with reflective materials and pieces of candy. They were set up in a half-moon formation with the opening facing towards them and Lowsunn. In the middle was a grand bonfire with a merry band dancing around it as they played their violins, flutes, and handheld harps. The crowd around them was absorbed in the music more than the players were. They waltzed away in couples, laughing to the point of tears and hugging each other so tightly that Aidan wondered if they all knew each other.

“I don’t think there’s a shield,” Ori said, examining the twenty houses from end to end. “At least not one that blocks out a stranger from seeing in.”

“It’s strange that it’s so open,” Aidan observed. “And even weirder that they would be so happy considering that people have died here

recently.”

“We’ll figure it out.” Ori pointed to the right. “Let’s enter from the side to not bring attention to ourselves.”

“Agreed.” They took the long way around, passing several more beasts as they went, but they both traveled with great caution this time. The music had not died down in intensity. Still, Aidan was already feeling like they were being watched. As if the beasts were glaring at them through their eyelids, or the moon itself had transformed into one great big eye. He felt exposed, and part of him longed for the safety of Lowsunn’s borders, but he dared not to run back now. Come tomorrow afternoon, he would be venturing even further into the unknown.

“This way,” Ori said as they emerged from behind the flashy house on one end. He tapped one of the gumdrops lined down its side. “You think these are real?”

“They’re real alright,” Aidan said. “The question is if you want to see what happens after you eat one.”

“Well, what do you eat out here?”

“The natural stuff. What you know comes from nature. Everything else could be a trap.”

“And how do you do that considering that even the grass could have been fabricated at this point?”

“It’s hard to tell the difference between real and fake, considering no one’s willing to label it, but you have to try your best. Usually, the beasts will steer clear of the strange accommodations, but even that’s not a guarantee.”

“It sounds like life on the outside is one big game of chance.”

“You work with what you have been born with,” Aidan replied, stepping onto what felt like a stage. The tile underneath him was a mix of hard glass and cooled caramel, but he paid no attention to the strange cracks and minor squishes he felt beneath his feet. He kept his focus on the people. The music didn’t cease, and the people kept dancing, but he still felt like it was a trap. What wasn’t a trap on the outside? As long as there were people nearby, especially those with seals, he felt uneasy.

Ori followed him anxiously, keeping his step right behind Aidan and probably causing more attention to come their way than not.

Still, Aidan kept walking until he was past the dancing crowd and well into one of the houses so he could catch his breath.

None of the couples had averted their gazes from each other. Not a single one.

“Do you know this place?” Ori asked, closing the sugar cookie door behind him.

“No, but I’ll be able to think better here.” They had walked into a tavern, and a small one at that. The barkeep was lazily dozing off on a stool behind a massive oak counter, so wide there was no way he would be able to just hand a drink to a customer on the other end. A number of chairs made for children and tables fit for one person were in abundance, and candied pictures were framed side-by-side across the walls. The air was stale and gritty. Every time Aidan breathed, he was taken aback by the combination of sweetness and sugar molecules that graced his tongue. He heard talking coming from upstairs, and that’s when he noticed a narrow stairway to his right, barely out of view as the surface of the steps had been covered in broken boards and debris. A light, classical tune played above their heads. Ori placed a hand on his dagger.

“This place creeps me out.”

“You creep me out. Don’t stand so close,” Aidan snapped. Ori took a step back. Aidan walked forward slowly, examining the room, the floorboards underneath them creaking and kicking up more sugar. A bout of laughter sounded off up above.

“You here for the bounty?” the barkeep muttered, seemingly in his sleep. Aidan looked back at Ori, but the swordsman just shrugged his shoulders.

“Depends,” Aidan answered. “We’ve heard that there have been several murders around here. Know anything about that?”

“You here to investigate?” the sleeping man said, his lips barely moving as his fatty chin continued to slump into his chest. His eyes were shut so tight it was as if he had none.

“We lost a friend,” Aidan lied, and the barkeep began snoring. “We want to know why he died and who killed him.”

“Why don’t you...ask upstairs,” he muttered, returning to his snoring. A fist pounded on the surface of a table up above.

“It could be a trap,” Ori said, but Aidan had already gone over those mental calisthenics in his head.

“Even if it is, we won’t know until we try.” Aidan stepped over the debris on the stairs and climbed up quietly, trying to match each step with a round of laughter to drown out his approach. Once he reached the top, his eyes peered out over the banister. Bailey was at the other end of the massive room, sitting at a thin rectangular table with three others. She looked right into Aidan’s eyes as if she had known he was there the entire time and waved for him to come over and join her. The two boys climbed the rest of the way in confusion, and Bailey sat back in her thin wooden chair and placed both feet on the wobbly table. With a smug look on her face, her lips parted.

“Welcome to the Movement.”





## Chapter 14 – Omega



“How scared were you, *Tallawah*?” Bailey asked, ripping a piece off the chocolate pillar behind her and popping it into her mouth.

“What’s going on here?” Aidan demanded. The woman sitting next to Bailey got up from her seat and went to retrieve two chairs from the unorganized pile at the side. She had a hardened face that expressed no surprise at suddenly having two more people in the room.

Bailey crossed her arms and closed her eyes. “We wanted to explain what you’re about to get yourself into.”

The woman with the hardened face put the two chairs at the table near Bailey as the other two men nodded. “Before we get into the details,” Bailey continued, “allow me to introduce the rest of the Movement’s leadership. This here is Jin...” The heavily armored soldier sitting at the table nodded as he was introduced. “And Makana, and Elroy.” The thin man in the dusty, hole-filled clothes nodded slightly when Bailey announced the last name. “I wanted you both to meet them if anything happens to me tomorrow.”

“Expecting a slaughter?” Aidan replied, sitting down in unison with Ori.

“No less,” Bailey smiled. “But it’s to be expected.”

“You sound pretty relaxed for someone who’s about to lose a lot of people.”

“I’m not happy about that,” she said, removing the grin. “But I am thrilled to see this coming out of the shadows and into the light. The Elders aren’t playing around. According to the reports we gleaned from Morrigan’s mind, they have placed 90% of the Movement’s members and only 10% of the average Lowsunn villagers on tomorrow’s mission list. This is no coincidence.”

“Gleaned?”

“Elroy here is a mind reader,” she said, waving a hand to her left. “He might not be speaking much today, and I hope you’ll excuse him. He hasn’t found a way to completely filter his abilities yet, and it tends to take its toll.”

“Where’s Morrigan now?” Ori asked. Elroy’s ears perked up.

“Still in Lowsunn. Elroy usually spends his nights here in Otalli, but we snuck him in to retrieve the information. It was risky, but we figured that it was necessary. We made the right call.”

“If the Elders are sending the Movement members to die, then they know who you all are.”

“They’re not going to outright kill us. They have a reputation to maintain. However, considering that many of our members habitually work on their skills, it wouldn’t be hard to convince others that they were simply sending their best outside. By the way, I’m sorry to have sent you out here with such little information, but we couldn’t tell you the whole truth of what was going on – that we were having a meeting out here. We needed to ensure that if you got caught, they wouldn’t be able to extract any vital information from you. Eugene set it up to appear as if you acted on your own.”

“Basically, I was tricked,” Aidan said, crossing his arms. “He knew that I was going to face Ainsley – probably even said exactly the right things so that I would – and he knew that I would try to preserve myself by coming out here.”

“I’m sorry,” Bailey said. “You’re not the type to just follow orders. Even if he had said the instructions were from me, you wouldn’t have obeyed him.”

“Why do you need me here so badly? Where’s everyone else?”

“Sleeping soundly. You’re the latest member of our resistance, so you’re the one with the least knowledge. Makana and Jin both handle their own circle of members inside Lowsunn. Elroy handles any members here in Otalli and vets new ones. Altogether, we maintain the whole movement. Although no one group is fully knowledgeable about what goes on behind the scenes, it keeps us all accountable. The only reason we’re all here tonight is to go over the teams the Elders have selected and discuss their composition. Their strengths and weaknesses and how to best combat the enemies or situations they’ll be facing. Much of what we decide will

be given to our respective group in the morning before announcements.”

“And what of this mysterious murderer?”

“That was a lie. I’m sorry. We needed to give you a target that you would deem enough of a threat to investigate but not so much that you would be afraid of going outside. A delicate balance was required.”

“So that’s twice you’ve lied,” Aidan huffed. “Why should I believe anything you say from here on out? You could be using me to pursue your agenda. What are you after, Bailey? The Choate?”

“It hurts that you would say that,” Bailey said, placing a hand on her chest. “After all we’ve been through.”

“You should have just told me to come here –”

“– but I was detained. I couldn’t –”

“– YOU SHOULD HAVE TOLD ME!” Aidan screamed. A pair of tired eyes appeared just above the banister behind the boys. Bailey nodded in the barkeep’s direction, and he disappeared.

“I’m sorry.”

“Who do you think I am? Do you really not trust me enough that you–”

“That’s enough,” Jin interrupted. His calm yet booming voice caught Aidan off guard. “Bailey’s intentions were pure, and we knew you wouldn’t listen to reason. We acted in a manner that would yield the best results.”

“I wasn’t talking to you.”

“Well, you are now. And there’s going to be plenty more of it. Guess who’s going to be partnered up tomorrow? You, me, Ori, and a few others under my command. I wanted to bring you both here to see what we can do. Figure out a way to overcome the wall in our path.”

“Which is?”

“Necrosis,” he said, angrily slamming his fist on the table. Ori’s face gave no response, but Aidan was immediately paralyzed. Before he could gain his composure, he began sweating. The room lost air, and he felt like his soul had just fallen into a bottomless pit.

“What is it?” Ori asked in reply, his head swiveling back and forth between them. “What did Jin say? Is it Zorin’s new potion flavor?”

“No, Necrosis is a man,” Aidan said, taking a gulp. “Or at least he used to be.” He fought back the stinging in his eyes as tears of fear began to well up uncontrollably. How would he survive against such a monster? How could he get back to Leah?

“You wouldn’t have come here if you had known ahead of time,” Jin explained. “You would have spent the night in the arms of Ainsley’s daughter. I, for one, have no intention of getting killed.”

“Why – why even continue going on the mission?” Aidan stammered.

“You know why,” Jin snapped, leaning into the table.

“Can someone PLEASE tell me who Necrosis is,” Ori shouted.

Jin leaned onto the table. “I’ve been in Lowsunn for a couple years now, but I spend every moment I can on the outside because this is where I feel I belong. Let me explain something. The world you both remember has changed. It’s still very, very dangerous, but there are societies now. I’m not talking about the failed attempts you’ve experienced. I’m talking real, thriving cities, bigger than Lowsunn and far more powerful. No matter how much people destroy, they always rebuild, even if it’s just to tear it all down again. The murderers of old, the ones who would go around exacting their bloodlust on others – most of them are gone, and the smart ones have gone into hiding. What happens when you use one of your seals?”

“It’s gone.”

“Exactly. All those greedy, selfish, vile men used their Yen long ago when the world was made brand new from the Cataclysm. But time heals all wounds. With their Yen gone, they eventually had to face others who still had their Yen intact or groups of people with abilities that had a little more thought put into them. As a result, Naropa has become a world in which you can go outside and live a peaceable, comfortable life, as long as you stay out of the way of a dangerous few. We refer to them as the Omegas. Powerful beings beyond our comprehension. They don’t fear. They don’t hide. They are the equivalent of gods walking amongst us. Necrosis is one such creature. And sadly, he knows when someone on the planet aims to defeat him. It is part of his terrible power.”

“What do you mean?” Ori asked, now beginning to feel his hands tremble.

“He used both of his Yen early on, and he wasn’t afraid to announce what they were used for. One was to know when a threat was coming his way and to simultaneously know everything there was to know about that person or group. Memories, abilities, everything. You so much as speak his name, and he is suddenly aware of your existence. This is so he could actively combat his enemies before they’ve even devised a plan. And for his second Yen, he desired a strength that rivaled that of the Cataclysm’s effect on the planet.”

“How do you even calculate that?” Aidan said through a clenched jaw. “Why would the judge grant this?”

“Then why can’t one of us just use one of our seals to wish for more strength than he has?”

“You think that hasn’t been thought of or tried? Listen, even with the Yen, there is order. Do you want to know what most men do? They wish to become as strong as ten men, or a hundred or a thousand. Some get more general and wish to be the strongest man in the world. And perhaps the Judge grants it, but what happens when another wishes for the same? The previous man just became number two on the planet. And so on and so on. Next thing you know, the strongest man on the planet just became the thousandth in order. Necrosis made sure to beat us all out.”

“The Judge won’t grant wishes that destroy the planet,” Bailey said. “Or something so ridiculous that it may threaten his position. That’s part of the reason the mythical Choate is so popular. In an age of wishes, that artifact has become the wish without chains.”

“The Judge is not going to grant someone the power of the sun,” Jin explained. “Or the stars or anything that could destroy the planet. But the power of the Cataclysm? Sure. With this power condensed into one man, it’s not so bad. The planet won’t be destroyed, and the wish could be granted. Unfortunately, our imaginations limit our wishes, so it is hard to think of something more powerful than the Cataclysm without making things worse for the planet. You could probably ask the Judge, but your Yen will be taken for probing. You

could use a Yen to get the answer, but what if the Judge says there is nothing in-between?"

"What about wishing to be stronger than Necrosis? Even just slightly?"

"Perhaps you could. But remember his first Yen. He knows you and all that you are. Even if you were stronger, his knowledge of you would negate most of the plans you could make. Our wishes are limited by our imagination, and so are our abilities."

"Then how do we do this?" Aidan shook his head. "How...how do we survive this? Any plan we make, he'll know what it is. He'll know what we can do. He'll know about my most powerful attack before I even think of unleashing it."

"Whether we go or stay in Lowsunn, Necrosis may seek us out," Jin sighed. "The moment we were put on that list, he knew of our existence. It's better to face this threat than have him come for us in Lowsunn. As people begin defending their homes, they will simply become threats in his mind. In a lot of ways, he is a very intimidating machine."

"What did you have in mind?" Ori asked, wiping his eyes on his sleeve.

"My ability is relative absorption, as I like to call it. When I am hit by force, whether a fist or a rock, my body absorbs the kinetic energy surrounding that person or object. I channel it back either through my fists or an object I carry, such as a sword. I might not be able to kill Necrosis outright, but I might be able to knock him unconscious if I can survive one of his blows."

"That's the plan?" Ori said, clutching his temples. "We're doomed."

"The hit," Aidan said in thought. "It would have to be pretty hard."

"It's why I'm wearing so much armor," Jin said, glancing down. "But I don't know if it will be enough. Getting hit in the chest would surely shatter it, and I don't know how much the armor will slow his approach. Even if it did stay intact, I would surely be thrown off my feet, and the whiplash alone might kill me. Of course, this is all supposing he will hit me in the body. A headshot would kill me instantly."

“We only get one shot,” Aidan sighed. “And it depends on you surviving a hit from an Omega.”

“It’s all we’ve come up with,” Jin said with a heavy sigh. “But I am open to suggestions.”

“I have one. We leave Lowsunn and stay on the run.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Our running might show Necrosis that we’re not a threat.”

“No one knows how long it would take for that message to get through.”

“It’s an option,” Aidan replied. Jin looked over at Bailey who nodded in his direction.

“The boy has a point. Only you and your team are on the list, not Lowsunn. While you’re on the run, you could gather more information that could help our cause. And it would ensure your survival. If you don’t come back to Lowsunn, the Elders will just assume you’ve died. They might even consider the mission a success, and the threat level gets removed in Necrosis’s mind. The plan might work.”

“I like being on the outside,” Jin replied. “But not enough that I would sleep on the ground. We would have to gather supplies, shelter – all the necessities while we stayed on the move, always with an eye open!”

“Or you could die tomorrow, my friend,” Bailey said solemnly. Jin grabbed his hair and grit his teeth in exasperation as Bailey turned to the boys.

“Are you okay with that?” she asked. Ori nodded reluctantly but Aidan was at a loss for words. Once again, two paths were before him that could destroy all he cared about. Take Leah with him or leave her in Lowsunn – both options had their risks. Both would probably end in blood. He just had to decide how much he would allow to be spilled.

“I think running is better than fighting this battle,” Aidan said finally. “But, I want to talk this over with my wife. It’s up to her whether she wants to go with me or not.”

“Do you understand how serious each choice is? And what you’ll be asking of her either way?”

“Don’t have a clue,” Aidan laughed. “And I would rather not know. But I have to choose, and I’m ready to get it over with. I’m going to be leaving now. I want to spend my last couple of hours with her.”

“I understand,” Bailey said. Jin began to protest, but she placed a hand on his chest. “Be careful on your way back.”

“Those people outside,” Ori said suddenly. “Are they real?”

“No, they’re puppets,” Bailey said. “Created by Eugene’s imagination to fill up this place. By controlling the way they act and making the environment enjoyable, we can attract future villagers to Lowsunn.”

“Control,” Aidan said with downcast eyes. “You seem to have a knack for it.”

“I’m not the enemy, Tallawah,” she said, glaring at him. “Given our past, I hoped you would have realized that by now.”

“Given our past, I hoped you would have known me by now. Then, you would have remembered how much I hated tricks.”

“I know you more than you think. And that’s exactly why I sent the message that way.”

“We’ll finish this later,” Aidan said, pushing Ori lightly toward the stairs. “But just remember how much this hurts me.”

“I’ll remember,” Bailey said with a lump in her throat. “I promise.”





## Chapter 15 – Trust



She wasn't in the infirmary. She wasn't in her bedroom or the Field of Visions either, and Aidan felt like he was going mad searching for her. It hadn't taken long at all to find the break in the shield, and he and Ori had parted ways in the forest, each not having much to say. All Aidan could think about was what he would tell Leah, and what he would suggest she do. But reaching her room and finding her gone? Now all he could do was worry about what had happened.

Immediately, his mind raced through a list of faces and names, with her father at the top. But he knew that deep down, she had probably just been checked out of the infirmary. After his encounter with Elder Ainsley, it wasn't unthinkable that she might be found in the Elders' compound, bundled up before a warm fire, drinking warm tea as her father scolded her for associating herself with the scum on his boot or whatever the heck he had called him that afternoon.

But before he scorched the compound in search of Leah, he decided to check one last place. Once again, he navigated the shadows and crept into the boys' cabin just as the sky was beginning to come to life, and the birds were warming up for their morning song. He made it past the rooms where his associates slept and into his bedroom. He barely remembered to close the door behind him when he saw her, sitting on the bed in the dark, holding his pillow.

He tried to tackle her, he was so excited, but she caught him in mid-air with an explosion of water that thrust him into the door. The water became ice, and then the floorboards became sentient, creaking up and wrapping around his wrists to hold him down. She shot up from the bed and onto her feet, throwing the pillow directly in his face. Thankfully, it wasn't encased in ice.

"Where have you been?"

"Out," he said.

“Haha. That’s funny. You know what’s also funny? This.” She made a circle with her index finger towards Aidan, and a floorboard shot up and slammed into his elbow. He winced and fought against his restraints. “Get it? Funny bone? Why aren’t you laughing?”

“Leah, we don’t have much time together.”

“And whose fault is that?” she sobbed, walking over and stooping down to be eye-level with him. “I thought you were going to come by tonight. What happened?”

“A lot,” he said, hearing the stirring of boys awakening from the morning light.

“Whatever,” she said, walking back to the bed. The floorboards unraveled and reverted back to their rightful place. The ice on his body melted, leaving his clothes damp. He climbed to his feet and sat next to her, deciding to take her hand into his.

“It was important,” he said.

“More secret espionage stuff?”

“Yeah, and I’m going to tell you all about it.”

“You are?” she asked, looking at him in puzzlement.

“I need you to hear this. The reason I was brought here to Lowsunn is because Bailey sponsored me. She believed that I had the resolve to become a strong leader if I just harnessed my anger properly. Her words. Anyways, she and I are part of a secret underground movement that monitors the Elders. It’s no secret that their dealings are shady.”

“So what do you do? Prevent the Elders from making wrong decisions?”

“I’ve been on the ground floor mostly. I don’t know much. But the movement mostly just watches and ensures that we keep our focus on what’s best for Lowsunn. Usually, that means not getting too comfortable. Comfort in some ways can be a hindrance to growth. You lose that will to grow, to fight for what you believe in...I know how that feels. From seeing both sides though, I believe there has to be a balance somewhere. We just have to find it. I think the villagers here could rise to do better.”

“Kind of like what Duncan was talking about,” she said. He didn’t know how to take that.

“In a way, I guess. But I don’t like his methods. Of course, I don’t care for the Movement’s methods that much either...but most of us don’t get a choice in what situations we’re placed in.”

“That doesn’t mean you have to go with how the current takes you. You can paddle. If Bailey or anyone else in this Movement isn’t treating you right, shouldn’t you speak up? Doesn’t your vote count too?”

“I would like to think it does. But it sure doesn’t feel that way.”

“It’s still better than doing nothing.”

“I’ve made some choices on my own,” he said, smiling at her. “Choosing to be with you was a big one.”

“I believe it was the other way around, mister.”

“Either way, that’s one move I’ll never regret. And that’s why what I have to say next is pretty painful.”

“What happened?”

“I was outside the shields tonight,” he admitted. “I know you would have come with me, but I didn’t know the situation. Our Movement found out the particulars of the mission list, and most of the names on there were people in our organization. I was brought outside to talk, and they told me that the enemy I would have to face...it’s one of the Omegas.”

