

# The Legacy of the Spirit Rings

Book 1

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# Prologue

“Get out the way!”

The warning call was blasted away by the thunder of hooves as the column of riders charged down the cobblestone road.

The young boy’s eyes widened in horror and he froze directly in the path of the soldiers. Tears streaked his cheeks and his lip quivered, not knowing what to do, hoping the knights would stop or swerve around him. But the street was narrow and filled with debris, the riders were not going to stop.

The ground shook beneath the kid’s feet and suddenly he realised that he should move, but by then it was too late and the soldiers were right on top of him. Letting out a scream in fear the young boy closed his eyes hoping it would all just go away and he would wake up in his cosy bed.

He felt something crash into him from the side and cried out thinking he would be trampled, but as he hit the ground he felt no more pain and the thundering of hooves stormed off into the distance.

Whimpering the child opened his eyes to see an older boy slowly climbing off of him and dusting himself off.

“You gotta be careful kid,” the older boy remarked, “Those Kingsguard won’t stop for no one. Like as not they’re getting the royal family out of the city before the Reparians take control.”

The young boy could not find any words to say and let out a wail as more tears ran down his face.

“Mumma. Puppa.” The young boy cried aloud.

Suddenly the older boy was right in front of his face, eyes staring into his. The younger child tried to crawl away but the older boy slapped him across the face.

“What?” the young boy cried, clutching his stinging cheek.

But then the older boy grabbed his head with both hands and planted a great lick over his cheek.

“What?” Melodin exclaimed as he awoke with a start.

Just in time to receive another paw to the cheek and a wet tongue in the ear.

“Get off me mongrel,” he groaned and pushed the dog away.

It seemed to have worked, but seconds later he felt a toothy maul latch onto his shoe and start tugging at his leg.

“Alright, alright,” Melodin grumbled as he sat up and scratched his head, “I’m awake you annoying mutt.”

The dog stopped chewing his foot and sat back, fixing him with an angry glare, its emerald green eyes shimmering with more intelligence than they should have. The dog’s white fur seemed to glow in the coming light of dawn that was streaming into the small crook under a large tree root where they had been sleeping.

With a great yawn Melodin turned his eyes towards the eastern horizon and across the lands of Shirten. From his position on the hillside he could see far across the rolling hills and over the tops of the leafy trees. The sun was just peaking above the hills to the east and he ran a hand through his tangled mess of hair, wishing he could go back to sleep. But that reminded him of that dream he was having and quickly the drowsiness left his mind.

“Had that dream again Dog,” Melodin remarked as he packed up his camp, “When Reparian invaded Delaforr. It’s been thirteen years already, can I never forget that day? God damn it.”

Dog gave a slight whine as it laid down on the ground, still regarding him closely with its piercing eyes.

“You’re right,” Melodin conceded as he moved to the side and began relieving himself into a bush, “Some things should not be forgotten.”

Melodin yawned wide again as he finished and tied up his loose fitting, three-quarter, pants before wiping his hands on his shirt.

“Alright, let’s get going,” he announced and headed off from the hollow and back up to the road.

Dog was quick to follow and trotted easily alongside him and he walked casually down the dusty path.

“Now where was it,” Melodin mumbled as he took out a piece of paper and unfolded it. “The Southern Road, about a mile from Woody End.”

His voice trailed away as he continued to read from the paper before glancing around as the road began to slant downwards.

“We should be pretty much there,” Melodin remarked and looked to Dog, “What do you think?”

Dog barked once before racing off ahead of him and around the bend. Quick to take up chase Melodin jogged after the dog as he stuffed the paper back into his pocket.

His leather shoes kicked up the dust as he raced to catch up to Dog and the wind whistled by his ears. But coming around the next turn he slid to a halt and glanced around nervously.

Dog had stopped also for not too far down the road a wagon was smashed up against the hillside, its axle broken and its cargo splattered about the area. The horse that had once pulled the wagon lay dead on the ground, the white bone of its ribs shining in the morning light. Flies buzzed around its open gut and gathered on its clouded eyes.

Melodin pinched his nose and coughed as he tore his eyes away from the half eaten corpse and to the cargo that was scattered about.

“The man said it would be in a small box,” Melodin remarked to the dog as he slowly walked about the area, “I hope it wasn’t broken like all the rest.”

Dog growled low as it began sniffing about the area and under the broken cart.

“Hey, look at this,” Melodin exclaimed happily as he pulled something out from under a pile of broken crates, “A nice vest. Hardly damaged at all. What do you think Dog?”

The smile he turned towards the hound vanished and was replaced by a frown as the animal seemed to give him a look of disapproval.

“Well you’re a dog,” Melodin remarked indignantly, “What do you know about fashion? Besides the man said I could take anything I find. So it’s mine now, and you’ll just have to live with it.”

He heard Dog growl low as he pulled the vest over his shirt and slapped away the dust. Only one button remained, but that did not matter and with a grin he fastened the remaining button and puffed his chest out in delight.

“If only I had a mirror,” Melodin remarked happily, “Man, the girls are going to go wild when they see me.”

Dog barked at him.

“No one asked for your opinion,” Melodin snapped as he continued to dust off the nicely designed fabric.

Dog barked again, this time getting his attention, and he looked to see the white hound sitting beside a small metal box that was clasped tight with a heavy padlock.

“That’s what we came for,” Melodin exclaimed as he skipped over to Dog, “Good work girl. Want a treat?”