“What?” she gasped, squeezing his hand. “Which one?”

“Necrosis,” he said solemnly. He could feel Leah’s temperature rise through her palm. “Listen, I don’t know if your father’s involved. But, it’s no secret that the Elders want me gone.”

“But they’re not expelling you. They’re murdering you.”

“Not exactly. My team and I – we’ve decided to leave Lowsunn. Necrosis will probably still come after us, but it’s better than meeting certain doom and putting the rest of the village in danger.”

“When?” she asked, casting her head down, her hair veiling her face.

“Tomorrow. I’ll be leaving with the mission. Only I won’t be coming back.”

“And what happens to me?”

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about...I –” Leah clutched his jaw and slammed his lips onto hers, holding it with all her strength.

Aidan sighed deeply and pulled away, but all he could see were her pleading eyes.

“Whatever you do, don’t leave me behind,” she said. Aidan began to say something, but then he stopped and pulled her to his chest, kissing the crown of her head and holding her tight.

“I won’t,” he said. And he felt her temperature drop immediately.



“WHAT HAPPENS WHEN ALL of you are gone? The Movement, I mean.” Leah asked as the last of the boys left the cabin for the announcements. Aidan rubbed his eyes and yawned.

“I have no clue,” he said. “Some will come back. Others won’t. But I think Bailey’s using the missions as a way for us to become better soldiers. More battle experience. More intel gathering.”

“But then what? You come back to Lowsunn, and the cycle continues. It’s nice that you are talking and gathering together for a purpose, but nothing changes. The Elders are still in charge. They still get to make any decisions they choose, and no one’s going to challenge them openly, or they’ll be branded as an enemy.”

“I trust that Bailey knows what she’s doing,” Aidan said, looking under his bed. “Guess it’s just the role I’m taking,” he muttered.

“That doesn’t sound like you.”

“What?”

“To put your life in another’s hands like that.”

“She’s my friend.”

“But she didn’t trust you enough to tell you why you were going to Otalli.”

“Guess not.”

“Now I know what Bailey’s talking about,” Leah said, still sitting on the bed. Aidan halted his search and stood up to face her.

“What do you mean?”

“You’re afraid of yourself. That’s your problem. It’s not the anger.”

“It’s always been the anger.”

“Everyone’s angry. The difference is that you’re vocal about it.”

“I don’t see how that makes me afraid.”

“You only combat what you know. What’s familiar. You start the same old fights and battle only when you’re sure you can win. When you think you can control the situation.”

“Please don’t use that word,” Aidan sighed, closing his eyes. “Control...I’ve heard a lot about that tonight.”

“But it’s true!” she said. “You can talk big and act big and fight your enemy to the end, but only when you think you’ve got a shot. Anything complicated, anything bigger than you are – you bow out or run. Because you can’t control the situation. You’re afraid to tackle any problem you don’t completely understand.”

“What are you saying? That I should face Necrosis?”

“No!” she shouted, jabbing a finger into his chest. “I’m saying that you should fight for your right in this village, and you should fight for Lowsunn!”

“Why should I fight for this place? They’re trying to kill me.”

“The Elders are, but they only hold an insignificant percentage of the power we all have if we came together. We have far more seals than they, and they are supposed to represent our wishes and desires. And if they’re not going to listen to that, then it is our job and our right to stand up and tell them that they can no longer claim to act in our best interests. Your underground movement might believe differently than the Elders on what is the best way to save Lowsunn, but the desire is still the same. We want to save this place! And you do too...you didn’t just fight for *me* that night. You fought for them. And none of us would be here if you hadn’t.”

“I have no clue what to do,” Aidan said, raising his palms to look at them. “Whatever I put my hand to, it melts. It gets destroyed.”

“I need you to make a flame,” she said, taking his palm and facing it toward the ceiling. “Go ahead.”

He obeyed, and in an instant, a small flame emerged, only a couple of inches tall. Leah placed the palm of her right hand just above the flame, and rain began to pour. The flame flickered and fought to stay ablaze. Just as it began to die, Leah tightened her grip on Aidan’s hand.

“Don’t let it die!” she shouted, and he increased the intensity. Leah furrowed her brow and let a miniature monsoon pour onto the flame. It flickered rapidly, and it wasn’t as strong, but it still remained

in Aidan's hand. "Don't you see?" she said. "Alone, your fire is too hot and so bright that it offends. But together with something that cools it, it's stabilized. It's enough to comfort. And yet, even in the rain, it never goes out. Your will is strong, Aidan. But if it's too hot, you'll push people away. Stabilize it – and you can make them dream again. You make them want a better future. They feel your warmth, and it gives them comfort. Don't let the Elders or this Movement put out your fire. Because you're the only one that can allow that to happen."

"Maybe you're right. But how do I make a difference now? I'll be leaving soon."

"You might have to take care of things on a lower level...but that doesn't mean you give up. Look for a way to save the village. Bring together others of commonality. Know when it's time to act."

"I'll do my best," Aidan smiled. "When we're on the outside, we'll search for a way to save everyone."

"That's my man," she said, giving him a quick kiss. "Now, let's hurry to the announcements before anyone realizes that we're missing."

"You want to know what's really sad?" Aidan asked. "I finally thought there was another place like Lowsunn out there when I came upon Otalli, but in the end, it was all fake."

"That's because they don't have you around to test the waters," she said, and then they walked out the door.

They weren't late, but they were close. As they reached the crowd of concerned villagers, they were forced to wait in the back, trying to extend their necks over the many heads that swayed back and forth in the way of their view. The Elders sat in chairs on the makeshift stage, their hands folded together as their legs draped over their knees. It was strange seeing only five of them now. Once the crowd had reached an acceptable level of silence and order, Elder Thine stood to her feet and addressed the villagers.

"This is an exciting and solemn time, but necessary nevertheless," she said. Elder Exil handed her a stack of papers from behind. "I must remind you that, to secure Lowsunn forever, please be aware of any information concerning the Choate while you are on your travels. In my hand, there are lists of teams. Each team

will receive a parchment on which will be the details of the team's mission and requirements for completion. It is best if you do not discuss the particulars of your specific mission with each other. The time is now 8 a.m. All teams must be adequately prepared and vacate the premises no later than noon. I will now begin by reading off the names of the first team: Laura Ent, Samantha Childs, Tristan Yen, Elias Quill, and Leah Ainsley. Tristan, please come retrieve this document for your team."

The crowd formed a path for Tristan by parting into two large groups, but Aidan barely moved. He couldn't take his eyes off Leah.

"Well, who didn't see that coming?" Leah sighed, rubbing her shoulder as she stared at the grass. Aidan grabbed her shoulders.

"You know you're not going on that mission," he whispered.

"I don't even know what class it is."

"It doesn't matter. We're not going to be separated."

"This complicates things, but I'll meet up with you as soon as possible."

"How? Necrosis will be coming after us. We'll have to stay on the move. Why can't you just ditch them?"

"Because they'll know right away that we're together. Tristan will report me to the Elders and they'll send the Discipline Squad or some other warriors your way which will make things harder. How about this? In one month, meet me in Otalli."

"Now who's leaving who behind?" he snapped.

"Remember," she said, taking his red hands into her blue ones. "Remember." Aidan shook his head profusely and ripped his hands from hers.

"First chance I get, I'm coming to you."

"Don't do that."

"Stop me."

"You were going to ask me to stay behind anyway," she said, giving him a stern face. "Tell me I'm wrong."

"You're wrong," he said through grit teeth, facing the Elders while he repeated his promise. "I'm coming."

"And let your team die? No, you're not. You would never forgive yourself."



“Stranger things have happened,” he said, pointing at Tristan in the distance. He was waving for Leah to come with the group so they could strategize. “They need you.”

“I’m not leaving until I know we’re okay,” she grabbed his arm. He took a deep breath and tried to turn down the heat on his boil.

“We’ll always be okay,” he said, his face softening and turning to her. “One month,” he said reluctantly. “Nothing more.” Leah nodded.

“I’ll be right back,” she said, going to meet her group.

“- and Aidan Serafino,” Elder Thine finished calling out as Jin went to retrieve the parchment. It was strange seeing him without his armor and in a Lowsunn uniform. Jin strolled over to Aidan with a weary countenance and gave him a corner of the paper to hold. Three others, two girls and one boy came up behind them and glanced over their shoulders.

“B class mission,” Jin scoffed. “What a joke. We’re supposed to investigate the city of Darken – one of the few municipalities inhabited solely by naturals. It’s rumored that Necrosis has been killing naturals there, and we’re supposed to confirm whether this is true or not and relay the information back to the Elders.”

“What’s the point of that?” one of the girls asked.

“I figure it’s to know whether they can start sending more groups there. If there was no real threat there, then Darken could become a possible supply source or ally in the future. The real joke is that this is classified as a B because we’re only to investigate, not fight whoever is committing the crime. Like that’s going to happen. Necrosis will probably be the welcoming party.”

“So where are we going instead?” she asked.

“Onyx Major,” he smiled. “A place so populated that we’ll know if Necrosis is coming from miles away. It’s a far trek to the east, but we have more than enough power to make it. Allow me to introduce everyone. This is Aidan – Fire Arts –”

“- we all know him,” the extremely long-haired girl laughed. “My name is Grain. Yeah, I know it’s a horrible name. Anyways, my specialty is that I can read deception. So I know when someone’s lying right away. And I’m not too bad with a sword either.”

“I’m Teller,” the bored-looking, red-headed boy said. “I can fly.” Aidan stifled a laugh.

“And I’m Jessica,” the last girl with the long black hair and blue eyes replied. “Gravity manipulation.”

“Together we’ll be okay,” Jin commented. “And we might as well get to know each other well. After all, we’re going to be one big family for an undetermined amount of time. Teller can help us see the way ahead while in flight. Grain will assist with finding safety zones, and the rest of us are the wrecking crew. We’ll deal with the threats that we come across. Now, we’re to leave by noon, and that’s not a lot of time, so please, say your goodbyes and gather any supplies that are dear to you. Don’t pack too heavily though, or the Elders will know something’s up. We will head out at 11:30 at the south end, where the shields will be made weak enough for us to pass through. Any questions?”

They all shook their heads, and Jin clapped his hands together.

“Then we’ll see each other later. Take care.” Jin disappeared into the crowd with Teller and Grain, but Jessica grabbed Aidan’s arm before he could leave.

“Hey, I just wanted to say that we might not show it, but we’re happy you’re with us. You have a lot of insight into the outside world that we can only dream about.”

“We’ll all be getting plenty of insight soon enough,” he replied as she let go of him. “But don’t worry too much. We have an able team. We’ll be fine unless we come across Necrosis, of course.”

“Yeah,” she said, playing with a strand of her hair. “That would be bad.”

“I have to go,” Aidan replied, leaving her so he could search for Leah. As he looked around for her, he suddenly realized that Ori hadn’t been there. What had happened?

Come to think of it, he hadn’t shown up at the cabin either. Aidan began tapping people on the shoulder and asking if they had seen Ori, but none knew of his location. Jin appeared from the middle of the crowd.

“Hey, Aidan,” Jin said. “Do you know what happened to Ori? I didn’t want to say anything with the others there.”

“I’m on it,” Aidan waved Jin away. “I’m on it.”

Concerned, he began searching more frantically, looking in all the major spots: the Field, the schoolhouse, the cabins, the infirmary. Ori

was nowhere to be found.

***He wouldn't go back outside without us, would he?*** Aidan wondered as he stopped by the Western Restaurant to think. Hopefully, he was with Bailey.

"Aidan, come quickly!" a cry interrupted his thoughts as someone grabbed his forearm. Aidan faced the source and found Eugene before him, sweating profusely. "It's Ori."

"Take me there," he demanded, following the professor. They ran through the woods behind the Restaurant as fast as possible, jumping over fallen branches and whole trees.

"He's over here," Eugene cried out, jumping through a thicket of leaves and thorns. Aidan opted to burn it down rather than crawl through it as Eugene had done. As he walked through the smoking remains of the thicket, he saw that Ori was indeed there...and he had seen better days.

He was lying on his back with his eyes closed, a pool of blood seeping out from underneath him. Looking closer, Aidan saw that he had been stabbed repeatedly by something big. Every one of the wounds was fatal.

"Ori, are you there?" Aidan asked, stooping down to examine him. He could hear the soft spilling of his friend's life leaving his body. Aidan grit his teeth and began concentrating.

"What are you doing?" Eugene asked, but Aidan shushed him. Aidan took a deep breath and said the words clearly within his mind: ***I wish that Ori's wounds would be healed, and that his body would be back to normal.***

The teleportation was instantaneous. Once again, he was back in the Judge's chamber, standing before him as the Judge continued to sit on his tiny stool. Aidan made no move for him this time. Feeling the invisible hands encase him once was more than enough.

"Hello, Aidan," the Judge replied, still sitting atop the engraved symbol of the Yen on the floor. "I hope you have been well."

"I've been better," he said, waiting for the Judge to grant his request. Only silence ensued. Finally, the Judge spoke up.

"No threats this time?" he asked. His voice almost sounded shocked.

"Not this time," Aidan said. "I just want my wish granted."

“You would waste one of your Yen on him?”

“I’m here, aren’t I?”

“It’s just surprising. I thought you were saving your Yen so you could kill me.”

“I can’t bring my dead family back. Not even with a Yen. So I’ve got to save the family I do have.”

“You make me more curious every year, Aidan. Your wish has been granted. Until the next and last time we meet, take care.”

“Even after the Yen are done, I’m sure we’ll meet again.”

“Perhaps,” the Judge replied, and Aidan was back in the woods. Ori was coughing, and Eugene patted his back as the swordsman sat up to catch his breath.

“What-what happened? Why am I still alive?” he asked. Aidan pulled up on his own sleeve. Two of the three Yen were darkened. Ori coughed one last time and did the same. Two of his three Yen were black as well.

“Good to have you back,” Aidan replied, helping Ori to his feet. The swordsman didn’t look happy.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” Ori replied. “I didn’t want you to waste one of your wishes on a weakling like me.”

“It’s done. What happened?”

“I was here in the woods trying to think of how I could best use my next Yen when someone snuck up behind me and stabbed me in the back. I was paralyzed instantly, and as I fell, they kept stabbing me. I didn’t have much time. I used one of my seals to grant myself a telekinetic ability, and I threw my sword in the direction I heard someone running, but I don’t think I got them.”

“Won’t know until we make sure. Which direction?”

“East,” he said, and they began walking that way. Ori rubbed his hands over where the wounds used to be. “I can’t believe I’m still alive. Aidan, I’m grateful...but you have no idea how terrible I feel.”

“I said it’s done.”

“No, it’s not,” he said. “I wish I could use my last Yen to give you back yours...you know what? That’s what I’m going to do. My last Yen is yours to use as you wish.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“It would be gone if I had died anyways. I should have been more careful.”

“You can’t blame yourself,” Eugene said from behind them. “It could have happened to anyone. You are fortunate that I frequent these woods for reflection and meditation.”

“Did you see anyone besides Ori?” Aidan asked.

“No. All was quiet.”

“I don’t care what you say,” Ori practically shouted. “My last Yen is yours, and in the meantime, I’m going to become the greatest warrior in the world. I’m going to make what you did count. I’m going to fight so hard that you won’t have to. My life is yours to do with what –”

“– geez, just stop,” Aidan chuckled. “I’m just happy you’re still here.”

“That must have hurt to say,” Ori smiled. “But in all seriousness, I will get incredibly strong.”

“I have no doubt,” Aidan chuckled. He stopped and kicked back a few leaves to reveal Ori’s dagger. He picked it up and inspected it, but there wasn’t a drop of blood. He glanced back to where Ori had fallen. “Your throw went quite far. The telekinesis might have stopped once you went unconscious.”

“Then whoever it was got away,” Ori seethed. “And with everyone going on missions today, there’s no way to conduct an investigation. They might already be gone.”

“But who would be bold enough to do this?”

“If the Elders are after us,” Eugene said, “they might have sent a hit on Ori. They know that they placed you two together on a mission. Maybe they realized that they gave you too much of an advantage. By removing one of you from the equation, the others would have a greater probability of failing.”

“All the more reason to get stronger,” Ori said.

“We’re leaving Lowsunn at 11:30,” Aidan stated. “We’re meeting in the south end by the shield. Do you need any supplies or anything?”

“Just what I have on me,” Ori replied. “You know I don’t have anything.”

“Me neither,” Aidan chuckled. “Well, until then, we’re sticking together. I don’t want to give the assassin another chance. Unless you feel like being bait, and we try to settle this.”

“He’s probably gone. Besides, have you said goodbye to Leah yet?”

“No,” Aidan replied. “I was heading over to do so when I realized you were missing.”

“It’s so weird. I can still feel where the blade pierced through me...I don’t think I’m getting over this anytime soon.”

“Just accompany me,” Aidan replied, turning to Eugene. “It’s good you found Ori and were able to get one of us in time. You’re going to have to be careful around here in our absence. Most of us are leaving. There’s no one to protect you.”

“Even if I’m killed, I’ve lived a full life,” Eugene said, his eyes smiling. “I wish you both the best of luck.”

“Thanks,” Aidan said, and they walked away. Eugene began searching the ground for clues as to what had happened. The two boys stayed in the background as much as possible as they made their way to Leah’s cabin in the south. She was sitting right outside the door when they arrived, and she stood to greet them with a smile.

“I was given an N mission,” she declared with a smirk. Ori raised an eyebrow.

“What is that?” he asked. “I’ve only heard of A through D.”

“There are six classes to a mission,” Aidan declared. “The highest is Omega, and then it goes A, B, C, D, and ends with N for negligible. Basically, she’s probably going to Otalli or another nearby location to get supplies and come right back. But it doesn’t matter. Leah, plans have changed. You’re coming with us this morning.”

“I thought we talked about this.”

“There was an attempt on my life,” Ori said. “No, let me take that back. I was murdered. If it wasn’t for Aidan using a Yen, I wouldn’t be standing here right now.”

Leah’s eyes widened in surprise as Aidan pulled up his sleeve to reveal the truth. She rubbed her fingers across the newly darkened seal.

“We can’t stay here,” Aidan said. “Not with a murderer around. We can’t risk it.”

“But it’s already...” she looked up at the sun. “It’s close to 11. I haven’t packed anything. I haven’t seen my father –”

“We can gather some of your belongings, but it might be best to leave your father be. We don’t even know for sure that he wasn’t involved.”

“So one minute he’s innocent until proven guilty, and the next, he’s a possible murderer?”

“What would you do, Leah? Huh? Would you want to stay here? I know Lowsunn is all you’ve known since the new era, but you have to choose now. Either stay here and take the risk, or come with me, and well...take that risk too.”

“It’s not even a question,” she answered with a smile.

“I’ll do everything I can to make it easy for you,” Aidan said. “Now go inside and get some things. We have to meet up with Jin and the others.” Leah entered the cabin as Ori glanced around him.

“I don’t know what’s right anymore,” he muttered.

“What do you mean?”

“I didn’t think the Elders would be so bold as to try to kill me like that. What if I had been found by someone other than Eugene? It would have raised a lot of questions. People would have gone into a panic.”

“Yeah...” Aidan said in thought. “It doesn’t sound like the Elders at all. But like Eugene said, they must have realized that putting the two of us together would increase our chances of survival. So with everyone leaving, they took the risk. If Eugene hadn’t found you so quickly, they might have cleaned up your body quickly.”

“Yeah, it’s great he was there, isn’t it?” Ori muttered. “You know, what if – what if Eugene was the one who did it?”

“No offense, but you would have heard Eugene coming.”

“One of his puppets then. Especially if it’s the kind that can just hang from strings. They might not have touched the ground at all.”

“You’re getting conspiracy theory on me again.”

“No, think about it. What do you actually know about Eugene? You know he works closely with the Elders. And did you know that his abilities involved puppetry from the beginning?”

“No, he told me differently,” Aidan said. “Said it was a tactical mind.”

“He could be one of the Elders’ secret assassins.”

“Then why would he run to get me so fast?”

“Because he got you to use a Yen.”

Aidan’s eyes widened in a rage once he heard that. He could feel his blood boiling. He hoped it wasn’t true. For Eugene’s sake, he prayed it wasn’t.

“If I die, our chances at survival go down collectively,” Ori continued. “So even if I had died before you got to me, there would have been no loss. But since I didn’t, having you use a Yen makes you that much weaker. Even I used one in the heat of the moment. All we have left is one each.”

“Where do you think Eugene is now?” Aidan asked, clenching his jaw.

“Look, it’s only a theory,” Ori said, placing a hand on his friend’s shoulder. “And we wouldn’t be able to do anything about it right now anyway. We have no proof, and it’s his word against ours. And if I’m wrong, all it does is weaken our relationship with him and the rest of the Movement.”

“Yeah, but if he is the culprit, he got away with it.”

“For now. We’ll keep an eye out.”

“I’m sick of keeping an eye out. I want this to end. All the games. All the politics. Why can’t we grab Eugene and force him to talk?”

“Because he might not. And even if he does, there’s no guarantee he won’t be lying.”

“That’s why we must ask around,” Leah said, emerging from the cabin. She only had her Lowsunn backpack over her shoulder. “There’s no question that many know of Lowsunn. They might have more knowledge and insight into what goes on here than we do since we’re already in the mix. Only a baker knows how his cake is going to turn out. The ingredients are simply clueless and along for the ride.”