Dog glared him in reply, causing him to grin wide as he picked up the small box and turned to leave.

“Well this was an easy job,” Melodin remarked as he turned from the crash site. “But it seems I spoke too soon.”

Melodin stopped in his tracks as a group of men walked around the bend, their clothes worn and their faces rugged.

“Looks like some kids beat us to it boss,” one of the hardy men remarked, but he did not sound disappointed.

“Hey, who are you calling kid old man?” Melodin exclaimed angrily.

“Old man?” the bandit yelled, “I’ll sort you out you little bastard.”

“Hold up, Trojen,” another man said calmly and placed a hand on his comrade’s shoulder, “There’s no need for that. I’m sure we can come to some kind of agreement, wouldn’t you say?”

“What do you mean by agreement?” Melodin asked slowly.

“He’s unarmed boss,” Trojen argued, “We don’t need to make any agreement.”

“We should be civil at least, don’t you think?” the boss replied calmly, “Listen up kid, here’s my offer: you put down anything you found and we let you and your mutt leave here alive. Now doesn’t that sound generous?”

“But I haven’t found anything yet,” Melodin replied innocently.

“Liar!” Trojen blurted angrily.

“Take us for fools if you want,” the boss again calmed his companion, “But I wouldn’t recommend it.”

The man’s eyes flashed dangerously and he drew his sword. As soon as the blade hissed out of its sheath its metal edge came alight with magical flames.

“You see, I’m not your ordinary bandit,” the boss continued, “I am Rufo, the master of flame.”

Melodin smirked, “So you can cast fire, big deal, it’s just you and half a million other people.”

“Yeah? And what can you do kid?” Rufo snapped back, his composure suddenly vanishing.

“I told you, don’t call me kid,” Melodin was quick to rebut just as loudly.

“Well, come on then, show me what you’ve got,” Rufo growled and readied himself for a fight.

Narrowing his eyes Melodin readied his feet also, and steadying his breathing he clutched the box in his hands tightly. Slowly he twisted his toes into the soft dirt road, ready to spring at any moment.

“Take this,” Melodin cried as his foot shot forwards launching a large stone towards Rufo along with a cloud of dust.

Not bothering to see if the rock hit home Melodin turned about and raced off down the path with Dog close at his heels.

“You little bastard,” Melodin heard Rufo cry out, “After him. I want his head.”

With the box held tight in his hands Melodin did not look over his shoulder as he sprinted as fast as he could towards the nearest town.

“Hey Dog, cover our retreat,” Melodin called to the dog as she raced alongside him.

But Dog did not turn about and instead she outpaced him and headed into the woodlands.

“Not fair,” Melodin called out and followed after her.

Somehow he managed to keep sight of her white tail as it darted around the trees and through the bushes. He could hear the bandits yelling and smashing into the brush as they refused to give up the chase, but he did not dare look behind him. Not just because he did not want to see how close they were, but because if he did he would likely run head first into a tree.

Melodin’s eyes widened as he lunged over a log and nearly head-butted a low branch. He felt the twigs rip through his hair painfully and a trickle of blood run down his cheek as he continued on at full pace.

Suddenly the slant of the hill changed and he almost tripped over his feet as he struggled to run down the steep decline. He could still hear the thugs pursuing him and he cried out as he stumbled over a rock and into a thick tree trunk. His momentum stopped abruptly and he was forced to look back up the hill just in time to see an arrow thud into the tree above his head and trio of men crash through the brush.

“I got you now,” Trojen cried aloud as he raised his sword.



But the bandit before him tripped on the same rock Melodin did and all three of them crashed into each other as they tumbled towards him.

Quickly Melodin rolled around the tree just as Trojen smashed face first into the unyielding trunk. With his feet moving as quickly as they could Melodin raced down the hillside and around the trees and rocks as best he could. But again he tripped, this time on a tree root, and he tumbled to the ground before rolling the rest of the way down the hill.

Bruised and battered Melodin jumped to his feet and sped off through the trees after Dog, who he could once again see just ahead of him. For hours he seemed to run, until his lungs burned and his legs felt numb, but he had to push on for he would not let those bandits catch him and take the item he had been hired to retrieve.

Through the bushes he burst and out into the open but he gasped as Dog was suddenly right in front of him and calmly sitting on the ground. With a cry he tried to avoid the dog, subsequently tripping over his own feet and falling to the ground on top of the animal. But Dog was far too agile for that and nimbly jumped out of the way before Melodin crashed into her.

Gasping for breath Melodin rolled onto his back, still clutching the box tightly in his hands. His energy was spent and there was no way he could continue to run from the bandits. But as he lay there, he realised that there was no longer any need to run, for the sounds of pursuit had vanished and all that remained was the quiet of the country side.

The gentle wind whispered through the trees caressing the cuts on his skin, and carrying the sounds of the birds sung happily. Somewhere in the distance he could hear a waterfall above the sounds of his own laboured breathing and with a groan he sat up and glared at Dog.

“What’s the big idea leading me this way?” Melodin grumbled, “I almost broke my neck falling down that hill. Don’t give me that look. Yes alright, I’m not dead and we lost those thugs, but still...”

His voice trailed away as he looked around the area and across the pastures to a small village in the distance.

“Hey is that the place we met the merchant?” Melodin wondered as he jumped to his feet and squinted into the distance. “So it is. Good thing we took this short cut hey Dog?”

The white animal gave him a blank look before it trotted off into the fields.