“Oh!” Ori exclaimed, turning to Aidan. “So this is where you get all your metaphors from!” Aidan smacked him upside the head, and Leah giggled.



“Regardless, we have to go,” Leah said. “If we stay, everyone will want to know why.”

“We’ll be back for sure,” Aidan muttered as the three of them headed south, past the cabins and through the woods behind them. Neither of them said a word as they traveled further and further into the woods, not until they saw a group standing by the shield’s edge. Jin waved at them cheerfully, but his face scowled once he saw Leah with them.

“Um, what is she doing here? She has her own mission to go on.”

“She’s coming,” Aidan said, sticking his face into Jin’s. “And that’s final.”

“You don’t get to make that call,” Jin replied. “She’s the Elder’s daughter. AND she’s supposed to be leaving with her own group. They’re going to notice she’s missing within the hour, and they’ll know she went off with you. They’ll hunt us down.”

“The three of us can leave on our own if that’s what needs to happen. But there’s no guarantee they won’t come searching for her in your group. They’ll find out you didn’t go to Darken, and you went running. At least if we’re all together, we can all fight as one.”

“You had to find a way to make this harder,” Jin sighed. “And I was hoping you wouldn’t live up to your reputation.”

“You should have known better,” Aidan smiled. “Now, let’s get going. First, we need to distance ourselves and this place.”

“Whatever,” Jin groaned, walking off. Jessica patted Leah on the back and gave her a hug while Grain and Teller wore unreadable expressions. Leah introduced herself to the group, but not everyone responded. Once she was done, they all picked up their few belongings and headed out.

Passing through the shield was different this time. There was no reason to crawl or be afraid of what section was touched, although Aidan did wonder if the shield could identify who specifically had passed through it or if it just registered in general that someone had. If it could identify the people who passed through, then Leah’s missing would be reported sooner than he had thought. But once Jin and Grain leaped through to the other side, he realized that there was no turning back. In an instant, they were back in the real world. Ori caressed the shield to see if he could go back in, but his hand

remained flat against its surface. Without authorization to re-enter Lowsunn, they were stuck out in the open.

On the south end of Lowsunn, there wasn't a cliff or rolling hill to behold. Just a massive expanse that stretched as far as the eye could see. The sky was a cloudless baby blue. The air was crisp, thin, and fresh, unlike the recycled thick atmosphere in Lowsunn. There were no beasts, but hundreds of dragonflies danced in the air. Dandelions with diamond petals covered the valley, and an ambiance of hope permeated the air. Except for Jin and Aidan, they were all in awe, and at first, no one moved. They took in the sight as if it were an organic mural. Jin chuckled and placed an elbow on Grain's shoulder.

"C'mon, everyone. Let's get moving. We have to find shelter before dark."



## Chapter 16 – What We Fear



“Oh! Look at that!” Ori exclaimed as they walked. A small lake, nearly a mile wide, hung in the air to their right. Aidan was quick to elaborate.

“It’s called an aqua station. It’s actually quite common. Why don’t you go stick your head in and take a drink?”

“Is it safe?”

“Usually. When it rains, the water falls into the lake, and it gets purified. All of the residue gets dropped to the ground below, which is why there’s so much mud and strange-colored grime underneath. Take that green patch over there on the left side. I don’t even want to know where that came from.”

“So I go over and take a sip?”

“Yeah. Here, let me show you.” Aidan walked up and stuck his face into the jiggling substance, drinking freely until he had his fill. His face was drenched when he emerged from it, but his thirst was quenched. “Ah, that tastes good.”

“And you’re sure it’s not poisoned?”

“This aqua station has a great probability of being safe since it’s sitting in the middle of nowhere. Once we’re in the Onyx area, I would be a little more careful.”

“Alright,” Leah said, walking over to the aqua station and sticking her head into the water. She took a sip and emerged, face dripping. “Oh my, that’s good.” She stuck her head back in to drink more, and the others followed suit.

“Yeah, it’s pretty crisp,” Aidan replied. It took a few moments for everyone to drink their fill. “So Jin, how much longer until we get to Onyx?” Aidan asked after everyone was done.

“Oh, that will be a couple of days,” Jin replied, wiping his lips with his sleeve. “I don’t even know if there’s shelter between us, and it will be evening soon. The sky’s already turning pink and red.”

“We might as well keep moving,” Grain said. “Though I have to admit, I’m kind of getting used to being out here. I was pretty terrified at first, but it’s not that bad.”

“All we’ve seen is this valley,” Jin pointed out. “There’s a lot more to this world than we’ve experienced yet.”

“Hey!” Ori shouted from a distance. “There’s something over there!” He was about a quarter-mile ahead of them, and the group sped up to reach him. They stopped and followed his index finger to where it was pointing. They could just make out a tiny dot somewhere out in the expanse.

“I’ll get a closer look,” Teller said, rising off his feet and into the air. He slowly gained altitude and headed toward the dot. Once he was about three-quarters of the way there, he doubled back and landed hard on the ground. “It’s a house. Small, but there was a light on inside.”

“Anything else?” Jin asked.

“Nothing I could sense,” he replied. “But the grass surrounding the home for about a quarter-mile was littered with paper.”

“Paper?”

“Yeah, it was all over the place. Just lying in the grass.”

“It might involve the inhabitant’s abilities,” Jin said thoughtfully. “Most of us should stay away from that paper as much as possible. We don’t know why it’s there. Aidan, you’ll be taking point. You’ll approach from the front while myself, Grain, and Ori take the back. Teller, stick to the skies overhead. How many windows did you see on the house?”

“One on each side. A couple in front. Very tiny, though. I don’t think anyone can fit through them.”

“Leah and Jessica will each take a side. If whoever’s inside makes a threatening move, I want you two to force him to his butt and ice him. Hold him down until we can assess who he is.” They nodded as Jin turned to Aidan.

“I understand I gave you the worst position, but given that you have the most experience out of all of us, you were best suited for the job.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll take my time approaching while the rest of you circle around.”

“Thank you,” Jin nodded. They traveled most of the distance to the house and, once they got close, dispersed their separate ways to flank the house. Aidan clenched his fists and warmed them. If he was forced to attack, it would have to be quick. He took a step forward slowly and continued towards the house in like fashion, giving the inhabitant plenty of time to see him approaching. Once Aidan was within a quarter-mile, he saw the papers that Teller had mentioned. They weren’t scraps. They were little paper men, with sticks going up against their backs so they could stand. They stood up between the blades of grass like miniature scarecrows, except these wards had creepy smiles on their faces. Against his better judgment, he began stepping on them, but it was the only way he could move forward. With each crunch, he expected the others to avenge their fallen brethren. To come to life and transform into giants and crush him. But nothing happened. They stayed silent, and Aidan kept his sights on his goal.

As he approached, he noticed that the house had not been made by human hands, but by Yen. It was square and tiny, with a roof that looked like it had been melted into place, drooped over the sides of the house, and hardened like stale syrup. The windows could barely allow a bird to enter, and the door was a plank of wood held in place by rusted hinges. Through the two small windows in the front, Aidan could see the flicker of a candle bouncing off the dark walls. Its brief illuminations showed him that the interior was very cramped. Then, just as he was a few yards from the front door, he saw Leah and Jessica squish their backs up against the sides, waiting for their cue to attack.

Aidan took one more step forward. The door suddenly burst open, flying entirely off the rusted hinges and onto some paper men below. An old man in a dirty apron and hole-covered boots spread his arms wide.

“Welcome, stranger!” he cried, then he noticed the door’s demise. “Dang nabbit. They told me those hinges would last until the second Cataclysm. Liars, all of them!” He turned his attention back to Aidan. “Well, come inside now. I got liber stew on the pot, and I made enough for you and your friends. Tell em to come inside now. Why it take you so long to walk here is beyond me. Seen you coming long

way off...kids. They slower than old folk. There is nothing –” he went back inside, muttering to himself and leaving Aidan in awe.

Jin appeared from behind the house and shrugged his shoulders. Aidan nodded, and they all reconvened in the front.

“What now?” Grain asked. Jin glanced inside and saw the old man hunched over a boiling cauldron, stirring so slowly it was like he was falling asleep.

“Jessica and Teller stay outside. The rest of us go in until we think it’s safe. Just because he seems harmless doesn’t mean anything. Did you guys see these creepy things?” Jin held up a paper man, and Teller slapped it out of his hand.

“It’s getting colder. I’d really like to be inside,” Teller said.

“Stay outside, just for a little while. To make sure there are no others on their way.”

“Fine,” Teller sucked his teeth and flew back up. Jessica maintained her spot outside the window while the rest entered the humble home. They could barely squeeze into it comfortably. There was a table to the left with its chairs pushed in. The chairs still had their backs pressed up against the walls. No one bothered sitting as they simply wouldn’t fit. In the middle, by the back door, was a dirty toilet, and to the right was the “kitchen.” A cauldron hung up by five rusted wires over a blazing hot fire. The old man took a spoonful of the stew and took a sip.

“Oh, that’s vile. As bad as a demon’s socks,” he spat the mouthful into a corner and then wiped his greasy hands on his apron and turned around. “Dinner’s almost ready.”

“Not hungry,” they all said in unison. The old man laughed heartily and stepped outside, waving for them to follow him. Once they were all out in the open, he swatted his hands out into the air, and the paper men blew away as if caught in a tornado. They spiraled up higher and higher until they couldn’t be seen anymore, and the old man took a seat in the grass, crossing his legs. He waved a trembling finger at Aidan.

“Fire fire. Make a fire right in the middle now.”

Aidan obeyed, and the old man sighed in relief at the warmth. “Figured you didn’t want to sit on people,” he said, motioning for them all to sit down.

“People?” Jin asked in shock. “Those paper men were people? I stepped on some of them!”

“Oh, they were all bad people,” the old man replied. “Don’t worry. You don’t seem like their sort. Come. Sit.”

Jin took a seat, and the others followed. The old man motioned for Jessica and Teller to join them, but they maintained their positions.

“Forgive us, but it’s a precaution,” Jin replied. The old man put a hand to his chest.

“From me? Why? Because I turn people into paper decorations? That’s not evil. I was defending myself.”

“I’m sure you were.”

“So what are you young ones doing on my property?” the old man asked, wiping his mouth with his greasy apron. They all tried their best not to gag.

“We’re on a journey,” Jin replied. “To Onyx Major. We were looking for shelter for the night.”

“It is a nice night, isn’t it?” the old man sighed. The stars were beginning to reveal themselves and start their preliminary dances before the true sparring began. The moon was getting brighter by the second. “I like that someone wished for fighting stars. It’s better than watching them sit. People sit too much.”

“Who are you? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“Name is Sylvester, but people call me Vest. I like Sly. Makes me sound like an old spy, but they like vest. Don’t care much for fancy digs.”

“We can call you Sly.”

“Oh no, call me Vest. Makes me sound like an Omega. Wouldn’t that be something? If I was an Omega? They could call me Big Sly.”

“Right,” Jin said, clearing his throat. “Vest, what are you doing out here all alone?”

“I takes care of myself. I manage,” he said, spitting into the grass to his left. “What you doing out here?”

“We needed shelter before heading to Onyx Major.” Jin sighed from having to repeat himself.

“Is that all? You ain’t here to get information? That’s what Duncan did.”



“Duncan? You knew Duncan?”

“Of course I did. It’s what I’m supposed to do.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s my job.” He gave a toothless grin. “It’s my ability. Know how old I am? Guess.”

“I don’t know...eighty?”

“I’m thirty-two,” he replied, coughing and laughing. “I got old quick, huh? Time do that. Stress. Pain. Burden. It do that. Lost my teeth, but that was from fighting. Fighting ain’t my ability.”

“When Duncan was here...did he mention something about a Choate?”

“Thank heavens,” the old man replied, dropping his chin to his chest. When he raised it back up, he was still old in body but noticeably younger in spirit. His brown eyes were lively and coherent. The sudden change was unnerving. “It’s about time you asked about the Choate,” he replied eloquently, ripping the old apron off of him. He stuck a finger in his mouth and felt around.

“Seriously? One tooth left? And my hair...great, there’s fleas.” He started scratching his head so hard that the group began gritting their teeth in discomfort.

“Um...Vest?” Leah asked.

“It’s Sylvester,” he said quickly, feeling his body all over as if checking for abnormalities. “Sorry for all the riddles and mumbo-jumbo earlier. I’m not myself until someone mentions the Choate. After that, I get a good hour of clarity, and then I revert back.”

“What happened to you?” Aidan asked. He had never seen anything like this. Was it a spell?

“I’m one of the Judge’s victims,” he replied, jumping to his feet and heading into the house. “Be right back.” He rummaged around and then walked back out with a pipe in hand. He held it out to Aidan.

“Do you mind? I realized your abilities when your hands lit up earlier, when you were approaching the house.” Aidan snapped his fingers and lit it. Sylvester sat back down and sucked at it before sighing heavily and turning back to the travelers. “Alright, let’s make this quick. You only get one hour, and that’s it. Even if you say

Choate a thousand times, nothing's going to happen, so hurry up, ask your questions."

"I don't understand what's going on," Jin said. "Did Duncan do this to you?"

"No, the Judge," Sylvester said between puffs. "There are eight of us out there, across the world, that had wishes granted with knowledge about the Choate and its location. Four of us have information, and four hold a piece of it. To ensure that it's even harder for someone to get all four pieces of the Choate and put them together, the Judge sent his lackeys to come to us and make wishes that forced us to lose our minds. We turn into these strange humans that everyone thinks are crazy. I become a senile, old man. There's another that turns into a bird. Don't ask. It's not fun."

"I thought the Judge was impartial."

"Yeah, right. He may have rules to abide by. He may have limits, but he's still in a position of power. He's not going to let that go under any circumstances. He has to honor the wishes we made with our Yen, sure. But then he made sure we were so nuts that we didn't have the willpower to retrieve the pieces ourselves. And, as a bonus for him, no one will consider that we even have the knowledge that we do. Most of the time, when people come by, they're either trying to rob me or kill me or some combination of both. That's when they get turned into gingerbread cookie cut-outs. At least I have that. Can't leave this stupid house though. I got another Yen to thank for that. I walk two miles from this place, and I get teleported back. It's annoying. Can't meet nobody. Besides Duncan and you guys, I haven't seen a living soul in two years. Two years! I've been eating that sewage water for...you know what, let's not talk about it. I don't want to talk about it."

"So what was Duncan doing here? Passing by?"

"I think he got information from one of us. We call ourselves the Dull Edges. A bunch of slobbering, stupid people with the most important and powerful knowledge in the whole world. Anyways, either by accident or intention, he must have said the word Choate or something around one of them and activated their clarity. Got information about me and came out here to investigate. A word of warning. Don't go around saying Choate to every person you meet.

You'll attract the Judge's attention after a while, and he'll make sure you're chewing on old hair brushes like the rest of us in no time. You know what? Let's not talk about it."

"What did you tell Duncan?"

"That the most important piece of the artifact is in the Sentinel Stronghold, over the ocean if you keep going south, on another continent."

"What is the Sentinel Stronghold?"

"The Sentinel Stronghold is one of the most heavily guarded fortresses on Naropa, comprised of military men and women who have fought more battles than any human should ever have to. There are multiple pieces to the Choate. 4 parts, to be exact. Each piece is required to make the whole Choate, and the whole Choate is needed for maximum efficiency."

"And the Choate grants whoever uses it a wish without limitation?"

"Oh, it does far more than that." Sylvester smiled through the pipe. "It summons a second Cataclysm."



## Chapter 17 – Together



“You’re kidding!” Grain exclaimed. Based on her reaction to his words, there was no doubt that what Sylvester said was true. He wasn’t lying. Grain would know.

“The four pieces are all over the place, but this is what they do. The first piece removes the Judge’s control over your Yen. The second, controls the method of destruction. You want a comet? A big explosion? Take out an enemy’s continent on the other side of the world? Go for it. The third controls the size of the destruction. And the fourth controls the targeting and location. The second piece is what’s in the Sentinel Stronghold. With it, you can cause epic destruction. Sure, you might be caught in it because you can’t control the size and location, but if you want to destroy everything, there you go. Now, if you had a complete Choate, you could not only get wishes without limits, you could grant them to multiple people.”

“Duncan really wanted to use Lowsunn as an army,” Aidan said. “He wanted them to fight the men and women at the Sentinel Stronghold.”

“Yeah,” Leah said. “And probably to get us to collect the other three pieces in the meantime.”

“So you know the locations of all the pieces?” Jin asked.

“Oh no, that would be crazy. Even the Sentinel Stronghold I only know about because I heard about it a few years ago. I don’t know for sure if it’s there, but I wasn’t about to send a guy like that anywhere. I told the truth, which I’m obligated to do, but not the whole truth, you know?”

“I’m sure Duncan would have come back for you if he had survived,” Aidan said. Sylvester raised an eyebrow.

“He died, huh? Not surprised. I hear Lowsunn’s pretty solid on defenses.”

“So he didn’t have anyone else with him when he was here?”

“Not that I saw.”

“Interesting,” Aidan said, and Jin sat up more.

“Do you know the location of any of the other pieces?” Jin asked. Sylvester gave him a weary look.

“What do you intend to do with it?”

“To be honest, keep it away from others. I don’t want a weapon like that in the hands of anyone I don’t trust.”

“And who’s to say you’re to be trusted?”

“I don’t plan on using it for one thing. That alone should tell you my intentions are honorable.”

“True. I know the exact location of only one piece, and it happens to be in Onyx Major. An old friend of mine is holding on to it. You’ll have to convince her to relinquish it to you. Her name is Mace.”

“Do you think she would give it to us?” Jin asked.

“I don’t know. You’ll have to pass her test, whatever that is. I’m just the messenger. But again, a word of warning. The Judge may leave you alone if you only have one piece of the Choate. Maybe two. But three or more, and you officially become targets. He may not be able to harm you himself, but he has followers. Followers with abilities that will make you wish for a quick death. I hope you remember my words.”

“We will,” Aidan said. “But while we still have some time, I must ask you – what do you know about Lowsunn? Or what have you heard? What kind of a place is it?”

“Hmmm,” he said, puffing away. “Well, they keep to themselves mostly. Especially since there’s not much around them. But people don’t like them. I know that. They act as a fortress when many of the places in Naropa have opened their doors to others. People understand the need for caution, but to cut themselves off from the world? People start thinking they have something to hide.”

“I only ask because I don’t know what to make of them. Lowsunn is home to me, but I don’t like how they handle some things.”

“If you’re a family like they say, then they should treat you like it. What do you do when a family member is having problems with another? You have a meeting. You work it out. We all need a knock on the head sometimes. No one is above the knocking.”

“Right,” Aidan said. Sylvester nodded as he took one last look at all his guests, then climbed to his feet.

“I don’t have much time left so I hope you don’t mind if I spend it doing a little light reading. Used to love that. Don’t eat that crap I concocted in the pot. There’s fresh meat in the cabinet in the back of the house. Check it before you eat it. Don’t remember how long it’s been there exactly. But use the cauldron to cook it, and you’re free to sleep on the roof. When I revert back, I might yell at you and stuff, but just ignore me. The whole turning-people-into-paper thing is an auto-defense mechanism. Unless you attack me, it won’t kick in. Have a good night, everyone. It was nice meeting you all.”

Sylvester hummed a tune to himself as he scurried into the house. They heard the noises of a chair being ripped from the wall and placed into the open. The tune continued until his pipe dropped from his mouth and onto the table. The chair was heard scraping against the floor again, and then he emerged into view, hunchbacked and limping as he passed by the open entrance to the house. He grabbed his wooden spoon, stuck it in the cauldron, and took a sip.

“Tastes as good as sunshine,” he muttered. And then he kept stirring.



“CAN’T SLEEP?” LEAH asked as she came from behind Aidan in the field. The stars were in the midst of their second act, bouncing off one another like they were made of rubber. There was no noise accompanying the clashes, just a light breeze that rustled through his hair.

“It was hard enough with a cabin full of boys,” Aidan replied. “Even worse with six other people lying right next to you.”

“Even if one of those people is me?”

“You’re the only one I want to lie next to,” he smiled, momentarily facing her. “I can come back there now if you like.”

“Oh, no, I figured I wouldn’t be getting much sleep the first night out here. And can we talk about how creepy those paper men were? Soooooo creepy!”

“I’m not going to forget those anytime soon,” he laughed. Leah hugged him from behind.

“So, what’s the plan?”

“We head to Onyx Major, maybe get a little place of our own until we hear Necrosis is on his way. Then we keep moving.”

“I meant the Choate. Are we going to seek out Mace?”

“Should we? You heard Sylvester. We start collecting pieces, and we start gaining more enemies.”

“It is a dilemma,” she said, nuzzling her cheek into his back. “It’s hard because I almost feel like it’s our obligation though. On the other hand, imagine if Duncan had gotten a hold of a piece. The damage he could have caused.”

“I don’t know if having it in our possession is any better. It really is hard. Knowing when to intervene and when to just stay back.”

“What do you want to do? What does your gut tell you?”

“That we should retrieve it,” he sighed, looking to the stars. “Jin is right. The fact that we have no desire to use it speaks volumes. Unfortunately, I can’t say the same about the Elders or Bailey. Given that Sylvester’s home is so relatively close to Lowsunn, it’s only a matter of time before he tells someone else about it.”