“You’re right,” Melodin agreed as he followed, “No time to waste, I bet that guy will be happy to get his...” he looked to the locked box in his hands, “Well whatever this is, I’m sure he’ll be glad to get it back. Undamaged I might add. Hope he’ll pay extra for that.”

That thought brought a wide smile to his face and with a whistle on his lips Melodin jogged across the field with Dog beside him and back to the town of Hobire.

It took the rest of the morning to make his way through the fields surrounding the township, hopping over the fences and startling livestock. But finally he jogged through the muddy streets and into the tavern where he arranged to meet the merchant.

A pleasant musical tune greeted them as they entered the pub and few patrons raised their eyes from their mugs in brief recognition that someone had opened the door. The light was dim, with only a few candles about the place and a large fire in the cooking space behind the bar, and with a quick scan of the area Melodin spotted the merchant sitting by himself at a table in the corner.

“Hey there pops,” greeted Melodin as he sat down in a spare seat opposite the man.

“Who are you?” the man asked in surprise.

“Don’t give me that,” Melodin huffed, “You hired me to get your damn box back. Here.”

Melodin placed the metal chest on the table top and the merchant’s eyes lit up with excitement.

“Yes of course,” exclaimed the man, before a serious look came to his face, “You’re back quicker than expected. Did you slay the monster I spoke about?”

“No, it ran off before I could,” Melodin replied proudly, drawing a soft growl from Dog. “But I saw what it did to your horse.”

“My poor Jezebel,” the merchant cried and nodded sadly, “I’ll never find a horse as good as her, I’m sure. But I’m glad you found my box.”

“Sure did, here it is,” Melodin slid the chest across the table to the man, “Undamaged, I might add.”

“Yes, yes,” agreed the older man as he excitedly took the small box.

“So, what’s in it?” Melodin asked curiously, “Something valuable maybe?”

“Very valuable,” nodded the merchant as he took out a chain from his pocket that had a key dangling from the end.

As the man inserted the key Melodin craned her neck to get a better look at the contents. The lid clicked open and his breath caught in his throat as the merchant took out a pair of glasses.

“What? Spectacles?” exclaimed Melodin’s mouth fell open.

“Indeed,” the merchant smiled wide, “But not just any glasses I assure you.”

“They’re magically empowered?”

“Don’t be silly,” the man laughed, “They are bi-focal.”

“What?” Melodin scrunched up his face.

“It means they have two different lens variations,” explained the man as he put them on, “Quiet expensive and rare in this part of Middenland.”

“But...” Melodin stammered before he let out a deep breath. “Whatever, one hundred crowns we agreed on, right?”

“Yes of course,” the man said as if he had forgotten and quickly pulled out a sack of coins and handed them to Melodin, “There you go, and thank you very much.”

“You know you could have just bought a new pair for...” Melodin stopped himself and smiled, “You know what, never mind. Thanks pops.”

He gave the merchant a brief nod before standing up and heading for the bar.

“Looks like we’re eating well tonight Dog,” Melodin chuckled to his furry companion who looked back at him with a hungry expression.

# Chapter One

*So much fire. So much blood. Death everywhere.*

Sucking up a sudden breath Melodin groaned sleepily and stretched himself out in the bed. Slowly his eyes peeled open and a great yawn forced its way across his face. Moving his tongue around in his mouth to get some saliva moving and moisten up his gums he pushed himself up on his elbows. A smile came to his face as he looked to his dog lying on its back on the bed near his feet.

“Come on Dog,” Melodin said cheerfully as he reached forward and scratched the mutt’s belly. “Wake up. Time for breakfast.”

As he scratched the dog’s stomach one of her legs began to move as if scratching the spot herself. But once Melodin stopped she rolled onto her feet and shook herself, sending bits of fur into the air to dance on the sunlight coming through the window.

Hopping out bed Melodin pulled on his clothes, pausing in front of the mirror to look at himself and his smile widened.

“See, what did I tell you Dog,” he exclaimed happily, “All this vest needed was a wash to clean it up. Doesn’t it look snazzy? A great fit too.”

Melodin laughed to himself and puffed out his chest before he started to flex his bare arms and make different poses. A bark from Dog interrupted his ogling and he turned an annoyed look towards his furry companion who was sitting by the door impatiently.

“Okay, we’ll get food,” Melodin sighed and headed for the door, but not before he gave one last pose and winked at himself. “I’m such a stud.”

Dog gave him a blank look as he moved from the mirror to the door. Ignoring the mute rebuke and he began whistling a tune as he headed to the downstairs part of the tavern. It

was still early morning and the tap room was virtually empty aside from a few travellers and some sleepy eyed guardsmen.

“Yo, old man,” called Melodin as he walked up to the bar. “What’s for breakfast?”

“Nothing for you until you pay me for the room,” the gruff owner replied as he wiped a mug.

“What?” exclaimed Melodin, “I already paid you.”

“For one,” the man was quick to rebut, “Two of you used the room.”

“Dog doesn’t count,” Melodin argued irritably. “Besides it was a one bed room, so I should only have to pay for one bed?”

“But I gotta clean up all the dog hair that the mutt no doubt left behind,” snapped the owner.

“But I helped you with loading and unloading those barrels,” said Melodin. “For free, I might add.”

“It weren’t for free,” replied the old man. “I gave you a bottle of me good wine for that.”

“But I didn’t ask for payment,” Melodin was quick to clarify. “You gave me that out of thanks.”