“We’re already in trouble; why not add a little more?” Leah said. A cry of frustration interrupted their conversation, and they both glanced over to the right. Ori was off in the distance, testing out his newfound abilities, making his sword fly up into the air and dance. Ori used his hands to guide it, but he had difficulty figuring out the mechanics. The sword would fall randomly, and he stomped the ground, unable to figure out what went wrong.

“Should we go help him?” Aidan asked. Leah nodded into his back, and they separated.

“I’ll go first,” she said, sprinting forward. Summoning a blade of ice with a hilt wrapped around her right fist, she charged Ori silently, keeping her body and head low. But Ori sensed her approach, picked up his sword from the grass, and parried her blow at the last second. Leah pivoted and struck again, and they clashed, again and again, neither one taking the other too seriously. Aidan finally made his way over to them and stepped in between them.

“Now, now, that’s not going to help you improve,” he said, calling forth two magma swords from the palms of his hands. “Both of you taking me on at once will.”



Leah wasted no words and lunged right at Aidan's head. Aidan blocked the blow and then Ori's, activating fire shields whenever he wasn't fast enough to parry. The shields bounced their swords away and knocked them off balance, and whenever they staggered back, he would kick at them playfully. The three of them weren't serious at all, but they enjoyed the skirmish.

Until they were interrupted.

"What are you kids doing?" Jin laughed as he beat his fists together and came out of the shadows.

"I'll referee," Teller said, flying up above them. Grain sat and watched while Jessica went to Jin's side.

"Battle royale," she said with a big grin. "Winner gets to be carried to Onyx Major."

"Now that's worth playing for," Aidan smiled, dismissing his swords by reducing them to ash. "Any rules?"

"Just be the last one standing," Jin said, lunging at Aidan. Aidan shot a wave of fire from the tips of his fingers, sending Jin right onto his butt. He laughed as he got back to his feet.

"Alright, but remember, I can take that force and use it against you." Jin lunged forward again, and Aidan unleashed another wave of fire, but his opponent was quicker than before and rolled out of the way, pivoted, and hit Aidan square in the cheek – hard enough to send him reeling back. Aidan kept his balance as Jin danced back and forth in front of him, ready for more. All Aidan could do was smile.



"THAT WAS ONE WAY TO get some rest," Jin chuckled. The sun's rays made Aidan wince as he tried to open an eye. He shielded the light with his right hand, and Jin helped him to his feet with the other.

"What happened?" he groaned. His cheeks felt like he had slept on a rock.

"You lost, buddy," Jin said.

"I don't remember that."

"After you hit me with a tsunami of fire, I had no choice but to knock you out. That thing hurt! If it weren't for the kinetic power I had

gotten from you earlier, my skin wouldn't have been thick enough to handle the heat. Gave me a good tan though."

"I really have to stop doing that move. It never works."

"You would have beaten me if you had kept up the pressure. But you go too big too soon. When you use waves and beams and streams...all that stuff. Yeah, it's a large attack, and it hurts, but then you're exhausted, and you have to cool down before you can do it all over again, giving your enemy too much time to recover. Those waves may work against Teller or Grain, but not the rest of us. What if you made fire gauntlets?"

"Gauntlets?"

"Yeah. Gloves. But make them all spiky like your hair and infused with magma. Nice and hot and hard. You could have whaled on my face for a couple of minutes, and I would have been done. No time to channel my energy back at you."

"Hmmm." Aidan thought about the idea as he let the liquid fire pour out of his hands. Within seconds, he had a large, spiked gauntlet on each hand. They looked like the hands of a dragon but black and red in color. The traces of lava pumping along their talon-like edges glowed against the dark surface. Aidan held them up proudly for all to see, wiggling their horrific fingers.

"Like this?"

"Exactly," Jin said, poking a spike. "That is quite sharp," he laughed. "Occasionally, at night when you're not able to sleep, you should develop a few new techniques."

"So you won against everyone?" Aidan asked.

"No, Jess won, like always," Jin replied, pointing behind him. Jessica was already piggyback riding on Ori's back. She waved to them cheerfully as Jin muttered: "It's easy to win when you can just force everyone to lie down and go night-night."

"Stop your crying, loser!" she shouted from atop Ori's back, kicking at his ribs like he was a horse. Leah and Grain giggled from nearby. Teller was as stoic as ever with his arms crossed.

"I take it we're heading out?" Aidan asked. Jin nodded.

"Even at a quick pace, we won't reach the city until dark. I tried saying goodbye to Sylvester, but he was sound asleep at the table.

Didn't have the heart to wake him. For all I know, it's the only time he can truly be himself."

"I know the feeling," Aidan said. He could hear the rhythmic snore of the elderly young man coming from inside. "Maybe someday we can free him of his burden."

"One can hope," Jin said, facing the others. "Alright, everyone! Let's head out!"



IT WAS HARD TO MISS Onyx Major. The valley eventually dropped down into a crater so large that the group had no idea how far down it went. From the top, one couldn't see the city, only an obscure shadow that was so intimidating, that it caused many weary travelers to consider returning from whence they came. But upon heading downwards, the civilization emerged like an ancient beast summoned from a dark pit.

The major structures were black onyx, diamond, and ores of obsidian, fashioned into large spikes at awkward angles. It was like the back of a sea urchin at a distance, and the population below moved so quickly that it made the city itself seem alive. During the day, Onyx Major was lit up only by what little sun reflected off the diamond structures, but at night, it became pitch black, and the inhabitants mainly retired to their quarters. Once you entered the city itself, you could see that it wasn't as terrible as it had seemed from a distance, but it still kept its horror vibe.

The small corner stores and businesses were in tiny houses made of flesh-colored onyx with stripes of red, brown, and white thrown haphazardly across their surfaces. Brooding citizens without shelter of their own sat on the sides of the black roads, covered in dark purple clothing and heavy make-up. Still, no one questioned these individuals or tested the strength of this mysterious world. Though the people interacted as well as any neighbors would, it was understood that all those who made this city their home either had a terrible secret, a horrible power, or running from something so heinous that they would do anything to prevent capture.

“It’s so different from Lowsunn,” Leah said, rubbing her hand down one of the structures. “Everything is so cold and hardened. There’s no life at all.”

“People don’t come here for vacation,” Jin replied. “It’s to escape. Just like we’re doing.”

They had entered the city well enough. There were no gates or guards, and the entire populace was a provisional army in the making.

“The main buildings are like crystals,” Grain observed. “How is that possible?”

“They’re hollowed out,” Jin said. “They’re actually quite spacious once you’re inside, and looking out is like seeing through a glass, except it paints the world in a dimmer hue. I’ve been here on a couple occasions to see what it was like. The people aren’t as cold as you might think. From the homeless to the leaders, every person is willing to help as long as you respect their past and leave them alone at night.”

“A city after my own heart,” Aidan said, pressing a finger against the flesh-colored building. To his surprise, it was sticky and soft. “Are there anything other types of buildings here that aren’t made of spiked crystal or...whatever this is?”

“In Onyx Minor, which is located further in the heart of the city, you can find the typical houses in Lowsunn. They’re still made of Onyx, but they’re compact and cubicle. Most of the children roam free there until they decide to gain employment in the city or go off on their own.”

“Does anyone raise them?”

“They raise themselves mostly. Children especially have questions, and you don’t question anyone here about their previous life. Even if you are blood-related.”

“Sounds harsh,” Ori said.

“And yet it arguably prepares them for the world more than Lowsunn ever could. There are no handouts. No favors.”

“I can only imagine,” Leah replied.

“When it’s all you know, you get used to it.”

“So what now?” Grain asked. “If we’re not supposed to talk to anyone, how will we find a place to sleep?”

“We sleep on the streets with the homeless tonight. Don’t worry. No one will rob you. There is a delicate respect in place here. One crime committed could unleash chaos.”

“And in the morning?”

“We try to get our own place. I don’t care if it’s with the children. As long as we have shelter and maybe a field to train in. Worst comes to worst, we could go outside the crater and spar there, but that’s a long trek.”

“The street will be fine,” Aidan said, choosing a crystalline wall and leaning against it. He slumped down it until he was well-situated on the ground and then threw his hood over his head. “Here,” he said, creating an individual fire for each of them to sleep by. Across the street, curious eyes peered at them from behind the onyx crystalline walls, but they vanished as soon as they appeared. Leah sat next to him, and he wrapped his arms around her.

“Didn’t think we would be living in a place like this,” she muttered, her teeth chattering.

“It’s only temporary,” he said, warming her skin with his hot-pad hands. “We’ll find a permanent home.”

“Are we ever going to see where you came from?”

“I doubt it,” he said, dropping his chin down into her hair. He gave her head a kiss. “I didn’t come from this continent, remember? And I don’t see a reason for us to travel there.”

“Is it anything like here? What place is it most like?”

“To be honest? It’s not like any place here at all. It’s tame around here. Lowsunn. Onyx Major. Otalli, the valleys and the fields. It’s all peaceful and timid. Over where I came from – Pandemon. That place makes this continent feel like an oasis.”

“Yeah, let’s never go there,” she whispered. “This is wonderful right here.”



## Chapter 18 – Red and Blue



“Hey there,” the guy next to them whispered. “I saw you guys come in last night. You looking for a place to stay?”

“We are,” Aidan said, tapping Leah so she would wake up. The man next to them had so much mascara around his eyes that the residue had spread across most of his face, giving it an unnatural purple and black tint.

“Go talk to Kaylen. After you go down this road, take a right at the first intersection and go into the second onyx building on your left.”

“Does the building have a name?”

“And make it easier for bounty hunters to collect? They don’t label places like that here.”

“But you just told me that Kaylen is in that building.”

“That’s not his real name, of course. No one knows his real name. Just like you’ll never know mine.” Aidan, still heavy-eyed, leaned over to look at Jin.

“I think I’ve died and gone to paradise.”

Jin laughed as they all stirred awake. After they had brushed themselves off and thanked the nameless man, they headed over to the building he had directed them to. They passed fifty people on the way, all headed to their respective jobs. At least half of them waved hello. A few even asked if they needed help with something. It was strange to receive such love and warmth from strangers without there being intrusive or ulterior motives.

When they entered the onyx structure, they were thrown off by how the building leaned to the right, but the concrete platforms they walked on stayed straight. Aidan had the urge at times to tilt his head to the right to match the building, but doing so would just make him look stupid, so he didn’t.

There were no rooms, just desks at which people worked feverishly: filling out paperwork, signing documents, and outlining their next duties. Aidan suspected that the building was this open on

purpose – so that if a staff member was attacked, the whole department would know and be able to act on their behalf right away...but that was just speculation. The first person they came across directed them upstairs. They went back and forth on the platforms from one end to the other, going up the stairs and traveling across the floor, only to do the same thing all over again. Eventually, they reached the sixth floor, and the man sitting at the desk at the far end stood to greet them.

“I heard you were looking for me,” he said, extending a hand to them. Jin shook it, and Kaylen rummaged through his papers. “I understand you’re new to the city. Are you looking for a job and a place to stay?”

“Not yet,” Jin replied. “But if there is a field or open area we can train in, that would be great.”

“If you want a more permanent residence, the only property available is in Onyx Minor with the children.” Kaylen chuckled. “Nobody wants to live around children.”

“So it would seem,” Jin said. “I did see a lot of people sleeping on the streets last night. Why do they choose to live homeless when they could have a residence?”

“They were probably trying to get a residence here in Onyx Major. Inhabitants come and go as they see fit. When evening arrives, everyone claims their spots. If someone has left the city, their spot gets taken. Those sleeping on the streets were probably too slow to secure a site. And, as I said, nobody wants to live around children, so they chose to sleep on the streets and hope for better luck the next night rather than go to Onyx Minor.”

“I see: so first come, first serve. How do you keep that kind of order here without people beating each other up over it?”

“Every so often a ruckus occurs, but I assure you, it’s quickly squashed. If someone dares to upset the balance, it doesn’t bode well for them. Keep that in mind if you are a man of great passion.”

“We’ll take a spot in the children’s quarters,” Jin said. “That’s fine. We do have one more question though. Do you know of a woman named Mace? A friend of ours told us she would be here. We’re not trying to start any trouble, and we’re not bounty hunters. We just have a couple of questions.”



“Inquiring about one of our inhabitants is usually grounds for dismissal, but Mace has told us that if anyone comes to Onyx Major asking for her, we’re allowed to reveal her location. If you leave this building and continue down this street, not the way you came, she is in the last building on the right. Here is also the number of the house you have requested for residence. Please burn this paper and rip the number off the face of the house as soon as you have arrived there. Have a wonderful day.”

“Thank you,” Jin said, and they began heading back down the stairs.

“Should we go see her now?” Grain asked as they made their way to the ground floor. Jin nodded.

“No telling how long we’ll be here. Might as well.”

They noticed that the streets were even busier than before as they exited the building. The mobs bustled around like ants, all with purpose and focus. By sticking to the middle of the road, the group had no problem making their way to Mace’s house.

“Hello?” Leah asked, opening the crystal onyx door. Her voice echoed once they were inside the chamber. There were no platforms in this left-leaning crystal building. Only several stakes positioned in a semi-circle with a fire resting upon each one. In the middle of the floor was a symbol.

A symbol that was familiar to everyone.

Six organs and a sword. Like the granite flooring in the Judge’s chamber, this floor possessed the same design, and the woman that could only be Mace sat in the middle of it with her legs crossed and eyes closed. Her eyes opened once the seven of them were all inside, and the door had closed.

“What do you see?” she asked. Her voice was thick and authoritative.

“The symbol for the seal,” Aidan replied. “The seal that is branded into each of our right arms.”

“Then you are here about the Choate,” she said. Her eyes did not waver from Aidan’s. The same mascara that covered the citizens’ faces covered hers. Her dreadlocks also shielded the sides of her face, making her visage appear all the more mysterious. All he could see were the whites of her eyes.

“We are,” Jin declared. Her eyes darted to his.

“You would not be able to see the seal on the floor if you were not. But this does not mean you are worthy of its possession. So what do you offer me in exchange?”

“There are others searching for it. Men would use it to satisfy their own greed. We’re trying to prevent that from happening.”

“Then you have nothing for me,” she said.

“But they could –”

“What does it matter?” she snapped at him. “The artifact will ultimately fall into the hands of whom it is destined to belong. Perhaps you are not the one. Perhaps none of you are the rightful owner.”

“What would be a worthy exchange?”

“A Yen. A wish would suffice.”

“That’s a tall order.”

“Yet necessary. If you manage to collect all four pieces of the Choate, then you will get your wishes back. Though the odds of this happening are non-existent. Only one of your Yen would satisfy me.”

“I’ll do it,” Grain replied, stepping forward and rolling up her sleeve. I have one Yen left.”

“Why can’t someone with two or more give theirs up?” Jin asked.

“Because I don’t want this anymore. It’s too much of a hassle. And I’m not a fighter. At least I’m using it for a great purpose.”

“You don’t have to do this,” Jin said, but she gave him a smile.

“I want to,” she said. She turned to Mace. “What do you want?”

“I wish to forget everything I know about the Choate and to no longer be bound to this building. I’m tired of just sitting here waiting for travelers to come through. I want to explore the world again. Before you do that though –” Mace stood up on her feet and walked over to one of the fire stakes, put her hand through the flames, and produced a wooden triangle. On its surface were the ends of a couple of organ pipes. She walked over to Jin and handed it to him.

“Protect it well,” she said, then turned to Grain. “Now grant my wish.”

Grain closed her eyes and concentrated.

After a couple of seconds, she opened her eyes and lunged right at Mace.

Aidan and Jin caught her in mid-flight and held her back.

“She tricked me!” she screamed. “She tricked me!”

“What happened?” Jin asked as Grain ran over to one of the stakes, pulled out an exact replica of the wooden triangle Mace had pulled out earlier, and threw it to Aidan.

“That’s the real piece,” she huffed, glaring at Mace.

“I have no clue what you’re talking about,” Mace smiled. She gave a curt wave and then ran out the door. Grain shook her head and closed her eyes as tears flooded her face. Jin ran over to console her.

“What happened? Tell us.”

“I’m the new keeper of information,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m bound to this building now. I made the wish, and the Judge asked who would take her place. It was either accept the job or lose my seal and the Choate piece.”

“You can’t leave this place?” Jin exclaimed. Grain shoved him away.

“Not likely.”

“Well, try it! I’m not going to just leave you here.”

Grain walked over to the door and placed a hand upon it, but when she touched it, she grimaced and snapped her arm back. “I don’t think I can.”

“You can’t be stuck here,” Jin cried, searching frantically for an exit. “There’s nothing here! There’s –”

“– nothing you can do,” she said, taking his hands into hers. “We came here for a reason right? Look at it this way. For now on, whenever you visit Onyx Major, you all have a place to – to –” Grain broke down and cried, thrusting her face into Jin’s chest. Jin’s face scrunched up in anguish, but he fought against the tears. With shaking hands, he wrapped his arms around Grain and held her tight.

“We’re going to make this work,” he whispered into her hair. “I promise.”

The others said nothing and did nothing, except for Leah, who found her hand grasped tightly by Aidan’s. When she was done weeping, Grain wiped her eyes, put on a brave face, and grasped Jin’s arms with her hands.

“Let’s see what this place offers,” she said cheerfully. She then turned to the others. “No need to go to the children’s grounds tonight. We’re living it up!” Teller, Jessica, and Ori found places to sit while Leah and Aidan helped Jin and Grain tidy the place up to Grain’s liking.

There truly wasn’t much. Besides the stakes and the symbol on the floor, there was a back room with a child-sized bed, a semi-clean toilet, and a washing area. A literal river flowed through the floor on the left-hand side. Jin told Grain that he would make sure she had clothes to change into.

“What about food?” Leah asked. Grain shrugged her shoulders.

“I think it’s similar to the detention center in Lowsunn. I might not need food. Perhaps not even water or sleep...I guess I’ll find out.”

“Did you feel a difference?” Jin asked. “When you took over Mace’s job?”

“I was flooded with information concerning the Choate, but nothing more than we’d already learned from Sylvester. Knew she had lied about the piece she handed you, though.”

“So what happens now? With us?”

“You keep on moving,” she said with a smile. “Stay as long as you can for now, but if you hear that Necrosis is on his way, you have to leave.”

“But he’ll come for you.”

“He might not be able to touch me unless he’s willing to take over my job, which I doubt. I think I’ll be okay.”

“I’ll make sure of it,” Jin said, hugging her again. Aidan glanced over at Leah and she squeezed his hand harder. They had no idea that the two of them were together. Probably to ensure that no one targeted them. Yet in the end, it didn’t matter.

This situation happened to them regardless, and it was one of the things Aidan feared most. Watching the woman he loved get placed into a situation over which he had no control. Thankfully Jin could still be with Grain, at least for a while.

Jin and Grain stayed in the bedroom while the rest slept in the atrium. Aidan held Leah closer than ever that night, but her warmth provided no comfort. He couldn’t fall asleep, and all he could think about was how quickly Grain had been enslaved. They had felt such

a connection with Sylvester that they figured Mace would be similar in character, but she wasn't. She was just a bitter woman waiting to take advantage of the next sucker who walked in. And now she was free, roaming the land while Jin and Grain were forced to part.

It was sickening.

And the more he thought about it, the more the injustice of it all consumed him. It ate at him. It bit and chomped and gnashed without mercy, and when he couldn't take it anymore, he stood to his feet.

Mace couldn't have gotten far. Someone would have seen where she went.

Leaving his group to their slumber, he walked outside into the evening light, hoping it was still bright enough to ask for help. Already most of the city had retired to their homes or spots. Aidan marched down the streets until he found a pedestrian.

"Have you seen Mace?" he asked. She gave him a leery glance. He threw up his hands in surrender. "Hey, I know the rules. Remember that Mace said if someone was looking for her, it was okay to reveal her location."

"That's true," she said. "Why do you need – you know what, it's none of my business. I saw her leave the city a half-hour ago."

"Thank you," Aidan said. He started heading to the outskirts. With the crater being so massive, she couldn't have gotten far. She had probably been confined for years – which meant she would be physically limited to how fast she could travel. She would take in the sights, knowing that the innocent troop that had visited her would mourn and be too focused on their friend's plight. Revenge would be the last thing on their minds. But not his. He was not so innocent.

He ran as fast as possible, throwing all of his energy into his sprint. He didn't care if he was exhausted when he caught up to her. He had only one chance to find her. As he hit the lip of the crater, he jumped up to the flat land and scanned the area. He thought about sending a flare into the sky, but figured it might scare the population into a frenzy. Better to play it cool.

He squinted his eyes, took a few steps forward, and then a few back, unsure if the shadows he saw move were Mace or some nocturnal beast. His eyes instinctively fixed upon one particular

silhouette, and once he saw its dreadlocks whip into the wind, he knew he had found his prey. He gave pursuit, trying to keep his body temperature down as much as possible as he leapt over sleeping beasts. Mace must have sensed something amiss and glanced behind her. Aidan made no attempt to shroud his intentions. He slammed a hand into the grass and created the flame network he was familiar with. It shot under the earth, heading straight towards her and beyond until he was satisfied with the distance. He summoned the wall.

A twelve foot wall of flames erupted from the cracks in the earth, cutting off her escape. She ran to the left, and then to the right, but on each side, another wall emerged to close her off. Her only way out was through Aidan.

“What do you want?” she shouted. “Don’t you know it’s forbidden to attack someone in Onyx Major?”