The old barkeep narrowed his eyes and grumbled under his breath, “Fine. Have it your way, I’ll get ye ya damn food.” With that the old man headed for the kitchen.

“Make that two lots pops,” Melodin replied triumphantly and gave a wink to Dog.

A few minutes later the tavern owner returned with two bowls of porridge and roughly slapped them in front of Melodin on the bar top.

“Ten crowns that’ll be,” the owner said seriously and held out a meaty hand.

“What?” balked Melodin, “Ten crowns? Are you insane old man?”

“You know the current war makes things go up in price,” the bar keep shrugged.

“The war is on the other side of the country,” Melodin was quick to argue, “And Shirten isn’t even involved, it’s between Reparian and Narglefar.”

“You want yer food or not?” the owner replied flatly, drawing a scowl from Melodin.

“This is outright extortion,” he growled unhappily, but begrudgingly handed over the coins to the old barman.

The keeper grinned triumphantly as he took the money and Melodin glared at the man as he placed one bowl on the ground for Dog before beginning to eat his own.

The porridge was half congealed and not even warm, but it was good enough in his mind, and it sated the morning hungers. Dog seemed satisfied with the meal as well and had licked her bowl clean long before Melodin had eaten his serving.

“Yo pops,” Melodin called to the tavern owner with a mouthful of food. “Heard any news lately?”

“What’s that?” the man asked as he turned around, “I can’t hear ya over the amount of food in ya gob.”

With a frown Melodin swallowed his mouthful, “Heard any news?”

“Nah, not really,” the old man shrugged. “Same old stuff ya know. War between Reparian and Narglefar continues to the east. The peace between Solegrad and Reparian is still uneasy. They’re still having trouble with criminals over in City State despite their Hero Association workin’ hard. Pirates still rule the Jagged Sea. Monsters still plague the roads. You know how it is, why you asking for?”

“Any news from Delaforr?” Melodin asked hesitantly.

The old barkeep’s eyes brightened with understanding, “There’s the real question. You’re after news of yer homeland.”

“What are you a mind reader or something?” Melodin asked defensively and the old man chuckled.

“You think I’d be working here if I could read minds?” the bar tender laughed, “If I could I’d be council to the King of Shirten or something.”

“Then-”

“How’d I know you were from Lakelinds?” the man finished Melodin’s question. “I know travellers kiddo an’ you got the look of a Lakelinder. Why that blonde hair and stark blue eyes are a dead giveaway.”

“Don’t call me kiddo,” Melodin bristled irritably. “I’m twenty years old you know.”

The old man laughed at that, “All the more reason to call you kiddo.”

Melodin narrowed his eyes angrily, drawing a greater laugh from the owner.

“Well? You heard anything from Delaforr or not?” huffed Melodin.

“Nah not a thing recently,” the tavern master shook his head. “Just the usual you know, rebels making trouble for the Reparien diplomats and what not.”

Melodin nodded quietly, his eyes dropping to the empty bowl between his hands.

“Here, pass me them bowls,” said the bar tender, grabbing Melodin’s attention and he quickly handed over the empty crockery.

“So, any new jobs going?” Melodin spoke up when the old man came back from the kitchen.

“Nah, you cleaned up the last lot,” the tavern owner shook his head. “Probably won’t be another for a few months yet. I suggest you head over to the capitol, Becklinds, they always have stuff going on, might find a job or two.”

“More competition though,” Melodin sighed heavily and rocked back on his stool.

“You’re pretty talented,” the old man replied, “And a kid like you should have no trouble getting work in the big city.”

“Don’t call me a kid,” Melodin growled again, but the barkeeper waved away his objection.

“What’s your talent anyway, boy?” the old man asked curiously.

“What?” Melodin asked in reply.

“Your talent? Your ability, power. Call it whatever, what is it?” the tavern owner prompted. “I might know a few folk that could help you out in the city.”



“Well,” Melodin replied smugly and puffed up his chest, “I’m quite good with the ladies.”

Dog growled at that and the old man chuckled.

“I can’t really help you there,” smirked the barkeep.

“Never mind,” shrugged Melodin. “So what’s your ability?”

“You assume I’ve got one?” the old man asked back, raising an eyebrow.

“Come on,” Melodin was quick to prompt, “ninety percent of the population has an ability.”

“Alright, alright, I’ll show you,” the old man replied before he search for a few things behind the bar top.

Moments later the old man placed some string and few buttons on the bar top.

“I see you’re missing a few button on that vest of yours,” the barkeep remarked and clicked his fingers, “Here you go.”

Suddenly the string and buttons animated themselves and flew through the air towards Melodin and before he realised they were sowing themselves onto his vest.

“That’s awesome,” Melodin exclaimed with a laugh. “Thanks. Why aren’t you working as a tailor for the palace or something?”

The old man scoffed as the string and remaining buttons returned to the bar top where he swept them up in a meaty hand.

“Because I don’t want to be no damned tailor,” the old man replied gruffly.

“Can’t you create other stuff then?”

“Nah, no matter what I do it always ends up being some kind of garment.”

“And you still don’t want to be a tailor?” Melodin shook his head incredulously as he inspected his new buttons.

“No money in tailoring,” the old man replied. “Besides, the Red Pig has been in my family for several generations and bar keeping is what I love doing. Plus, this tavern is one of the best known in all of Shirten.”

“Stupid name though,” Melodin remarked flatly.

“You what?” snapped the old man. “Better name than Emerald Lizard or Dancing Horse.”

“Hey, I’ve been to those before,” Melodin nodded his head in recognition.

“But they aren’t as good as my Red Pig,” the tavern owner slapped his chest proudly.

“Still a silly name.”

“What’s silly about it?” demanded the old man. “People associate pig with food and red with fire, so therefore whenever someone hears the name Red Pig they think warm food.”

Melodin scratched his chin thoughtfully, “Actually, that’s not bad.”

“Yeah, not so silly now is it?”

“No, it’s good,” Melodin nodded. “Never thought of it that way before.”

“Good, and don’t forget it,” the old bar tender said with a smile, before some other customers caught his attention and drew the man to the other end of the bar.

Melodin yawned wide and stretched his hands above his head before slapping his full belly and turning to Dog.

“Well, looks like we’ll have to head somewhere else now,” Melodin remarked to his canine friend, who looked at him understandingly. “How do you think we’ll do in the big city?”

Dog was quick to sit up from the floor and bark happily with a wag of her tail.

“Guess that means good,” Melodin nodded and smiled “Who am I kidding? Of course that means yes. You always know which way to go, don’t you Dog?”

Again she barked happily and wagged her tail at him, her green eyes seeming to know more than they should.

“Shut that stupid mutt up kid, we’re tryin’ to talk ‘ere.” shouted a large man at the table behind Melodin.

His anger was quick to flare at the remark and Melodin turned swiftly on his stool to regard the man and his two friends fully.

"It were her alright, no mistakin' it. As you said: blonde hair, about seventeen and-" the man started to say to a sophisticated looking individual.

"Don't call me kid, fatty," Melodin snapped, "And don't call my dog mutt."

Dog was also on her feet, and with her hackles up she growled low.

"Fatty?" the large man exclaimed, "I'll have you know I have big bones, it runs in the family. Not that some stupid kid like you would understand. Now, buzz off."

"I told you not to call me kid," Melodin jumped to his feet and Dog barked angrily. "Quiet mongrel, this is between me and the fatty."

"You what?" the large man looked at him incredulously, and his Halfling companion snickered. "You just called the dog mongrel, an' you're getting upset at me for calling it a mutt? Kids these days."

"I can call her mutt, 'cause she's my mutt," Melodin replied angrily. "But you call me kid one more time and I'll drop you on your fat arse."

The big man's eyes narrowed dangerously and he stood up slowly, his wide frame blocking the light from the fire as he stood several inches above Melodin.

"Go ahead and try kid," the fat man said slowly, his eyes unblinking as he stared at Melodin.

Firming his jaw Melodin readied his feet and balled his hands into fists. There were three of them, although the sophisticated one did not look interested in the argument and in fact was watching it with amusement. But even if that one was not interested in fighting, the fat one and the Halfling looked more than eager.

"Take it outside you lot," the old bar keeper spoke up drawing the fat man's eyes away from Melodin.

"Bad move," Melodin said quietly and as quick as he could he grabbed an empty bottle from the bar top and threw it into the face of the fat man.

The glass bottle connected solidly with the man's forehead and shattered into hundreds of little shards. The large man hollered in pain and stumbled backwards before tripping over a seat and tumbling to the ground.

"Told ya," Melodin laughed victoriously, his hands on his hips.

"You little runt," the fat man's Halfling companion shouted angrily and jumped onto the table top, a knife in his hand.

"You're the midget around here buddy," Melodin replied rudely, making the Halfling's face turn red with anger.

A roar from the side caught their attention as the fat man staggered back to his feet, blood running freely down his face.

"You're mine you little bastard," the fat man roared furiously.

Hesitantly Melodin took a step back and glanced to Dog who returned his look of concern.

"Leg it," Melodin nodded to Dog and together they sprinted for the exit.

Easily he darted around the tables and patrons, lunging over some chairs as he made his swift exit from the tavern. But just as he reached the door the Halfling was suddenly right in front of his, knife flashing in the fire light.

"You're one speedy little midget aren't you," Melodin exclaimed in surprise as he skidded to a stop.

"We're going to gut you good you little bastard," the Halfling spat. "You and your bloody mongrel."

"She really doesn't like being called that," Melodin replied calmly.

"What? Like I ca-"

The halfling's words were cut short as Dog lunged at him, her sharp teeth clamping a hold on the halfling's crotch, making him wail in agony and his eyes roll inwards.

"Leave him Dog, let's go," Melodin was quick to say as he darted past the two of them and out the door.

The fat man was charging through the tavern with murderous rage in his eyes and with Dog right behind him Melodin sprinted out of the building and down the road as fast as he could. Knowing he would leave the fat man far behind Melodin laughed to himself and glanced over his shoulder just in time to see the large man throw something towards him. Melodin's eyes widened in surprise as the object whistled towards him. His reflexes saved him and he managed to duck at the last instant as the bottle thundered over his head and continued on for several hundred feet before smashing into the sign post in front of the bridge.

Putting his head down Melodin increased his pace, realising that he would need to put as much distance between him and this man as possible. Suddenly another bottle shot by his ear and crashed into the tree trunk on the side of the road.

"Damn that guy's got a good throw," Melodin remarked between breaths. "Why isn't he playing professional sports or something?"

The question was a moot one and Dog did not offer any answers as she sprinted just ahead of him as they raced away from the village as fast as they could.