“We’re not in the city,” he said, extending his fiery claws in and out.

“Who are you? What do you want?”

“Forgot already? Were we that insignificant to you? That you didn’t even bother to glance at our faces?”

“What are you, her friend?” she asked, squinting through the darkness. Only Aidan’s gauntlets revealed themselves in the shadows. “Listen, I had to do it. I was in that place for years.”

“You took advantage of her,” he said. “You enslaved her.”

“Just leave me alone!”

“You should have told her the specifics first. You’re going to go back there and demand that you get your old job back.”

“I don’t want anything to do with that place! I would rather die than go back there!”

“That’s exactly what you’re gonna do if you don’t return.”

“I don’t want to be trapped there anymore.”

“I don’t care.”

“You’re not going to kill me.”

“I already have,” Aidan said, stepping into the light of his fire walls. The moment she saw the stone-cold determination in his face, she knew he wasn’t bluffing. “I’ve killed you over and over in my mind for what you did. I just haven’t manifested it yet.”

“That will taint you,” she said, dropping to her knees. “You don’t want to do this.”

“Show me your seals.”

“Fine. Whatever,” she said, revealing her bare right arm. One seal was upon it, and it was darkened.

“Good,” he said. “Then there will be no surprises.”

“You don’t want to do this,” she repeated, bowing her head into the grass. “I just got my freedom.”

“If we were back in Lowsunn, I would believe you. But I know your kind out here. That place made me soft. It made me think there were good people on the outside. But they’re all the same. They’re all just like you. All you know is this,” he held up his gauntlets. “This is your language, your culture, and your religion.”

“And what about you? You’re different?”

“No, I’m a child of it,” he snapped. He raised his right arm at her and was just about to swing it down upon her head when he stopped. Out of the corner of his eye, he could have sworn he saw the color blue amongst the flame wall to his right. He looked again, and sure enough, one of the walls wasn’t just made of red and orange, but flickers of blue crackled. He sheathed his gauntlets, grabbed Mace by the collar, and pulled her face to his.

“If I ever see you again, I will kill you.” She nodded, her eyes stretching as wide as they could. He threw her violently to the grass, and she scurried around him and away. He dismissed the fire walls and shook his head as darkness replaced the light of the fires.

“What is wrong with me?” he whispered, closing his eyes. “Why can’t I keep this temper under control?”

Killing Mace wouldn’t have solved anything. It would have simply fulfilled a craving within him. It wouldn’t have granted Grain her freedom. It wouldn’t have helped Jin reconcile with the situation. It wouldn’t have helped his relationship with Leah.

This was why Leah and Bailey were wrong. He was no leader. Not even close. He was still a child. An angry and confused child who was still prone to tantrums.

As he walked back with his head held low, wallowing in his shame, his senses didn’t pick up the small troop of five in the darkness nearby, wide-eyed and frozen with fear. They couldn’t

believe what they had just seen, but somehow, they would have to find the strength to move. After they were sure the pyromaniac wouldn't reappear, they climbed to their weary feet, brushed off their Lowsunn uniforms, and teleported home.





## Chapter 19 – The Best There Is



“**D**id you leave last night?” Leah whispered. She, Ori, Aidan, and Jin had decided to stay back with Grain while the other two went off to find breakfast. Aidan wasn’t sure how to recount last night’s events to his wife, but he knew he had to tell her the truth. He had promised to never leave her behind. It wasn’t going to start now.

“I went after Mace,” he said. Her face scrunched up with anger and disappointment, while her hand quivered at her side, wanting to slap some sense into him.

“Did you kill her?” she demanded. He shook his head.

“I almost did, but I let her go – because I thought of you.”

“You could have been killed going outside the city by yourself. After what happened to Grain...”

“I realize that now,” he said. “It won’t happen again.”

“Next time, you take me with you,” she said, grabbing his shirt with both hands. “I’m your backup.”

“I will.”

“Hey, this isn’t too bad,” Teller said, munching on a pastry sticking out of a small brown paper bag. “It’s like sweet and nutty.”

“Well, don’t hog it all to yourself,” Jin said, swooping in from the side and grabbing the bag. Jessica walked in behind him with two more sacks and without the lower half of her pants, showing off a new pair of makeshift shorts.

“Didn’t have money,” she said, blushing. “So we had to sell something.”

“Why couldn’t Teller sell part of his clothes?” Jin asked, handing a pastry behind him to Grain.

“I told her,” Teller stopped to take a gulp, “that my clothes are tied into my flight. If I lose pieces of them, then I can’t fly as high.”

“Apparently,” she continued for him, “there’s a fabric that – hey, that doesn’t make any sense!” she shouted, slamming one of the paper bags across the back of his head. Teller began cracking up

and running away, and Jessica gave chase. Jin stepped in to save the pastries she was carrying.

“The food doesn’t have to suffer,” he said, rummaging through the paper bag. He threw Aidan, Ori, and Leah one pastry each, and after Teller got his beating, the entire group sat down in the middle to eat.

“It’s not so bad here,” Grain muttered through bites.

“We should still check out that house,” Jin said, grabbing more food. “You never know. Maybe Aidan and Leah would like to live there.”

“Very funny,” Leah said. “But I know what you’re doing. You just want this place for you and Grain.”

“What? What are you saying? That I would try to kick you out into another home and Ori, Teller, and Jessica out onto the streets just so I could have Grain all to myself? Yes. Yes I would. Yes I am.”

They all laughed except Teller, who was trying to read their faces.

“You’re not serious about me being on the street, are you?” he asked in concern, and they all laughed again. Jin got up, walked over to him, and put him in a headlock.

“No one’s kicking you out, loser,” he laughed, rubbing a knuckle into his hair. Leah cleared her throat.

“I think Aidan and I will check out the house,” she said, swallowing her last bite. She climbed to her feet and tapped her husband. “Care to come?”

“Yeah,” he said, taking his pastry with him. Jin handed him the paper with the number on it.

“We’ll be here,” Jin said, slapping Ori’s hand away from reaching for another pastry. The others waved goodbye as the couple headed out the door. The streets were a bustle again, and people were eager to wave hello and smile. Leah and Aidan extended the same courtesies as they made their way to the city’s center, dubbed Onyx Minor. It was not hard to find. Before they had even arrived, they could hear the uncontrollable laughter of children. It sounded like they were laughing so hard they could hardly breathe.

Aidan and Leah passed by a row of flesh-colored houses and then knew the moment they had made it to their destination. The area was one oversized cul-de-sac, a half-moon row of houses

facing the dirt street and the entrance to Onyx Minor. In like fashion, behind the first row of houses was another, and another, extending for a couple of miles. But even from where they stood, they were sure that not one adult was inside the sub-city. The “Street” in front of the first row of houses was one giant sandbox, and over three hundred children of all ages were at play.

Water rollercoasters, pits of fire used for grills, giant sand monsters that would come to life, and attack groups of kids who would defend themselves with wooden swords. Babies were rocked to sleep by pre-teens. Teenagers were standing in circles practicing their respective arts. There were sand slides and dancing clouds, cotton candy flowers, and insects traveling from one kid to another, delivering messages. It was all so chaotic and so orderly at the same time that Aidan and Leah could only stand there in awe, wanting to jump into the mix and yet afraid to disrupt the flow. Leah tapped her husband’s arm.

“It’s like the Field of Visions,” she said. “It’s smaller, and more unorganized, but from the youngest to the oldest, they’re all training in their own way.”

“The houses are probably just used for sleeping,” Aidan said, crossing his arms. “It might take all day to find the right one, but it doesn’t matter. This is where I want to live.”

“Really?” Leah asked, jumping up into the air. “Me too!”

“You thinking what I’m thinking?” he laughed.

“Yeah. This is the kind of training we need,” she said, spreading her arms out wide. “No rules. No instructions. No restrictions. Just unbridled imagination at play. We can develop new techniques here that we never could have in Lowsunn.”

“No wonder people that leave the city are so prepared for the outside. No excessive comfort to make them lazy. No excessive danger to force them into hiding. It’s just right.”

“Let’s go say hello,” she said, running into the middle of the kiddy hurricane. Aidan began to protest but followed after her, certain that he would be hit by something at any moment. But nothing happened. Whenever a makeshift monster was about to swing at his head, the arm always diverted its trajectory. Water just missed his ears.

Swords whizzed above his hair. A beetle rested on the top of his ear and leaned in.

"You're kind of old to be here, aren't you?" a voice emerged from the spots on the back of the beetle. "But if you're serious about playing with us, come over here and talk."

Aidan was about to ask how he would know who to speak with when the beetle left. He scanned the area and saw a group of teenagers huddled in a circle. One of them, the one that had multi-colored, spiked hair, was staring at him. He waved Aidan forward. Aidan tapped Leah's shoulder, and they made their way over to him.

"Welcome," the boy said. The circle widened to allow the two of them in. "The name is Best. The other boys here are Rot, Toomuch and Jar. You here to sightsee or live?"

"Live," Leah said. "I love what you've done with the place."

"Yeah, it's neat, isn't it?" Best chuckled, taking a stick and drawing in the sand.

"So what's your ability?" Aidan asked. All the boys snapped their heads back in shock.

"Not cool," Best said, still drawing. "Where did you get your manners?"

"We're not from around here," Leah said, as an explosion sounded off behind them. The boys didn't turn around, so the couple fought the urge to do so themselves. "What we really want is some training."

"Training?" Rot laughed. "For what? This isn't an army."

"The lady's just talking, Rot," Jar replied. "What's it the little kids sing? Oh yeah. **Think before you speak so you don't sound like an idiot.**"

"You added that last part, fishbrain. That's not how it goes."

"But you sure remember the song, waterstain. Yet you keep flapping them lips. How old are you?"

"Boys," Best laughed. "You can stop showing off for the lady. She's too old for you."

"I'm almost thirteen!" Rot declared proudly. "In ancient times, I would already have like three kids by now."

"More like **had**," Jar quipped. "You'd probably eat them with your fat self."

“I’m at a healthy weight! My mom said so!”

“Like eight years ago before she left, liber dung.”

“Can Best speak?” Toomuch spoke up. The boys shut up, and Best cleared his throat as he continued drawing in the sand.

“Alright, well, we can help you for sure,” Best said. “As long as you aren’t trying to change things around here. We keep a delicate balance of doing whatever the heck we want. Understand?”

“We’re here to learn from you,” Leah replied. “Not the other way around.”

“Just checking. Adults like to hear the sound of their own voices, but most of them are like sirens. The songs sound good, but then you find out they really have their own things they want. And they’ll bust your ship all over their rocky shore to make sure they get their way.”

“Best is so wise,” Rot declared. The boys nodded happily.

“We’ll start you off with a rigorous schedule from youngest to oldest. You’ll face the Poopers first. Then the Nosewipes. The Won’t-shut-ups. The Know-it-alls. And then us, the Big Boys. You’ll move on once you’ve beaten a group to our satisfaction. We’ll set it all up. You just show up. Behind the houses is a field. We got it all ready for this kind of purpose. You want to start now or get settled in?”

“Bring them all,” Aidan said, and the boys stared at him in surprise. Best chuckled and smirked at each of his friends.

“Got ourselves a tough one today,” he said. They all chuckled as he stood to his feet and threw the stick into the sand. He turned to Aidan and Leah. “If that’s the way you want it. Sure. I’ll bring them all. But I don’t recommend it.”

“Just keep heading straight?” Aidan asked, pointing behind the houses.

“Yep. See you there, tough stuff.” Best smiled. Aidan and Leah headed out, taking note of the numbers on the houses they passed by.

“I take it that the names Best mentioned are the tiers of the little kids,” Leah said as they walked. “The Poopers are probably their youngest fighters.”

“I just want to see what they have to offer us in terms of training. It doesn’t seem like much.”

“Two minutes ago, you were excited over the potential of this place, and now you’re scoffing at the challenge.”

“I want to test my limits,” he said. “That’s all. If I get beat by a group called the Poopers, then all that will do is show me just how weak I really am.”

“You and me both,” she said, tucking her arm into his. “Let’s do our best. No matter what age they are. We can’t underestimate them.”

“I won’t,” Aidan said as they arrived at the field. It was unkempt, with an abundance of weeds, mud patches, and high grass, but it was at least three times the size of the street in the front. Plenty of space to get the job done.

“So we’re working together, right?” Leah asked, stretching her neck and arms.

“Yep. We should probably try to subdue them as quickly as possible. Should we do a trap?”

“Like you scare them with fire, and I come from behind with a cage?”

“Yeah, like that.”

“Sounds good to me,” she said, opening and closing her fists, stretching out her fingers. After a few minutes, the crowd began pouring in. Literally. A tidal wave carried all the children through the housing district and onto the field, circling the perimeter repeatedly with Leah and Aidan staring in awe from the middle. The water circled four times and then settled into the soil, putting everyone gently onto their feet. Best slapped the hands of one of the pre-teens.

“Bad as always, man,” he said to him, then he walked out to meet up with the couple. A large beetle sat upon his head. “Okay, everyone!” he shouted, his voice not coming from his lips but the beetle itself, acting as an organic loudspeaker. “We’re going to get this show underway soon. These two young adults have asked to join us, and you know we’re hospitable to anyone here, but then they said they want some training.”

The crowd giggled and oohed and aahed.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” he chuckled. “So they’re going to face off against the Poopers first, and so on. Whoever they lose

against will be training them until they're ready to graduate.  
Everyone got snacks?"

Toomuch held a thumbs up high in the air from the center of the crowd. Jar and Rot handed out the last of the pastries, and all the children were munching away like it was their last meal.

"Then let's give it up for the Poopers!"

Aidan winced at the designation. This was just degrading. Two kids, no more than three years old, stepped out into the circle. Both of them had tussled hair and clothes far too big for them. One was crying. Aidan rolled his eyes and looked back at Best.

"Are we seriously going through with this?"

"Why? Are you scared?" Best smiled. Aidan turned his attention back to the kids. The crying one had stopped and was wiping away his tears while the other was glaring at Leah and Aidan like they had just taken his most precious toy. Before Aidan could say a word, he started growling and barking at him, then he attacked.

He ran at them as fast as he could, but he was so slow that Aidan had to refrain from laughing. When the scowling kid finally reached them, he cocked back a painfully slow fist and unleashed it towards Aidan's abdomen. But Aidan knew better than to let the fist connect. For all he knew, the kid could have wished for crippling strength. Aidan dodged the blow and punted the kid in the stomach. The child keeled over and crumpled to the ground, clutching his wound and crying into the dirt as Aidan glanced over at Leah with concern.

"Now I just feel bad," he said as the crowd booed them. Best cleared his throat loudly.

"I would get defensive if I were you," he warned over the loudspeaker beetle, but it was too late. Something uppercut Aidan in the chin, so fast and so hard that he nearly blacked out in mid-air. All he knew was that one second he was on the ground, and in the next, he was twenty yards away on his back, his jaw aching so badly that he could barely speak.

"Whoa," Leah said, ducking down and scanning the area. The kid who hadn't attacked yet now ran at her. But she didn't wait until he got close. With a quick gesture of her hand, she called the earth up to swallow him whole, trapping him in a cocoon.



But while she began commanding lightning bolts to hit him from inside, an invisible force grabbed her mid-section and lifted her up into the air. Before she could protest, it turned her over, and slammed her head first into the ground, releasing her body from its grip on impact. Her legs flopped into the dirt behind her, and she did her best not to get up. Dizzy and disoriented, she climbed up onto all fours, and then back to her feet.

Aidan ran over from behind and began summoning fire to hurt the kid outside the cocoon, but another invisible force smacked his head from the side, sending him back into the dirt.

“What’s going on?” Leah groaned as she saw the cocoon she had created being peeled back like an orange, letting the kid go free.

“It’s their abilities,” Best called out from a distance. “They have imaginary friends. Invisible monsters.”

“How are we supposed to fight that?” she yelled back.

“Figure it out! They’re invisible, remember?”

Leah sensed a shift in the air, and she created a rock shield with her hands. An invisible fist slammed into it, sending her down to one knee.

“How do we defeat it?” she shouted.

“I don’t know,” Best laughed with the crowd. “Those imaginary monsters of theirs don’t have any limits that I know of.”

“That doesn’t make any sense!” she groaned under the weight of the fist, which was slowly pushing her further down. Aidan climbed back to his feet.

“Are you sure?” Best called out. “What limits do kids place on themselves? They think they can do anything! Accomplish anything! You’re the one limiting your power!”

Another fist hit Aidan in the face when he took a step forward.

“The only advantages adults have over children are experience and knowledge. But children don’t restrict themselves like the grown-ups do. You gotta know things like an adult to make it in this world,” Best said, placing a hand on his chest. The rest of the crowd followed suit. “But you gotta have the heart of a child to master it.”

***There’s a way around this***, Aidan thought, as he climbed to his feet for the third time. ***This is the first string, not the last. Best***

***and his boys had to have beaten these two. So how did they do it? What do they see that I'm not?***

Aidan summoned several fire shields to encompass him as he glanced at Leah, who was still struggling with the invisible giant, and then the two boys, who were playing with a bug sitting on a blade of tall grass. ***They're not even paying attention***, he realized. Their monsters are doing all the work. But if we can't see them, how can we defend ourselves?

An invisible fist broke through three of Aidan's shields and nearly knocked him off balance. Once he had gained his footing, he began running around the field, giving himself time to strategize while dodging the monster's blows.

***An ability is tied to its owner***, Aidan thought. ***If I knock out the kids, then the monsters should go away. Ignore the creatures I can't see and attack those I can!***

Aidan ran for the boys with a plan in tow, warming and hardening his hands simultaneously. Another swipe at his back took out the last of his shielding, but he ignored it and kept moving. Finally, he reached the first boy, closed his fist and punched him across the cheek with as much strength as he could muster. The kid went unconscious, and Leah felt the weight of a giant fist on her back disappear.

But the other kid was still awake, and once he saw his friend lying still in the grass, he threw up his hands in surrender and cowered under Aidan's raised fist.

The crowd began clapping, and a few teenagers went out into the field to grab the fallen three-year-old and tend to his wounds. Best was clapping hard and slow as he walked out into the field with a big smile.

"Looks like you're moving on to round two," he said. "And you've learned your very first lesson. When in battle, there is more than just your enemy. There is everything else. When adults fight an enemy or are faced with a problem, that's all they can think about. But kids think of solutions that adults can't even dream of because they're looking at everything, not just the problem. Once those invisible giants started smacking you around, that's all you could think about."

But once you saw that knocking out the kids themselves was the key, you won! So congrats! You ready for the Nose-wipers?"

"No," Aidan laughed, poking at a bruise on his face.

"Definitely not," Leah laughed, rubbing her head. "I don't think I could survive another bout so soon. Maybe tomorrow. I have to say, though, I am very impressed."

"Why, thank you," Best beamed. As the crowd began to disperse, they suddenly stopped in their tracks as the sun suddenly eclipsed. "What's that?" Best asked, pointing up into the sky. Leah and Aidan followed his index finger up to what it was pointing at.

A winged creature, larger than the tallest of Onyx Major's buildings, was descending. But it became smaller and smaller as it got closer and closer to the ground. By the time it hit the grass, like it would if it were landing on a runway, the dragon was no larger than a dog. Once the black-haired child riding it jumped off, it magically transformed into a tiny, stuffed animal.

"Charlie, this is how it has to be," the child yelled at the stuffed animal as it dangled from his chubby fingers. He ran over to Aidan and Leah, who stared at him in shock.

"Sawyer, right?" Leah asked, stooping down to his level. "What are you doing here?"

"Whatever the reason is," Aidan said, "it can't be good. How did you know we were here?"

"You were seen last night," Sawyer said to him. Leah and Aidan looked at each other as the boy continued. "And the Elders have been looking for Leah since she left. They were sure you two were together."

"What's going on here?" Best asked, the rest of his crew coming up behind him.

"There's not a lot of time," Sawyer said. "Where are the others?"

"We're not saying anything until you spill it all," Aidan snapped. "For all we know, you're here to assassinate us."

"Charlie wishes that were true, but it's not. Morrigan sent me. She couldn't leave, but she knew I wanted out bad. You have to come quick. The Elders made a mistake. Ne-cro-sis has arrived."

"Necrosis?!" Best exclaimed, nearly falling backward. His boys buoyed him. "What's a guy like that doing around here?"

“It’s because of us,” Leah said. “But don’t worry. We’re not going to let anything happen to this place. We’ll leave before he gets close.”

“No, that’s not it,” Sawyer said, shaking his head. “He’s not coming after you. He’s attacking the other groups.”

“What? Why?” Aidan said.

“Aidan, the others have to hear this now,” Leah said. “Let’s go.” She grabbed his arm and started urging him back toward their original team as Best and the boys were joined by groups of other children.

“You come back soon,” Best shouted as they began heading to Onyx Major. “And if you need help tucking Necrosis into his grave, you call on us. We’re ready. Just send us a message.” He threw two beetles to Aidan. “Tap it on the back once to record a message. Two taps to make your voice amplify. Or tap once on one and twice on the other to make one the recorder, and the other the amplifier. You say my name at the end of a message, and the beetles will come right back here.”

Aidan caught the insects and gave the boys a smile and a wave of thanks. Leah doubled back and gave Best and each of his boys a hug. Then they headed for Jin and the others, ready to discuss the horrible news.