It was not until he was exhausted did Melodin finally slow the pace to a walk, and breathing heavily he glanced over his shoulder a few times to make sure that fast Halfling was not bearing down on them.

"Good thing you took care of the midget Dog," Melodin remarked, drawing a growl from the animal and a disappointed glance. "Yeah, I know, calling him a midget was uncalled for, and kinda racists. But still, he wasn't a very nice person. Neither of them were in fact."

Dog growled low again as she trotted alongside him through the countryside. The sun was bright this day and the sky was clear letting the warm rays fall upon his shoulders and making Dog's white coat glisten. The birds could be heard chirping in the trees and bushes beside the road and they fluttered about in the air hunting down small insects.

It was a beautiful day and Melodin enjoyed all the sights as he watched the rolling hillsides move by them and the farm animals that grazed in the paddocks.

Becklinds was a few days journey from where they were and Melodin was in no rush, enjoying all the sights the country had to offer. Quite a few other travellers walked the roads, some merchants peddling goods and others on their own quest.

Having forgotten to gather supplies before they left the town Melodin was quick to hail down one of the merchants and purchase a few items that would make the trip to the capitol more bearable.

Their pace was leisurely but by the time midday came around the countryside had changed a bit and more woody forests occupied the rolling hills and shaded the roads. It was in these parts that the roads became more dangerous and were well known for bandits and other raiding monsters.

As the sun filtered down through the bows of the trees that sat on both sides of the road, Dog stopped in her tracks and her ears flattened to her head.

“What is it girl?” Melodin asked curiously as he knelt down beside the dog.

Dog issued a low growl and remained still.

Cocking his head to the side Melodin listened hard for any signs of trouble, his eyes glancing around to the undergrowth of the forest. His ears were quick to latch onto the sounds of combat echoing through the tree trunks, the ring of steel and the cries of pain he knew well.

“Sounds like there’s a fight further down the road,” Melodin remarked, and again Dog growled low. “Come on, let’s go around them. We don’t want to be caught up in the fighting.”

Dog seemed to agree and together they moved off the road and into the trees, carefully picking their way through the brush and over the fallen logs. The sounds of combat grew louder as they cautiously skipped through the trees and the noises of the wildlife had become utterly still.

“Look, there,” Melodin said quietly as he paused behind a tree and peered through the forest, “I can see them.”

Between the tree trunks he spotted four three people fighting hard against a horde of Trunkins, monstrous creatures that resembled half chopped down trees. The woody skin of the Trunkins splintered loudly as the large man wearing knightly armour wielded his axe bravely against the creatures, severing branch like limbs and sending the enemies flying.

“An elf,” Melodin remarked quietly as he noticed the pointed ears of the tall knight. “Don’t see many of those around these days.”

The golden hair of the elf flew about wildly as he launched into a great swing, his heavy axe moving swiftly in his hands. The poor Trunkins stood no chance against him and were torn apart. As the knight corrected his footing, the axe transformed into a great sword, that he then used to deflect a clawed attack from another monster.

Melodin gave a silent whistle and looked to the other man fighting, who was much smaller than the armoured knight and wore simple traveller’s clothes. Melodin could see no weapon in the bald man’s hands, but it did not seem as though he needed one. As casually as you like the bald man side stepped around the clawed attacks of the Trunkins, easily tripping them up and bumping them off balance as if he were playing a game with them.

“These guys a good,” Melodin breathed as he watched the two men fighting, finally he tore his eyes away from the main battle to the last of the party who was hanging back with a high powered pistol in her hands. “She’s not so good. But boy is she cute.”

Dog growled low beside him, a wide grin came to his face as he watched the young woman take a strong stance and fire her revolver at the enemies. The bullets did little damage to the creatures, but Melodin was not watching the fight any more.

“Look at those long legs in those tight pants,” he whispered softly. “That long blonde hair, her tight butt and abs, and those perky boobs. What a sight, I think she’s about my age too.”

The snap of Dog’s teeth right beside his ear quickly brought him back to reality and the turned a scowl on the mongrel.

“What?” hissed Melodin to his furry partner and Dog growled impatiently, her eyes looking to the other side of the road. “I see, those Trunkins are smarter than they look, they’re flanking the girl. Think we should help?”

He looked from the subtly moving creatures in the brush to the main fight and then back to the attractive girl.

“They’ve probably got it covered, right?” Melodin asked, “I mean, they’re clearly skilled warriors with powerful talents. They don’t need my help, right? Besides, what can I do?”

He looked to Dog beside him whose vivid green eyes were staring at him hard.

“You’re right,” Melodin sighed heavily and stood up from his crouched position, “Don’t know what I’ll do, guess I’ll think of something. Come on Dog, let’s go help them.”



## Chapter Two

Taking a deep breath Melodin jumped to his feet but as the Trunkins rushed from the brush and the girl cried out the bald man was suddenly there, punching the first of the monsters with a fierce blow. A tremendous crack sounded around the forest and the unfortunate Trunkin exploded in a shower of debris. As the other Trunkins charged the bald man, they met the same fate.

“Good thing I did something,” Melodin remarked flatly and squatting back down he gave Dog a blank look.

Dog did not say anything as she too sat down, returning the dumbfounded expression.

“Guess these guys really are good,” shrugged Melodin, before a curious look came to his face. “Unnaturally so. The only warriors I have ever heard being this powerful were the Kingsguard, back before Delaforr was conquered. Or the Narglefar Elites, south of the Jagged Sea.”