## Chapter 20 – Eleven



“It’s not all your fault,” Sawyer said to Aidan as they all sat in the middle of Grain’s building. “The Elders were all talking about this change of plan before you were spotted yesterday.”

“How do you even know all of this?” Jin asked. “Who are you?”

“Morrigan’s my big sister,” Sawyer said, rubbing his own hair.

“This is my pet, Charlie,” he said, holding up the stuffed animal, “and Elder Thine is my mother.”

“So that’s why Morrigan’s trusted you with so much information,” Leah muttered. “And why she’s trusted with a great deal of it herself. She’s probably next in line for Eldership.”

“Lowsunn is not going to attack Onyx Major,” Jin said. “It would be insane.”

“Yeah,” Leah chuckled. “Even the children are a force to be reckoned with.”

“They can’t have you, so they want your friends instead,” Sawyer replied. “The Elders have been gathering information on your secret group for years, and Aidan, you were their main target at first because you were making the biggest noise. But that was before you ran here. So they changed the mission lists, called everyone back to the village, and then resent everyone out, writing down that you were off on an N mission while everybody you know is going to fight Necrosis.”

“There is no way Necrosis will let that go,” Grain said. “It was up in the air for us whether he would show or not, but not this. What is that? Like two hundred people assigned to be threats against him? He’ll come and squash that for sure. Are the Elders insane?”

“Morrigan told me that Mama says you all are making an army here, so she has to crush your friends now, while there’s still time. Necrosis hit our land a day ago, and he’s slowly making his way to the first group.”

“Who’s in the first group?”

“Bailey, Elias, Makana...um, a couple others. I’m sorry. I forgot.”

“They’re not even trying to hide their intentions,” Jin snapped.

“And Bailey probably has no idea what they’re walking into.”

“Their paper says they’re on a D class mission,” Sawyer said.

“Yeah, I’m sure they sense something amiss,” Jessica said. “But they don’t know what. It will be a slaughter. I still can’t believe the Elders would be so stupid, though. That’s a big risk to goad Necrosis into coming so close to the village. Anyone else think this is a trap? That the Elders are just using Morrigan to get us out into the open?”

“It’s not a trap!” Sawyer screamed, and Jessica threw up her hands in surrender.

“Whether it is or not, what does Morrigan expect us to do?” Leah replied, resting her face in her hands. “Any group that comes across Necrosis will be slaughtered.”

“She thinks you all have an army here. She wants you to fight Necrosis and save our village. She thinks Mama is making a mistake.”

“Too bad we don’t have an army,” Leah sighed.

“You don’t? Charlie, shut up! You can’t beat him alone!”

“Not at all,” Jin said. “Actually, we’re one down. Grain is stuck here. We’re the whole cavalry and not much of one at that.”

“Why does Morrigan even care?” Teller interrupted. “Why is she going against her mother?”

“Morrigan has this sense of order,” Ori replied. “This sense of right and wrong that few understand. I think she’s looking out for the good of Lowsunn over the wishes of her Elders. It is her future, after all.”

“Either way,” Jin sighed, “Necrosis will wipe out most of who we know before we get back there. So I guess the question becomes...should we intervene?”

“Is it a question?” Teller asked. “I mean, what happens when they’re all murdered? We’ll have no one.”

“No, it’s more than that,” Aidan said. “They’re our family, and it would be downright evil to not help them somehow. We may not stand a chance, but you have to admit, we brought this on ourselves. If we had just intervened earlier...we could have talked with more people in the village, and demanded for the Elders to make changes.

We could have altered our way of life, but now all of it is threatened. Now all of us are in danger, and we have no one to blame but ourselves.”

“He’s right,” Jin said. “We’ll go fight Necrosis. Who knows? Maybe we’ll be able to reason with him. But regardless, if we survive that fight, we can’t play around anymore. We have to make changes in Lowsunn.”

“What are you saying?” Teller asked. “We take over the place like Duncan did?”

“We have a place in that village just as much as the rest. We do it right. We go to Morrigan for help. We go to the Elders and confront them. We expose their secrets and dealings, and we take them to the people. They can decide.”

“Then who’s in charge?”

“Don’t know. But the pain of change is far better than certain desolation. Isn’t fighting Necrosis harder than what we would have to do after?”

“Then let’s hurry,” Leah said, standing to her feet. “Sawyer, would Charlie be able to take all of us to the battlefield?”

“He doesn’t want to,” Sawyer smiled. “But he will.”

“Just give me two minutes, guys,” Jin said, looking over at Grain. They all hugged her one by one and then headed outside. Sawyer refused to move because he didn’t understand what was going on, but Aidan dragged him by the collar and escorted him out, enduring the miniature bites from the kid’s plush dragon. They waited silently, not waving back to those who passed by. Huddled together, they thought only of the future and the battle to come.

One they were sure to lose.

Jin came outside and slammed the door behind him. His eyes were red, and his face was worn.

“Listen to me,” he said, trying not to break. “I don’t intend to die today. I plan on getting this done and coming back. She will not endure this world alone. And neither should any of you. Necrosis. Lowsunn. The Movement. The Elders. We finish this once and for all. Are there any objections?”

Not a word was said.

“Good. Then let’s go kill an Omega.”





“DON’T JUST SIT THERE. We need to strategize!” Jin shouted. Despite the high speeds, Sawyer’s dragon had expanded large enough for all of them to sit on its back comfortably. According to Sawyer (and Charlie), they would reach Bailey’s group within the hour. Just before Necrosis arrived.

But no one was in the mood to talk.

“Well, we know not to let him touch us,” Teller muttered.

“And I left my armor in Lowsunn,” Jin sighed angrily. “Though I’m sure it wouldn’t have made much difference.”

“We know that Elias is there,” Aidan spoke up. “He’s a healer. If you get hit with a blow that would have killed you, and he heals you, will you still possess the energy?”

“Not sure. That’s never happened to me before.”

“Well, that’s one plan. If nothing else.”

“I would rather not let our survival and victory hinge on the particulars of my death.”

“He’s an Omega, but he’s not invincible,” Leah said. “There is a way to stop him. Let’s not give up hope.”

“Will Morrigan be joining us?” Ori asked, but Sawyer shook his head. “It was risky enough asking for your help. She’s still in Lowsunn.”

“Well, I for one am willing to see what I can do against him,” Ori said, flexing his biceps. “It’s too bad I didn’t go with you guys to Onyx Minor. I could have gotten a few bruises to decorate my face too.”

“Funny,” Aidan remarked. “Remember that you don’t want any of Necrosis’s.”

“Charlie says we’re here,” Sawyer replied solemnly. Charlie descended slowly as the group below tried to interpret the meaning of their approach. Aidan examined the faces: Bailey, Elias, Makana, George, and Ticker. The dragon swooped down low enough for all of them to jump off. Bailey wasn’t sure whether to cry out in joy or fear.

“Tallawah?” she asked, turning to Aidan, then Ori. “Ori? What are you doing here? I thought you were gone forever.” Not able to hold back any longer, she ran forward and hugged them both. “And the

Elder's daughter?" she asked in awe. "So she really has been with you the whole time. And Jin!"

"No time for happy reunions," Jin said. "We came to assist you. Necrosis's not coming after us, but all of you."

"What?" Bailey's voice wavered.

"I'm afraid it's true. The Elders...they're going to crush your group and then the rest of the Movement...today."

"I knew a quick trip to Darken and back was too good to be true. We've been on our toes the entire time."

"Head back," Leah whispered to Sawyer. "You shouldn't be here for this." The little boy nodded, jumped back on the dragon, and waved goodbye before they took flight. Every single person on the ground was completely envious. They stood around as Sawyer disappeared into the clouds, unsure of what to say next. Makana broke the silence.

"Good to see you, brother," Makana said, her voice deep and powerful. She gave Jin a hug that made him wince. George and Elias saluted Aidan.

"So Necrosis is coming here, huh?" Bailey said. "Right now?"

"Any moment," Jin replied.

"And do you think there's enough of us to stop him?"

"Don't know...perhaps now would be a good time to use one of your seals. You do have three."

"My friend, only when the time is right."

"That time is now, Bailey."

"Perhaps. And perhaps not. If I use my seals whenever conflict arises, I'll soon be defenseless. What about the next Omega we face?"

"Is this going to become a habit?" Jin laughed nervously.

"All I know is that things are not going to get easier," she said. "But I promise to use them all if it means we make it out this day."

"Do we have a plan?" Makana asked. Jin shook his head.

"We'll try to reason with him first. If not, then we do our best."

"A real Omega," Ticker muttered. "Never thought I would see one in my lifetime."

"Shouldn't we go reconvene with the others?" Ori asked.

“No,” Makana said, flexing her muscles. They were easily noticeable even under her baggy and exotic clothes. “This will be the first line of defense. If we start adding more, it will look like we’re building an army against him, and we’ll lose all hope of reason. We eleven will wait.”

“I can keep him down as long as possible,” Jessica said. “Our heavy hitters can do their best. Though if he has the power of the comet...I don’t know how anything we do will make a difference.”

“Elias and Teller will be support,” Bailey commanded. “Teller can swoop in and carry any wounded away. Ori can protect Elias while he’s healing.”

“I’m sorry I won’t be much help,” Ticker replied. “My sole ability is foreseeing the weather before it comes. Excellent for travel, but hardly useful in battle.”

“He’s with us because he’s part of the Movement,” Bailey explained to Aidan.

“Steel yourselves,” Makana said. “Rest while you can. If he is to approach at any minute, then this may be your last respite. This valley is our final battleground.”

The eleven stood vigilant, facing out towards the west from where Necrosis would come. Aidan took in his surroundings and, for what might be the last time, embraced its tranquility. The dandelions, the gentle breeze, the hot sun. It was so calm and perfect, and it settled his restless soul. Another fight would soon be upon him, and he knew that this could be the last moment he had his sanity. He was amongst friends and family now, and it was unreasonable to think they would all survive, even if they won.

There was no denying it.

He would turn.

He didn’t know when, but at some point, whether through the loss of Bailey or Jin or worse...he would hand over his body and spirit to a more animalistic nature. To consume. To devour. To do what he could not. It had helped him survive countless horrors, and it would surely not let him down now. There was still too much killing to be done.

But then, five icy fingers intertwined with his.

And he remembered.

There was another that could guide him.

One that promised to show him a better way.

He opened his eyes and faced his wife. His sweetheart. His partner in battle and love. She smiled at him warmly as she parted her cool, blue hair with strong yet delicate fingers. No words needed to be said. He heard them all.

Neither would leave the other behind.

He would not turn.

And she would give her all.

Neither could live without the other.

So they would ensure that both made it to the next morning.

Leah squeezed his hand harder. There were no tears in her eyes. Just a fearless determination. She was not afraid of the unknown. And neither was he.

The eleven stood vigilant, side by side.

And then they saw him, rising over a hill miles away. He was nearly twelve feet tall and as wide as three men. His skin was smooth and perfect. There were no scars. No faded wounds or blemishes. His hair was long and rugged, and his light brown beard was fashioned similarly, producing what looked like a mane. His muscles were chiseled and divine. His grey eyes were soft and distant, and his clenched fists were as mighty as boulders. He walked like a god, and the aura surrounding him was no less majestic and awe-inspiring. He wore only a loose white t-shirt and ripped, brown leather pants. He was barefoot.

No one said a word once they saw him. They only took in his radiance and breathed in his essence – until he was but a few feet away. His eyes smiled, then he sat down in the grass, crossed his legs, and said hello.

When no one replied, he continued.

“You are my opponents,” he stated matter-of-factly, observing them one at a time. “A man of fire, a girl of elements, swords and telekinesis, gravitas, gravity, flight, wind, healing, weather analysis, combat efficiency, and...absorption of energy. It is best to face a terrible situation with multiple talents.” He nodded at his own wisdom.

“There has been a misunderstanding,” Bailey replied, stepping forward. “We don’t want to fight you. We know of your ability. You sense when a target has been placed upon you, and I understand your desire to perform a preemptive strike. But you have been tricked into doing the bidding of another.”

“I know what has happened,” Necrosis said, closing his eyes. “I am not new to this. So many over time have summoned me in the hopes that I would do their dirty work. Some I carry out. Others I do not. But I do intend to crush all parties of Lowsunn this day. Especially the ones that put you in this predicament.”

“You don’t have to face us,” she said, and his eyes shot open. The grey became as sharp as steel.

“You may not want to face me now. But you will. Your hearts are too connected to the place where your oppressors reside. As I lay destruction upon their door, you will not be able to stand aside and watch. You will intervene. Then, you will fight me. What difference does it make whether it is now or then?”

“We can handle them,” she pleaded. “Let us all go, and we will make them answer for their deeds.”

“Empty promises,” he said. “Why do you wait until it is far too late to gain your resolve?”

“You don’t have to do this.”

“I do this out of principle, not desire,” he said, standing to his bare feet. “It is up to you whether you will attack now or later. But once you decide to engage me, there will be no more talk. I cannot control what happens after. I become no longer a man but a force of nature. And you cannot stop a hurricane once it has hit your shores.”

“You cannot destroy Lowsunn,” Bailey said as he began walking away from them. But he ignored her and continued on his way.

“The second group will surely engage him,” Makana said with crossed arms. “Whether through ignorance, pride or fear. The slaughter is but hours or less away. Would any of us be able to live on knowing what our idleness has done?”

“It’s no way to live at all,” Leah muttered. “He’s right. Whether it’s now or later, we will have to fight this battle. Might as well try now, before there’s more damage and lives lost.”

“So,” Ori laughed. “Who’s throwing the first punch?”

“Whoever it is, you better make it count,” George muttered.

“Already on it,” Makana said with a big smile, but Leah grabbed her wrist.

“No, allow me,” Leah said, looking back at Aidan. He nodded. Necrosis would target her first, given her sorcery, but worrying about her safety now was no use. They were all in the same amount of trouble.

Leah let go of Makana and slapped her hands together. The earth behind them began to shift and quiver and roar, bursting up from the ground, hovering in mid-air, and then flying upwards into the sky above the walking Necrosis. More and more pieces slammed together, forming a large solid ball that blocked out the sun from where they stood.

But she wasn't done. As more earth strengthened it, Leah had ice envelope the surface, hardening it even more. Necrosis stopped his walk and looked above him, watching as the rock nearly a fourth of the size of Lowsunn loomed above him.

Leah's nose was beginning to bleed, but she continued the process until her arms began shaking uncontrollably. She looked at the rest of them from left to right, and they nodded. Finally, she let the massive boulder go, and all but Elias and Ticker ran forward, ready to capitalize on any damage Leah's attack would cause.

The rock smashed into Necrosis with such force that they were all knocked off their feet. The impact cracked the sky with a booming sound so loud that even Onyx Major heard its echo. But the Movement did not stop. Instead, they climbed to their feet, unsheathed swords, charged up their abilities and continued the run.

A massive fist broke through Leah's rock, and Necrosis's face emerged from the midst. With red glowing eyes and hair whipping in all directions, he began to crack through his temporary prison. Makana reached him first and hit him with a punch so hard that his neck snapped to the left.

But it was then that they learned why he was called an Omega.



## Chapter 21 – Gods Among Us



**A**s soon as Makana punched him, he burst through the rock wall like it was made of glass. Makana dodged one of his blows narrowly, ducking under it, but she could not pivot in time to get out of the way of his knee. She blocked it with both arms, but the impact not only sent her flying away, but it broke both of her arms instantly. Elias rushed forward to assist as Bailey swung her sword upon the back of Necrosis's neck.

It shattered on impact.

He went to backhand her, but Jin blocked the blow with his forearms. From the scream that came from his lips, the block couldn't have helped much to ease the pain. Both he and Bailey were sent flying backward. Elias swore as he tried to hurry and finish healing Makana. Ori kept his sword ready, just waiting for a chance to strike.

Aidan hit Necrosis with a wave of fire, but it had no effect. The Omega barreled towards him, picking up speed with every step. Aidan unleashed three firewalls to slow down his path but he just smashed through them. As he was about to hit Aidan, Teller released Jessica from his grip above them. Using her gravity ability, she increased her weight significantly in mid-air. She folded her arms and legs and plowed into Necrosis's face like a wrecking ball. He was unhurt, but he staggered back. George hit him with a powerful gust of wind, and he fell onto his back.

Jessica held him in place while a healed Jin concentrated his energy into his fists.

"Keep him down!" he ordered as he cocked back his arm and punched Necrosis square in the face as hard as he could. The Omega didn't even blink. He ripped out of Jessica's hold and grabbed Jin's throat quickly. He pulled him close, roared in his face, and then crushed it.



Aidan and Jessica were in such shock that they forgot to keep attacking. Makana screamed in rage and began punching and kicking at the Omega in a frenzy, hitting him with such speed that even Necrosis couldn't see it all. Jessica did her best to keep the Omega from harming Makana. Using gravity to slow his punches at the very last moment, she allowed Makana enough time to dodge them. Bailey and Elias rushed over to Jin.

"Can you save him?" Bailey asked, rolling up the sleeve on her right arm, but Elias shook his head no. Then, in the next second, Jin's eyes fluttered open, his neck completely healed. Bailey knew what had happened immediately. She looked over at Makana and then Jessica. Jessica's last two seals and one of Makana's were darkened. Three Yen to bring back a life.

"I get the next one!" she shouted, turning to Elias. "If you and Jin think of an ability I can use to stop this monster, you let me know. I'm going to talk to Ticker and Leah."

He nodded as Jin coughed and rubbed his throat.

"I can't keep this up!" Jessica screamed, clutching her head. Makana rolled backward just as Necrosis missed her head. There was no gravity holding back that punch.

"I have no effect at all," Makana said as he came running at her. Aidan cut him off with a punch to the face from one of his gauntlets. It shattered on impact and strained his hand. He winced and cried out at the pain, but he punched the Omega again anyways, even with his bare hand. It broke on impact and he backed off as Necrosis kept his sights on Makana. Teller swooped in just as the Omega was about to grab her hair and took her upwards with him. Necrosis glanced around for another victim.

"We can't beat this monster," George said as Aidan nursed his broken hand. Elias came over to heal it.

"We'll manage," Aidan replied.

"He's not even unleashing his full power," George whined.

"Then we'll beat him before he does," Aidan snapped. "Now shut up or do something!" He turned to Elias. "Heal Jessica next." Elias stared at him curiously.

"I can only heal wounds, not exhaustion."

"Have you ever tried before?"

“No.”

“Then try. If we can figure out how to hurt him, she’s the only one who can keep us from getting hurt.” Elias nodded as Aidan noticed that Necrosis was headed straight for Bailey, Leah and Ticker. “Are you done yet?” he demanded.

“Yeah,” Elias said quickly, and Aidan shot his hand out towards the Omega. A whip-like tentacle made of fire shot out from his palm, wrapping around Necrosis’s throat.

“You get back over here,” Aidan said under his breath as he shot a wave of fire into the Omega’s back with his free hand. Necrosis ripped the whip from his throat and ignored him, continuing toward his prey. Aidan began running at him, but he knew he wouldn’t make it in time. It was all up to Leah now.

But she wasn’t afraid. Just as he was about to hit her, she created a floor of ice underneath them. The Omega fell off balance, and she took the reprieve to envelop him in a colossal cocoon of ice.

“We only have a moment,” she shouted, waving for everyone to meet up. “George, create a tornado within the cocoon to slow him down.”

“Done,” he said, slapping his palms together. Teller and Jessica descended and Elias carried Jin over.

“Listen, I know how we can end this,” she said. “Not kill him. But stop him for a while.”

“I could use my last Yen,” Jin said wearily. “Force him to be immobile.”

“No,” Aidan said. “Bailey’s right. We can’t just rely on these Yen to fight our battles for us, or we’re never going to win in the future. Bringing back Jin was noble,” he said, turning to Makana and Jessica. “But the consequence is that you’re now limited to your abilities. Leah, what’s the plan?”

They heard the smashing of ice behind them.

“The children in Onyx Minor taught me that a battle is not just about your opponent but also your surroundings. We don’t have the strength to beat Necrosis, but we can stop him. Trap him under the earth in such a way that he’ll be unable to move no matter how strong he is.”

“I already know how,” Aidan smiled, nodding towards her.

“This is going to be highly dangerous,” Leah said, creating an ice spike and drawing out the plan in the grass. “We might be killed in the process. But if everyone does their job, we have a good chance of coming out on top.”

A roar broke through their discussion as Necrosis removed himself completely from the ice.

“Bailey, Ticker and Elias, you three stay back. Makana and Jessica, do what you were doing while Aidan and I prepare. George, help to keep Necrosis off balance. Ori and Jin, distract only when necessary.”

The group broke. Bailey, Ticker, and Elias ran off as far as they could while Teller again took to the skies.

“Ready, hubby?” Leah asked. Aidan nodded with a smile. Necrosis sprinted towards them all, but Makana ran over to meet him and drop-kicked him in the face. Jessica and George pulled the Omega onto his back with the momentum and their abilities. Leah and Aidan ran opposite each other, while the others fought Necrosis in the middle. The married couple each slapped their respective hands together, concentrating on the tremendous power they were about to unleash.

Leah let out a deep sigh and began hollowing out the earth beneath Necrosis and the others, siphoning off the dirt, letting it travel behind her, and then up into the sky, forming another large rock like she had hit the Omega with earlier. Aidan closed his eyes and tried not to concentrate on the grunts and groans of his comrades. He had to trust everyone to do their part. No longer was he burdened with fighting alone. No longer did he have to turn. No lives **had** to be lost. Not this day.