He looked back to the group finishing off the Trunkins and shook his head.

“Nah, these guys aren’t as good as the Kingsguard or Elites,” Melodin laughed lightly to himself. “If they were, the Trunkins would have been dead the moment they attacked.”

With a shake of his head Melodin hopped to his feet, “Come on Dog, let’s get out of here.”

Heading off at a jog Melodin nimbly moved through the forest away from the fight, deeper into the trees, before travelling parallel to the road. With Dog jumping over the logs beside him and weaving around the trunks, the sounds of the fight were far behind them in a few minutes and eventually he headed back to the road.

The rocks and dirt were soon once again crunching under Melodin’s feet as he followed the road as it meandered through the forests of Shirten. A tune was on his lips and his eyes gazed up through the leafy branches to the clear blue sky above. Golden rays of sunlight

flickered down through the bows, casting the path in a splattering of light and bringing the undergrowth alive with colour.

For the most part this region was safe from the worst kind of monsters, instead the forest was filled with beautiful birds and other gentle creatures that scurried about on the ground or jumped from tree to tree.

That night Melodin and Dog camped by the edge of a bubbling stream where he was able to catch a fish to eat for dinner. It was not much of a meal, especially when sharing with Dog, and the fish was pretty small. But it was enough to satisfy until they reached the capitol.

Taking his sleep in a comfortable nook at the base of the tree Melodin slept soundly and it was not until dawn that he was awoken by Dog, and with the dew still wet on the grass they continued on their way.

“Hey, look there Dog,” Melodin said excitedly as they walked through the open country side and pointed to the sky to the north. “An Airship. Looks like we’ll reach Becklind around midday.”

Dog barked happily as Melodin watched the flying craft drift through the clear skies with a wide grin on his face.

“One day Dog,” Melodin remarked, his eyes sparkling. “One day we’ll have enough to get an Airship of our own.”

Dog whined softly, drawing a snicker from Melodin.

“Scared of heights?”

The whine turned into a low growl and Melodin laughed again.

“I wonder if there will be any merchants hiring on crew?” Melodin pondered wistfully. “That’d be good if we get the chance to sign up, but those kinds of jobs are hard to come by and very competitive. I heard one guy broke some other guy’s leg just to get a spot on an Airship.”

Dog gave him an odd look before snorting derisively.

“What would you know?” Melodin scoffed in reply before a grin came to his face, “Come on Dog, I’ll race you to the capitol.”

Dog was off at a run in a flash, leaving Melodin with a surprised look on his face.

“Hey, that’s not fair,” he cried out as he took up chase, “You cheat.”

\* \* \*

The smell of putrid and rotting skin filled the air as he pressed his boot into one of the dead Trunkins on the road. The creature’s hard bark-like skin was now soft and slimy as it decomposed. Bloated flies buzzed about the corpses, laying eggs in the rotting carcasses.

One of the flies exploded in a flash of light as it flew too close to the man standing over the dead Trunkin.

“Must’ve been some fight,” the Halfling remarked a few feet away from the man.

“Yer not kidding,” replied the Halfling’s larger friend and shook his head in disbelief.

“Could’ve been the blonde girl and her two companions we was telling you about Solordorr.”

“Could have?” the man standing over the dead Trunkin asked over his shoulder. “It’s obvious that it was.”

Another fly drifted too close to the man and exploded in another flash of energy.

“How can you be so certain?” the Halfling asked as he subconsciously rubbed his wounded crotch. “There’s at least thirty Trunkins dead, and the blonde girl’s party was only three.

Sure, one guy was an elf, but still no one’s that powerful.”

Solordorr smirked as he moved away from the bodies and continued down the road towards the north.

“Snatch,” said Solordorr as the other two caught up to him and the Halfling was quick to jump to his side to listen, “Run ahead to Becklinds, take the side roads, and wait for us at the gates.”

“You got it,” the Halfling nodded his head.

“And be sure to take note of all who enter the city,” Solordorr continued, every word measured and articulated.

“Righto,” said the Halfling before he sped off down the road at an incredible speed.

“What should I do boss?” the large man who remained asked.

“Firstly Theo, never call me boss again,” Solordorr was quick to say, “And secondly, refrain from speaking until we reach the capitol.”

“What’s refrain mean?”

Solordorr clenched his jaw irritably, “Work it out. And don’t talk until you do.”

“I can do that.” Theo smiled eagerly before he began to mutter the word ‘refrain’ over and over again.

\* \* \*

“Look at that one Dog,” Melodin exclaimed, pointing to the sky as another Airship lazily flew overhead moving towards the docking stations of Becklinds.

Melodin’s wide smile had stayed on his face as they drew closer to the capitol, and continued to brighten as he watch the beautiful craft fly by. Its canvas wings glowing bright white and gently flapping on the breeze. The shimmer of the Crystal Core turbine engines that kept it air born, and the glisten of the sun of its sleek glass cabins.

“That’s the one that I’m going to get,” Melodin declared proudly looking to Dog, who gave him a disbelieving look. “Well, alright, maybe not for my first ship. I’ll go for something a bit cheaper, but definitely one that looks like that one.”

Dog did not reply as they both moved through the main gates of the city, weaving through the crowds that meandered along the main roads.

“Do you hear that?” Melodin asked his companion and twisted a finger in his ear, “That kinda high pitched buzzing. Wait it’s stopped. Weird.”

Stopping his walk Melodin turned to Dog and shrugged, but the sight of a certain individual caught his attention causing his eyes to widen in surprise.