Makana fought as fervently as she had when they first engaged Necrosis, but Jessica was beginning to get woozy, so more of George’s winds were holding Necrosis’s fists back than her gravity, and the potency wasn’t enough. Necrosis grazed Makana’s left arm, and it broke instantly. She cried out in agony but continued her assault.

“We have to do it now!” Teller cried from the skies.

“NO!” Makana bellowed. “When they’re ready! No sooner!” Jessica redoubled her efforts, and Teller fought back the urge to

intervene. Ori began swinging his sword in and out of the attacks at the right moments before Necrosis's eyes, blocking his vision for a second at a time, giving his friends a little more room to maneuver.

"Get ready!" Leah shouted, with her eyes still closed. "I'm doing it...now!"

With the end of her shout, the ground beneath them began to shake. Jin and Ori ran away from the scene. And five seconds later, the floor beneath them, a quarter of a mile in diameter, became nothing but dust. All that were fighting in the middle began to fall.

George took Jessica with him in a gust of wind that spiraled them upwards, but he could not catch Makana as Necrosis had grabbed her ankle in the drop. He squeezed and held on tight, but George didn't deviate from his purpose. He carried Jessica to safety. Teller dove down into the crevice and into the dark until he heard the grunts of his friend. Makana was still fighting the Omega to the best of her ability, swinging at him with her one good arm and one good leg. But he couldn't get a hold of her or Necrosis. Not in the dark.

Then a light illuminated his path, as Aidan began his part of the plan.

Floods of lava began filling up the hole from deep below the earth, filling the bottom of the cavern. Teller wasted no time. He jumped on top of the Omega's back and stuck his fingers into his enemy's eyes, forcing him to release his grip on Makana. Wounded and still in free fall, she could not reach the cavern lining.

Teller jumped off the Omega's back and flew to her side, putting her into his arms, but Necrosis managed to grab his ankle in the exchange. He didn't care. With all the strength he could muster, he carried her to the rock lining and made sure she had a grip on the wall.

Then he let go, allowing his abilities to no longer carry him.

Both Lowsunn villager and Omega hit the sea of lava below, and only one survived. But it didn't matter. The mission was complete.

"I got her!" George yelled out from above. "I got her!" With his winds feeling out the rock walls for both Teller and Makana, he retrieved her and carried her back to the surface.

"Teller's gone," Makana muttered, as he placed her onto the solid ground. "Close it up." Elias rushed to her side as Leah steadied her

woozy head and concentrated one last time. She let the large rock above them free fall until it was halfway into the pit, and then it broke up, filling in the surface and the upper half of the pit.

Once she was finished, she collapsed on the grass. Still, before she passed out, she managed to gaze upon Aidan. He was still concentrating, still working to ensure their victory. She knew he would keep a steady hand. She fell asleep with confidence.

Once Aidan was finished summoning as much fire and lava as possible to fill the cavern, he gave a heavy sigh and plopped down onto his butt. Jin carried over Leah's sleeping body and laid her next to him. They all sat down, weary but grateful. Bailey rubbed the seals on her arms, but Ticker patted her back. She looked at him, and he shook his head.

"They would be of no use, my friend," he said. "It would take four seals to bring him to safety. Three for his life and one to teleport him out of the lava. Teller wouldn't want that. He would be happy knowing his sacrifice was not in vain."

She nodded, and they sat in silence over his memory. Elias, exhausted, but feeling a sense of calm in the air, spoke up.

"So Necrosis is trapped down there?"

"For a long time anyway," Aidan sighed. "He might even die there. The lava won't hurt him, but he certainly can't swallow it. Of that I'm sure. And there's no food. No water. I don't know if he needs those things...but even if he doesn't, he'll constantly be swimming to stay afloat. Leah's created false walls in the lining of the cavern, so even if he swims to one end and tries to climb, more lava will pour in, knocking him back. If he makes it somehow to the top, it's unstable ground. There's nothing to hold onto."

"But theoretically, he could get out someday, couldn't he?"

"Definitely," Aidan sighed. "If he doesn't need food or water, and the lava can't hurt him in any way, then yeah, he has plenty of time to get out. Days, weeks, months. No one knows for sure."

"So what do we do in the meantime?"

"We live," Leah said, awakening from her slumber. "We don't focus on the problem we have no control over. Instead, we concentrate on the ones we do."

"You mean Lowsunn?" Elias asked.

“That’s right,” she smiled, looking at Aidan. “We’ll take care of matters there –”

“– and then we get stronger,” he said with a smile. “Our teamwork today was amazing. It doesn’t matter how you look at it. We felled an Omega today. What’re a few Elders?”



## Chapter 22 – Unfinished Business



There were many jaw drops when Aidan and Leah came strolling through Lowsunn. The group had taken the weakened shield entrance by the Elder's compound and quickly made their way to the village center. They were sure that after the Elders saw so many of them alive – opponents that should have been dead by the hand of Necrosis – they would do all they could to strengthen the shields, but it didn't matter now. The Movement was inside. And they weren't leaving until all was well.

Still, they decided not to confront the Elders first. Instead, they opted for the people. The only ones that truly mattered. And once Aidan walked out into the village center and simply stood there, word of his return spread like wildfire. The inhabitants came out of their homes in droves. Those on missions received messages via teleport and returned home quickly. They didn't know what his return meant. But they had all heard and felt the sounds of battle nearby. They had to hear what he and his group had to say.

"What happened out there?" they asked Aidan. "Why were you in Onyx Major?"

"Why did you leave?" they asked Leah.

"We heard sounds of a great battle," they inquired of Bailey and the others. Makana spoke up for all of them.

"We were in battle," she said proudly. "We were attacked by Necrosis the Omega, and we emerged victorious." The villagers were in awe, murmuring amongst themselves, unsure of the validity of their words.

"Look here," Jin said, handing them the parchment containing the details of their mission. "The Elders sent us to Darken, knowing full well its impossibility. But they didn't realize how strong our teamwork could be, and we have felled that monster!"

As the parchment exchanged hands and curious eyes widened with realization, the people began cheering and patting their heroes



on the back, jumping up and down and chanting their names. If this group could defeat Necrosis...there was no enemy too strong. They may not have found the Choate, but Lowsunn was surely saved.

“What are we doing?” Aidan asked Bailey as the crowd began discussing the celebration. “When are we going to expose the Elders’ corruption?”

“We’re gaining the trust and favor of the people first,” she said. “We’ll be seen as heroes and leaders in the community now for our accomplishment. This is far more important. Just showing off our mission details doesn’t prove any corruption. But the Elders will be much more careful before making their next move.”

“But it doesn’t solve the issue. It just delays it and makes the Elders more cautious.”

“This is the way it must be, *Tallawah*. Accusing them outright will make us no different from Duncan. Let us not ruin the reputation we have established tonight. This is not just a win for Lowsunn, but the Movement. We all have a reason to celebrate. We have all survived.”

“You do know that I won’t stay here much longer. You have Leah and me for a couple more days, if that. I can’t help you after.”

“Thank you for understanding.”

“No, I don’t understand. I don’t understand at all. But this is a favor because you’re my friend.”

“Thank you all the same.”

“Excuse me, I’ll be back,” he said, patting her shoulder. He grabbed Ori and pulled him aside to whisper something in his ear, then he motioned for Leah to come with him just as the crowd began breaking out in song and dance. Aidan and Leah had to wave back many pats on the back and congratulations. A couple even apologized to him as he passed, saying how they should have believed in him earlier. He paid no attention. There was still work to be done.

“Where are we going?” Leah asked.

“Just play along with me. I need to find something out. If Bailey and the others aren’t willing to confront the Elders and get the truth tonight, then I am.”

“What’s wrong? The truth about what?”

“The Elders aren’t stupid.”

“Yeah, so?”

“They love Lowsunn, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then why would they put it in jeopardy? Why would they send Necrosis here in the first place? Knowing full well he could come to kill us all? I need to know what they were thinking.”

“It was a crazy move. Maybe the Elders wanted to crush the Movement that badly.”

“No, I don’t think so. Like you said, whether it’s the Elders or the Movement, we all want the same thing: what’s best for Lowsunn.” He pulled Leah into the shadows. “Summoning Necrosis accomplishes none of that. It destroys it. I wanted to confirm my suspicions by speaking with the Elders, but I’m not going to get an audience with them without Bailey. So I have to approach this a different way. Tell me, if the Elders and the Movement both love Lowsunn, which of them sent for Necrosis?”

“Logically...” She thought it over. “It would have to be neither.”

“Which means that someone who doesn’t care about this village is the one pulling the strings.”

“Who would that be?”

“There’s only one person I know who pulls strings,” he said. “Eugene Balthasar is the only man living in both worlds and deep enough to get all the information he needs.”

“But for what purpose? Why now?”

“I guess we’ll see.”

“But if this man is behind everything, why didn’t Bailey figure it out? Or the Elders?”

“It’s because they’re not looking around them,” he said. “Their focus is only on their opponent, not the bigger picture. The Elders only see the Movement and vice versa. Meanwhile, Eugene is in the middle, watching us both destroy each other and helping himself at the same time. This victory over Necrosis does ruin the Elders’ pull on the people, and the Elders will fight back in their own way, but still, nothing gets accomplished. The war between both parties continues.”

“I don’t understand all of this...”

“Just tag along. Knowing how he is, he won’t join in the celebration. He’ll need time to revise his plans.”

Aidan put the Choate piece back in his pocket and took Leah’s hand, leading her through the shadows until they wrapped around the village and reached the schoolhouse. A light was flickering from the inside. Aidan smiled back at Leah as they came upon the entrance, and he slammed open the door, startling Eugene inside.

“Goodness!” he jumped, glancing behind him to see who it was. “Oh, Aidan it’s you.” He turned back to the teacher’s desk and gathered his loose papers into a pile, rolled it up, and tucked it into the pocket in his jacket. When he was finished, he turned to face them. Leah sat in one of the pews while Aidan stood in the middle, giving Eugene a smug smile.

“Surprised to see me?” he asked. Eugene clutched his chest.

“You scared me so bad,” he chuckled, finding a seat on the desk. “I am, actually. Last I heard, you were doomed to fight Necrosis, then a group saw you near Onyx Major, and now I just overheard! You defeated an Omega! Few in this world can boast such a feat!”

“I had some help,” he said, crossing his arms. “What I can’t understand is why you didn’t ask the Movement for help with your mission in the first place.”

Leah gave Aidan a quizzical glance, but she quickly dismissed her gaze. All she needed to do was watch and play along.

“I don’t understand,” Eugene said, wiping his forehead with his sleeve.

“We’re the finest warriors that Lowsunn has to offer, and you can’t ask us to go get the Choate for you? At the very least, you could have asked me. What did you think? That I was indebted to Bailey for saving me from the big, bad world? That I had integrated myself into the system? Haven’t any of my actions told you what I’m all about?”

“Aidan, you’ll have to be more specific,” Eugene said, calming down. “Are you accusing me of something?”

“I’m accusing you of being blind, and not seeing a friend when he was right in front of your face.” Aidan dug into his pocket, produced the Choate piece, and threw it to Eugene. The professor’s eyes

widened once he saw it, and he caught it eagerly, turning it over and over in his hands. “You know what that is, don’t you?”

“Is this...is this –”

“- it’s a piece of the Choate,” Aidan replied. “Found it in Onyx Major. That is what you wanted, right?”

“But why – I...a piece? I don’t understand.”

“All I want is to be a part of it. Sylvester told us about how the second Cataclysm could be localized. I want to be involved. To gain more Yen. We learned that once all four pieces are together, more than one person can gain its benefits.”

“But I don’t understand...”

“What don’t you get? Why I would keep this a secret from my friends? I have no friends here. Leah’s the only one I care about, and she’s on board. She’ll do whatever I tell her. Other than her, this whole village can be burned down for all I care.”

“No, I don’t understand...why you brought Ori to life,” Eugene said with leery eyes. “That was the test. To see if you would leave him to die or wish him back. When you used a Yen to save him, I figured you were too connected to them.”

“Ori’s been working with me against Bailey,” Aidan said quickly. “He does a lot of my dirty work behind the scenes, and I figured that bringing him back to life didn’t matter if we found the Choate soon. My Yen will be replaced.”

“I see,” Eugene said, straightening up. “Well, I’m surprised you found this so soon.”

“With Duncan so adamant about forming an army in this spot, I figured it had to be close. It would have worked out better for him to set up a base of operations here since he knew how the village worked already. That’s why I’m still here...and why you’re still here too, isn’t it?”

“It’s true. I’m not very sociable so I decided it was better to work with the conditions I know rather than new ones to find the artifact.”

“But you would have destroyed all of that with your plan. Necrosis told us he was going to destroy everyone in Lowsunn after he was done with us.”

“It was a risk I had to take,” Eugene sighed. “The Elders concoct the mission lists, but before they’re handed out to the villagers, I

make the final changes and finishing touches. I've been at it for years, and I've gained their trust all this time, so they don't recheck my work. Even when they read the names aloud during announcements, they never take a quick glance. I had to get the Movement working, and I knew you were my best bet. You weren't going into that fight to die like the rest of them would. But you understand why I did it, don't you? Sending something as big as Necrosis towards the Movement was the only guarantee I had that you and others would get off your butts and go out into the world. I needed someone to look for the Choate in places the Elders would never send its villagers to. Without my interference, the endless battle between the Elders and their Movement would have gone on forever. I didn't expect it to go as far as it did. But it worked out in the end, I think. How did you end up fighting Necrosis anyways? I thought you were running."

"We did run away at first, but then we discovered that you resent Necrosis after Bailey and the others. With so many more threats to the Omega, I figured the attack wouldn't be localized anymore and that it would just end up destroying the village in the process. So I intervened for the good of us all."

"I'm glad you did," he sighed. "I would have been killed too. But that part wasn't my doing. That was all the Elders."

"What do you mean?" Aidan asked, looking back at Leah in surprise.

"After finding you near Onyx Major, the Elders were furious, believing that you really were building an army over there. Necrosis was already on his way to your group at that point, from my doing. The Elders caught word of his incoming arrival and decided to take a risk of their own. They had known about the Movement for a while now and were just waiting for the right moment to strike. This was that moment. They were the ones that altered the course of the Omega from you to Lowsunn. They were the ones who sent most of the Movement to die at Necrosis's hands. All to hurt you, destroy them, and weaken whatever army you had accumulated in the city."

"No way," was all Aidan could say. Leah's hand had been over her mouth during the entire explanation. All this time, he had given the Elders the benefit of the doubt. He had known they were many

things, but certainly not murderers. He had figured Eugene was behind both rounds of assignments, but why would he lie now?

“I know it’s shocking,” Eugene said. “But it’s over now. You survived my schemes. You survived the Elders, and now I know that we’re on the same side. We have a piece to the Choate. My standing is sustained, and your reputation is better than ever. We can slowly manipulate the two sides to get the other pieces. I can be the brains, and you the brawn.”

“Like you’re going to keep me alive,” Aidan scoffed. “You might not be able to fight me, but you’ll devise a way to kill me in the end.”

“But we’re partners.”

“So you say. How dumb do you think I am?”

“I’ll admit, I thought you were. But after what you’ve just accomplished, I see you as an invaluable asset.”

“As I do for you. Why don’t you come outside?” Aidan said, pointing to his forehead. Eugene frowned and squinted his eyes. A small beetle fluttered its wings from between Aidan’s spiky hair. “Everyone’s going to have lots and lots of questions for you.”

Aidan and Leah stepped outside, and Eugene cautiously followed. Once outside the schoolhouse, Jin kicked the back of his legs and held his arms behind his back. The whole village of Lowsunn had surrounded the schoolhouse with angry, concerned looks on their faces. Bailey and the Elders were gathered in front, along with a smiling Ori, who had a beetle also on the top of his head, transmitting every word Aidan and Eugene had exchanged.

“You traitor!” Elder Thine spat, slapping Eugene across the face. “After all the privileges we’ve bestowed upon you. After all the luxuries, you spit in our face!”

“Traitor,” Elder Seven seethed.

Eugene grit his teeth and glared at Aidan. “You tricked me,” he said, and Aidan nodded.

“Something you must have thought was impossible,” Aidan said, snatching the piece of the Choate from Eugene’s sweaty hands.

“How could you do this?” Bailey asked, stepping forward and kneeling down to his level. “I thought – I thought we believed in the same thing.”

“Right,” Eugene laughed. “And why is that? Because back when you and the Elders were building Lowsunn I praised you and your views? Please. I was sucking up to you to gain your trust. All of you are the same. You’re so self-righteous that you can’t even see when someone’s fooling you right underneath your nose! So when you defected to bring in this wild brat, I saw it as an opportunity to play both sides! Until you became a prominent member of the Movement, I had no one to play the Elders against, but you performed your job perfectly. I used you, Bailey. Just like everyone else! You’re nothing but my tools! My puppets!”

“But why would you do this? We could have accomplished so much together. Why would you throw it all away?”

“I can only imagine how the naturals feel,” Eugene said, bowing his head. “Not only losing all of your loved ones in the Cataclysm but not getting any relief in exchange. They watch as everyone around them makes their wishes and rebuilds new lives and worlds while they continue to suffer and wallow in their pain. I had two seals, two Yen, and I wasted them. I threw away my opportunity and, like watching a gem wash down the river, I saw my chances at a better life slip through my grasp.

“My first wish was to control life-sized puppets, so real that people would think they were human. I thought I would re-create the family I lost in Advent. But they were lifeless and boring and predictable, so I wasted my last Yen to bring my real wife back to life. Because I was lonely...but the Judge told me...he told me that I needed three Yen to bring someone back to life, and then he wouldn’t even let me keep my second Yen! How is anyone supposed to still be sane after hearing that? When I first met you in the wild, talking about building Lowsunn...I saw it as my second chance. If only I –”

Eugene’s words were cut short as Elder Exil stuck a blade through his heart.

“Yes,” Elder Thine muttered. “I was wondering when someone would shut him up. The last thing we need is an army of puppets attacking the village.” Bailey made a move to hit her, but Ori held her back. Elder Thine smiled at Bailey. “I guess there’s no use hiding our opinions of each other anymore. To any of you.”

Elder Thine turned to face the people.

“What you must take from this is that Eugene has orchestrated both this Movement and the Elders against each other. He was the true enemy, not us. Now that both parties know how wrong we have been in our secrets and disdain, we can move forward to a greater and brighter future. This so-called Movement and the Elders can work together for what’s best for Lowsunn. We will be meeting together tomorrow to discuss just how we can do so, but it has been a tiring night, and we ask that you excuse us so that we may absorb and evaluate tonight’s events. We are all after the same thing, and we will never stop working for you – the people.”

“But you sent us to die,” Aidan spat. Elder Thine peered at him through tired eyes.

“I did what Bailey and your friends would have done in the same position. But I don’t need to explain myself to you.”

Elder Thine and the other Elders retired to their compound, and the crowd just watched them leave. Aidan went to lunge for Elder Thine, but Ori grabbed him from behind.

“Not right now,” Ori whispered, pointing down to their mentor. “The Elders can wait. They know they’ve lost, and they’re at our mercy now. You go after them, and you’ll just start an ugly fight.”

Aidan glared at him but kept his feet planted. He bent down to see how his mentor was doing. Bailey was still staring into Eugene’s lifeless face as Jin and Makana carried away the body to dispose of it.

“Bailey,” Aidan said, placing a hand on her shoulder. “I’m sorry I exposed everything you worked for. I –”

“– no, no,” she said, her voice distant and strained. “It was necessary, Aidan. I understand. I was blind. We were all so blind. He...he could have killed us all. Teller...I got Teller killed.”

“Hey,” Aidan said, hugging her tight. “Don’t do that. Don’t you do that.”

“That man did so much damage, and I just let it happen,” she cried, refusing to hug Aidan back. “I could have stopped him. I could have acted sooner. Why didn’t I act sooner?! Teller...he was such a good boy. I used to babysit him. He used to cry my name at night



when he had nightmares, when he thought someone was breaking into the village... He was like a son to me! I let my son die! I let him—”

“STOP IT!” Ori barked. He turned his head and wiped his eyes. Leah hugged Bailey from behind as she whispered into her ear.

“We’re here for you.”

“All of us are,” Aidan whispered. “Just stay with us.”

Bailey cried some more, but finally, she rested her head on Aidan’s shoulder and embraced him back.



## Chapter 23 – Elder



“Bailey’s finally asleep,” Ori sighed, entering the bedroom in one of Lowsunn’s dorms. “Makana’s keeping watch, and I’ll be taking over in a few hours. Jin extends his thanks and says he’ll see you soon. He left a few minutes ago to be with Grain. He knew you all would understand.”

“Especially after surviving an Omega,” Aidan sighed, patting Leah’s knee next to him. “We’ll visit him soon.”

“Before she fell asleep, Bailey said we should destroy the Choate piece.”

“What do you think?” Aidan asked Leah. She gave a heavy sigh and shook her head.

“No clue. Can it be destroyed?”

“Probably not, but we can try.”

“I think we should all make that decision together. Jin, Grain, Bailey...all of us.”

“You mean not the Elders?” Ori laughed, sitting down beside Aidan. The silence in the room told him loud and clear that it was a joke in bad taste. Ori winced. “Sorry, guys.”

“So what happens now?” Leah asked. Aidan shrugged his shoulders.

“I guess Bailey and the Elders work things out. It’s not like the Elders have any power after exposing their little stunt. Bailey can pretty much demand whatever she wants. I just don’t know if she’s up to all of this. Makana might be able to take her place, but she’s kind of rough around the edges. Elroy is in no condition.”

“Who’s Elroy?” Leah asked.

“The other fourth of the Movement leaders,” Aidan yawned, laying back on the bed.

“You think Lowsunn will be okay?” she asked.

“Well, the Elders are pissed,” Ori chuckled. “Bailey’s a wreck. The people are confused, and there’s an Omega under us that may

someday find his way to the surface and bring forward an equivalent of the apocalypse. Yeah, we're in excellent shape. I wonder what tomorrow will bring."

"Strawberry potions," Aidan sighed happily, closing his eyes and folding his arms.

"Oh, my," Leah said, and Ori laughed.

"Sounds like a date," Ori chuckled.

"Who said you're coming?" Aidan asked as a knock came at the door. "Come in!"

Sawyer stepped in, his stuffed dragon hanging onto his shoulder.

"Hey, little man," Ori said. "What's going on?"

"Morrigan," he sobbed. "I can't find her." Aidan, Leah, and Ori glanced at each other.

"Do you have any ideas where she might have gone?" Ori asked.

"No. It's not like her."

"She wouldn't have run away," Leah said. "Could only be a couple options."

"More like one," Ori said, standing to his feet. "The Elders."

"You think Elder Thine would hurt her own daughter?" Aidan asked.

"I'm sure of it. You saw what they did to Eugene for betraying them."

"Sawyer," Aidan said, turning to the boy. "Is there any chance that your mother or the Elders found out she helped us?"

"They might have," he sobbed. "She wouldn't trust anyone but me, and they know I was missing for a little while."

"Let's go," Aidan ordered as they all jumped up from the bed. "The Elders might have realized their plan would have succeeded without our interference. Someone had to have given us a heads up, and it sure wasn't Eugene."

He was dead tired, but he wasn't about to stop fighting now, especially for the girl that had inadvertently saved them all.

"Where could she be?" Ori asked.

"There's a secret chamber in my Mama's house where the Elders talk. But I don't have a key."

"Is it on the top floor?"

"Yes."

“Then I already have one,” Ori said, unsheathing his sword. “Take us to the roof.” Sawyer wiped his eyes.

“We can take Charlie. Let’s go outside.”

They ran out into the open, and Charlie seemed to teleport off of Sawyer’s shoulder. One moment he was a stuffed animal, the next, he was a real dragon, and Aidan could have sworn it sneered at him. He patted its hide as the four hopped on and took to the skies.

The ride was short, and they arrived at Elder Thine’s mansion in seconds. Ori and Leah jumped off first, but before Aidan followed suit, he leaned close to Sawyer.

“Get far away from here,” he said. “Just in case things go bad for us, I don’t want your Mama coming after you too. Understand?” Sawyer nodded, and Aidan jumped. Charlie took off into the clouds.

“We forgot to ask exactly where the chamber is,” Leah said, but Ori was already cutting into the roof.

“Doesn’t matter,” he said. “It’s on the top floor. That’s all I need to know.” Once he had cut a hole in the roof, they all jumped in before it sealed back up. It was not the chamber, but the luxurious decorations caught them off guard nonetheless. The walls were made of gold bricks. Blue and purple banners covered the walls. Decadent gems and rubies were embedded in elegant necklaces, standing on glass podiums as if they were trophies. Leah rolled her eyes as Ori and Aidan stared at her.

“Yes,” she sighed. “My home looks the same.”

“Why?” Aidan asked. “Just...why?”

“I don’t know. It’s pretty.”

“It’s gaudy.”

“You wouldn’t know.”

“We’re here for a reason,” Ori said, pushing past them. At the end of the hall was a vault door encased in gold and designed with thick gears and levers. Ori didn’t bother with subtlety. He lunged forward, drove his blade into the middle of the door, and began pulling down. Once he made a gash big enough to his liking, he cut through the center and began slashing from left to right. A hole the size of his fist was made, and he stuck his face in.

In the center of the room was Morrigan, chained to the wall, and all five remaining Elders were around her, staring directly at Ori in

shock. Once Morrigan recognized him, her eyes lit up with hope.

“Ori!” she screamed. Ori’s eyes sparkled and his cheeks turned slightly red.

“I could really get used to her saying my name like that,” he sighed, sticking in the blade one last time, expanding the length and width of the hole simultaneously. Finally, the hole was big enough for him to squeeze through, but before he could attempt to enter it, he was shot backward with a lightning bolt.

Aidan and Leah rushed forward. Leah hit the hole first and dived in, casting chains of ice around the hands of two of the Elders. Elder Ainsley ran towards her and tried to hold her back, but she hit him with a battering ram made of ice from the palm of her right hand. He got the wind knocked out of him and flew to the side on the floor. Serah Thine and the other standing Elder made no move as Ori and Aidan entered. Leah remained poised to fire off more of her abilities if necessary.

The room was massive, easily three times the size of their cabins alone. Stakes with torches lit up the golden-bricked room, and a symbol of the Yen was on the main wall in the back. Morrigan hung from her chained arms in the center.

“You have to save me!” she cried as Elder Thine lifted her nose at the intruders. “They’re going to take my Yen and ki –”

“– that’s enough!” Elder Exil shouted, punching her in the stomach. He turned to Elder Thine. “Do you want me to handle the intruders?”

“Let me speak,” she said as she took a step forward and glared at Aidan. “I knew it was a mistake letting you into this village when I saw you, but Bailey’s resignation enticed me. Her views had long clashed with ours.”

“Let Morrigan go,” Aidan ordered, but she did not move.

“You have deeply wounded us,” she said, folding her hands. “No matter how hard we try, we will never have the power we once had. You have crippled us.”

“Not if you work with Bailey and the others. Not if you work with the people and atone for what you’ve done.”

“The people,” she scoffed. “What do they know? They act on emotion just as much as you do. Are we to wipe away every tear?”

Satisfy every complaint? We may live in luxury, but we have earned our right. Who are you to question our way of life?"

"There is a better way."

"But do the people want it? Of course, if they demanded such, we would be forced to adapt. We are but few. But they do not truly want change. Because they are comfortable. They are content. They are happy with their scraps. Why tantalize them with anything more when so much hardship comes of it?"

"It's not right for you to decide for them."

"You know nothing of what it takes to lead. How every decision you make affects the very world we live in. Your defeat of Necrosis today, for example. Were you proud of it? It may have been noble to come to the defense of your comrades, but have you thought it through? Do you not think that word of your victory has not spread beyond these walls? Do you not think that others just as strong or greater will not come to our borders and seek a challenge? We maintain a delicate order here. Eugene Balthasar disrupted that order, and that is why he died. He brought that monster to our doorstep in the first place when we would have never, ever ordered such a thing to happen. Why are we the monsters? Because we took advantage of a force already set in motion? Now Lowsunn stands on the brink of annihilation. All you have done is delayed its demise."

"We're all to blame in one way or another," Aidan said. "But it's what we do after the mistakes that continue to define us and shape our future. That —" he said, pointing to Morrigan, "— just shows how much you're not ready for change. I believe everyone in Lowsunn, including the Elders, can work together. That's why we're not fighting right now. Because I believe we can all do better and that even what you did can be forgiven."

Elder Thine sighed deeply, looked at Morrigan, and then back at Aidan.

"I do not like you, Aidan Serafino, but I respect you. I do not think one who has fought and survived against an Omega should deserve to die at the hands of bitter old men and women. Though you cannot deny that is what could happen now. If we so desired, we could wish for abilities right now that would surely bring about your end, but the

day for that will come in time. The truth of the matter is, I am tired. We all are. I am sick of this life and especially of you.”

Elder Thine unsheathed a dagger from beneath her robe and turned it on the Elders. Methodically, she killed them one by one with swift strokes, quickly to the neck before she moved on to the next. Not one of them moved to stop her, and soon, only Elder Ainsley and Elder Thine remained. Leah cupped her mouth in horror as Aidan scowled at the scene, trying to interpret the act.

“What are you doing?” Aidan shouted, but Elder Thine held the dagger to her throat in response. Elder Ainsley unsheathed a dagger of his own and did the same.

“Dad,” Leah cried out at him, tears rolling down her cheek. “What are you doing?”

“I’m sorry, princess,” he said.

And then he took his life.

None of them could bear to look. Elder Thine gave a heavy sigh.

“Look at me now, Aidan Serafino. And you as well, Leah Ainsley.” Leah slowly lifted her head to look at Elder Thine through angry, teary eyes. Aidan’s face was exactly the same, for he knew how much pain Leah’s father had just caused his beloved. Elder Thine’s eyes were listless and dry as she steadied her blood-stained blade.

“Listen to me well, both of you,” she said, her eyes unwavering. “Your reputation will be known throughout the world. I am certain that you both will accomplish great things...but know that with every decision you make, there will be consequences, seen and unseen, and you will have to bear the burden of each of them. I was willing to endure those burdens, to make a haven in Lowsunn. A place unlike any else on Obsidian. I was willing to become a legend. To establish a legacy within these walls. But I see now that will not happen. You have made that clear tonight.”

“Where is this going?” Aidan asked, and she closed her eyes.

“I am sure your names will become even greater than mine would have been. Perhaps equal to the Omegas in prestige. You will have many victories and many losses. Each adds to your legacy in its own way. Those who have aided your causes and those who have taken from them. Mr. Serafino, if my name is not established through



Lowsunn, it will be through you. Whether I take my life or you do, it has already been done.”

“What has?” Aidan asked.

“Every Elder here used the last of their wishes to ensure one thing: upon our deaths, the connection between you and Ms. Ainsley will be severed.”

“What?” Aidan said, looking into Leah’s eyes.

“It might be repaired, but only time will tell if you can endure that test. It doesn’t matter. You will forever remember Elder Serah Thine. On the day you defeated an Omega. On the day you won magnificently, and on the day you lost...most terribly.”

Aidan reached his hand towards Elder Thine, but it was already over. Her lifeless body fell to the floor, and Ori could not bear to watch what happened next. He ran over to Morrigan and began to unchain her as Aidan continued to look forward.

His breathing was erratic, his heart racing faster than ever before...but he finally fought the fear and turned around to face her.

It was a bluff. It had to be.

But he couldn’t find her anymore.

It just wasn’t her.

This was not Leah Ainsley. That Leah glowed. She was his sun, warming his soul to the point that he felt invincible. She was so breathtakingly beautiful that he would find himself taking peeks at her even in the midst of the most serious of conversations and battles. He smiled whenever he thought he heard her name. His mind raced with poetry when he felt her fingers intertwine with his. There was magic and wonder, and her very presence made Yen feel like a worthless toy.

She was his wish.

She was the embodiment of all he could dream and hope for.

And now...now...she was so strange. She looked like an imposter.

She was smiling. Her hair was the same. Her lips. Her eyes. The way she leaned. The softness of her skin. The curve of her figure. It looked like her. And his mind told him it was her. That he loved her.

But he didn’t feel it.

She was as dull and unappealing as Eugene’s puppets.

He fell to his knees, and she embraced him. His head rested against her stomach, and she held him even tighter. But even her touch was loose and distant, like a mother consoling a stranger's child.

"I know," she said, her tears falling onto the crown of his head. "I know."

When she let him go, he took her hands and smiled, despite the pain. At least he hadn't lost her. At least she was still with him.

"We'll get that connection back," he said to her. "You know we will."

"We have no choice," she said with a half-smile, staring at him through listless eyes. "It's fate. We were meant for each other. And even the heavens themselves can't change that."

"We should go," Ori said, placing a hand on Aidan's shoulder. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but we shouldn't hang around here. Not until we've told Bailey what's happened."

"Right," he said, letting go of Leah's hands. He didn't miss their touch.

Ori nodded and walked past them with Morrigan on his back. "Thank you for saving me," she whispered as she passed by. Aidan nodded and then looked to Leah again. He tried to give her a smile.

"What are you smiling about?" she asked, and he shrugged his shoulders.

"Nothing," he said. Suddenly she leaped into his arms and kissed him tenderly. Normally his heart would have soared at the act, but not it felt awkward and forced. When they parted, he gazed into her eyes.

"Go ahead. I'll be right there," he said.

"Sure," she replied, turning away. She left the room, and he watched her walk for a moment, trying to conjure up some of the emotion he had once felt for his wife. But when nothing came, he turned back to the late Elder Thine, and decided to set her corpse on fire.



## Chapter 24 – Behind Us



He awoke with Leah on his chest. He didn't remember her coming into the bedroom, but he had been tired. For the first time since they had been married, they had gone through a night fully clothed. Aidan tapped her arm and her eyes fluttered open. She placed both hands under her chin, and they just stared at each other.

"We could use our Yen," she said, but Aidan quickly shook his head.

"We got this," he said. "I'm not worried. Are you?"

"Nope," she said, rolling off the bed and onto her feet. She was back in her Lowsunn uniform. "I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

"Falling back in love with you will be the easiest thing I've ever done," he laughed. "You make it so easy."

"Darn it, I was trying to keep my charm and beauty dormant."

"Liar," he yawned as a knock came on the door. "Is this knocking going to become a regular thing? Geez. Just one moment!" Aidan climbed out of bed and stretched. "Ori told Bailey about last night, right?"

"He went straight there," Leah yawned back. "After you crashed, I went to see if he and Morrigan were okay. It was a pretty gruesome scene."

"Yeah," he said with a heavy sigh. He opened the door, and Ori and Morrigan were standing on the other side.

"Morning!" Ori said with a big smile. Aidan raised his eyebrows.

"What are you two, an item now?"

"He saved my life," Morrigan muttered. "So I promised to spend the day with him."

"It was a compromise to marriage," Ori laughed and then covered his mouth. "I'm sorry. That was awkward."

"You've been really killing it with the jokes lately," Aidan said, punching his friend in the arm. "So what's going on this morning? I

hear the Elders and Movement meeting is cancelled.”

“Yeah, Bailey wants everyone to meet at Otalli. Said it was very important and that it concerns Lowsunn’s future.”

“I take it the shields are going to be down?”

“At least for everyone to leave. Can’t say much about getting back in.”

“Got it,” he said, pushing Ori and Morrigan outside. “Well, let’s not be late to the party.”

Leah followed not far behind.



“IS THIS EVERYONE?” Bailey shouted, standing on one of the tables outside. Jessica and Makana stood on her side, with the rest of the villagers crowding as close as they could to the makeshift podium. Even Elroy was in attendance – if you searched hard enough for him, you could spot him. The whole village of Lowsunn had arrived, and there were so many people that many were even standing beyond Otalli’s small borders. Aidan had lent Bailey his loud speaking beetle. “I’m going to ask again!” she shouted. “Is this everyone?”

The crowd nodded and murmured. Many of them had never been outside the village walls. So even being a few miles away was both exhilarating and nerve-wracking.

“Can we confirm this?” Bailey asked. A couple teleporters in the area gave the thumbs-up. “Okay, I’ll start. Ladies and gentlemen, as many of you may know, last night was a historic one for the village of Lowsunn. One of the most disturbing revelations we had last night was that a man named Eugene Balthasar was using two factions within Lowsunn against each other. Now make no mistake, the Movement and the Elders were at odds before his actions, but the fact that he was able to cause such fracture and devastation is both revelatory and disturbing. From our in-fighting and his manipulation, we almost caused the destruction of our village. If it weren’t for our brave warriors, we would have been lost...but the travesty didn’t end there. The Elders took their own lives...for what reason, I’m not sure. All I know is that the Movement nor I was involved.”

The crowd remained silent as Aidan gauged the reactions.

“I know how that sounds,” Bailey said, fidgeting with her hands. “It sounds like more lies. More deception. More of the status quo. Well, I arrived at a decision last night myself, before the Elders had gone. I had decided that no member of the Movement was fit to lead in Lowsunn, including myself. The foundations that were laid there...they’re too damaged. There’s no way to say whether or not we could do a great job from here on out. Even if it was the Elders, or me, or one of you...it would be hard to break tradition. It would be hard not to fall into familiar patterns and rituals. There comes a time when a system must be renewed. But I will have no part of it. Not in this one. And for that, I am sorry.”

An ear-splitting explosion suddenly rocked the foundation beneath them all. The crowd cried out in fear and anxiety as they were thrown off balance. Aidan clenched his fists and searched for the cause. He noticed Ori and Morrigan by his side doing the same. Finally, someone in the crowd pointed outwards, and all eyes turned to Lowsunn.

It was no longer standing.

It had been reduced to debris and ash. Eyes both afraid and angry turned to Bailey, but she was unmoved by their response.

“All of your belongings have been placed behind Otalli’s buildings,” she said. “And I made sure the demolition occurred in the early morning so you would have plenty of time to decide what to do next and where to go.” She rolled back the sleeve on her right arm and revealed her three unused seals for all to see. “In good conscience, I couldn’t let the foundations under Lowsunn stand. The shields disappeared with the death of the Elders last night, so there’s not even that to protect us. But if any one of you desire to rebuild Lowsunn. If you think that place was helping us, then, by all means, use my seals to rebuild.

“But if you think you can do better. If you think there’s still a whole world for you to explore and enjoy. If you think you can take your wishes and ambitions and become more than a tool or a weapon for others, then, by all means, go on. Fly. Teleport. Run. Fight. Hide. Love. Hate. The choice is yours. But there will be no more control unless you desire it. No more suffering unless you invite it. With the

new era came death and hope all at once. You choose which one your life will follow. You've all just graduated. Welcome to the real world."

Bailey jumped down from the table, and there was no applause. But, even better, there was excitement and new possibilities. Old friends and classmates began talking, asking where they wanted to go. What to see next. What to wish for. What to experience. Some left without a goodbye. They just grabbed their bags and ran off. Some hugged a couple acquaintances and then flew off into the horizon. Others formed groups and sat within one of Otalli's taverns to think. But not one came to Bailey asking for Lowsunn's return.

For even with protection and shelter and food and water in their grasp – they had had no life whatsoever.

Aidan clapped slowly as he approached Bailey, and once he was in range, they embraced.

"So," Aidan sighed, letting go. "That was unexpected."

"Very," Ori said, appearing from the side. "So, where are we all going?"

"What?" Aidan scoffed. "Who said you're coming with me?"

"Stop playing. You know I'm coming." Aidan rolled his eyes. The next moment, Morrigan appeared out of the crowd too.

"If you wouldn't mind," she said. "I would like to come as well. I've seen what life as an Elder has to offer. I would like to see what the infamous Aidan could show me."

"Sure," he said. "I'm thinking we stop by Onyx Major to say hi to Jin and Grain, and then from there, we see what this world is all about."

"So that's three of us, at least," Ori said. "Who else?"

"Well, if you're going to go see Jin and Grain," Jessica replied, leaning on Aidan's shoulder. "Of course, I'll stick around at least until then."

"Yes," Makana replied, sneaking up behind them. "I would like to see how my brother is faring."

"I'm not sticking around a sleeping Omega," Elias laughed, and George was not far behind him.

"Geez, maybe we should use those seals of yours, Bailey," Aidan laughed. "It's basically the whole village all over again...Bailey?"

Bailey's head was down. She refused to look him in the eyes.

"Bailey, what's the matter?"

"You wouldn't want me around, would you?" she asked. "After all I've been responsible for. You couldn't trust anything I had to say. None of my advice."

"Are you kidding?" Aidan laughed. "You're the syrup on our pancakes."

"Isn't he awesome when he speaks in metaphors?" Ori asked, elbowing Morrigan in the ribs. She slapped him across the face in return.

"If you'll have me," Bailey replied with a grin.

"Always," Aidan said, grasping her arm. She was beginning to nod when Makana suddenly picked her up from behind and thrust her onto her shoulders, parading her around the pavilion. Everyone watching started laughing.

All except Aidan.

He scanned the crowd, from one end to the other, but he couldn't find her.

His face fell once he realized she was gone. To where, he may never know.

Then a pair of hands covered his eyes.

"Guess who?" she asked sweetly. He didn't respond. He quickly turned around, picked her up, and spun her in the air. She giggled and laughed, and seeing her so happy made his lips curl.

"Got room for one more?" she asked as he let her drop down to her feet. His hands stayed on her hips. He refused to break his hold on her.

"Well, we were thinking of adding Trevor over there. You know he's a cool guy and all. You weren't thinking of coming, were you? Because I got plans. Sights to see. Omegas to conquer. They call me the Omegaslayer. Did you hear?"

"I heard you had some help," she winked. "And that without a special someone, you wouldn't have even got half the job done."

"Oh yeah, that's my other half you're talking about," he said. "You know her?"

"No," she said, biting her lip and getting closer to him. "What's she like?"



“Well, she’s about your height. Real pretty.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Very strong, smart, and she makes me quiver at the knees.”

“Oh? The Omegaslayer quivers? That’s interesting. Do tell more.”

“Well, even though some old nuts said something was cut between them...he thinks they were lying. Because he’s finding her quite irresistible right now.”

“Is that so? You sure? Because I might be able to persuade you to come home with me instead.”

“Sorry, lady. You’re not convincing me. I promised her that I would never leave her behind. And I intend to keep that promise.” Leah grabbed the back of Aidan’s neck and looked softly into his eyes.

“That you did,” she said. She suddenly kissed him.

And he couldn’t deny it.

He felt butterflies.

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