“Quick hide,” Melodin hissed and darted behind a nearby stationary wagon.

Dog was quick to follow, and together they peaked around the side.

“It’s that bloody Halfling,” Melodin said quietly as he watched Snatch standing at the main gate glancing about the area. “Did he follow us here? Damn it, we’d better lay low.”

As Melodin was watching the Halfling, as he curiously continued to look around the area, to the rooftops and parapets, Snatch all of sudden darted off, disappearing in the blink of an eye.

“Speedy little bastard,” mumbled Melodin.

“Hey kid what d’you think yer doing with me cart?” a shout from behind caught his attention and Melodin jumped away from the carriage.

“I’m not a kid,” snapped Melodin, causing Dog to growl at him. “And I was just resting after a long walk to the capitol, is that a problem?”

“When it’s beside me cart it is,” the merchant snapped back. “Go to the tavern if ye want a rest, just keep yer hands off me goods.”

“Yeah yeah,” Melodin replied dismissively as he turned his back on the man and walked away, Dog trotting beside him.

“Damn kids,” Melodin heard the merchant mutter “Should be in some kind of school...”

The rest of the remark was drowned out by the noise of the city streets and he pushed the merchant’s words from his mind. Soon enough a smile was back on his face as he passed by the shops and stalls, his eyes sparkling with curiosity and wonder as he looked at the goods on display. There were different foods from across the country, specialised travellers items, assortments of weapons and armours for adventurers. There were exotic products from as far away as Narglefar, strange mechanical contraptions from Reparian, even black pearls from the Water Steps and spices from Zarkadia.

Of course Becklinds was nothing in comparison to the great cities of Arch Eden or Emperious for exotic goods, and the number of shops paled to insignificance, it was still a bustling and vibrant place for shoppers and merchants alike.

As Melodin stopped to look at some particularly tasty looking pastries a deep rumble sounded up from his gut, causing Dog to bark at him and other shoppers to regard him curiously as he rubbed his stomach.

“They’ll all five coins each,” the store owner remarked to him, somehow reading his thoughts.

“Five?” groaned Melodin and looked down to Dog, “Looks like we’ll have to find some work before we can eat.”

“Head over ‘The Pirates Den’ tavern,” the shop owner said, grabbing his attention, “They have jobs posted there occasionally.”

“Yeah, I know,” Melodin nodded and sighed. “Thanks lady, let’s go mutt.”

Dog barked loudly and lead the way from the shop back into the busy streets of Becklinds. He knew the city well enough, having been here several times before and did some work around the streets. The Pirate Den was one of the more notorious places to buy a drink, known for its rough crowds and good booze.

“The Pirates Den, ay?” Melodin mumbled, “I once knew a girl who was a barmaid there. I wonder if she's still working.”

A grin came to his face and Melodin picked up his pace, jogging along the streets and down the alleyways.

The puddles on in the cobblestone streets splashed under his feet as he ran along, heading up a flight of stairs and changing direction towards the western side of the city.

Becklinds sat in the middle of a great field of rolling hills with two rivers snaking through the buildings before coming one as they headed south. At the centre of the oval city was the tallest hill, and atop it was the castle where the royal family of Shirten lived. The King was a good ruler as far and Melodin knew, although he never really gave much thought to politics and the like, so long as the ruler’s governing did not infringe on him in anyway, he was happy.

The slate rooftops of the buildings were shimmering in the late afternoon sun by the time Melodin reached the western streets, and it was later still by the time he pushed through the doors of The Pirates Den.

It was a lively evening in the tavern, a merry tune was being played by a trio of bards on the small stage by the bar, and the smell of cooking food made Melodin lick his lips hungrily. But the thought of food reminded him he had no money having spent the coin from his last job on the room and meals at the Red Pig. With his stomach grumbling Melodin moved through the crowd to the large notice board opposite the entrance. A couple of other people were also looking over the posted notes but Melodin pushed his way to the front before looking for something that would pay well.

“Bingo,” Melodin exclaimed after a few seconds as his eyes fell upon one notice that was offering a hefty reward.

“I’d think twice before taking that one up if I were you,” a stranger to Melodin’s side remarked seriously.

Curiously Melodin looking to the man, his eyes quickly darting over the stranger’s travelling garb and unusual accessories. The man had a slight grin on his rough face and his dark hair fell around his sparkling eyes.

“Why do you say that?” Melodin asked in reply.

“When you’ve been doing this business for as long as me and my partner have, you learn to spot the suspicious looking job offers,” said the man, though his eyes still sparkled with amusement.

“What’s suspicious about this one?”

“The large amount, for starters,” explained the stranger, “Also the description is too brief: ‘retrieve a stolen heirloom. Speak to the barman for details.’ There’s no who, what, why, how, or where. I’m telling you it’s a risky one, doubt the guy would even pay the amount even if you did complete it.”

Melodin's eyes narrowed slightly before he let out a laugh, "Nice try buddy, but I'm no novice to this game."

The man seemed surprised.

"You're just trying to dissuade competition whilst your partner speaks to the employer,"

Melodin accused with a grin, "That's not going to work on me."

The stranger smirked and shrugged as it did not matter, "Believe what you like friend."

"I will," Melodin replied confidently. "And I'm taking this job, so better believe I'll get the reward before you and your partner do."

"Good luck then," the man smiled before the sparkle left his eyes, "You'll need it."

Melodin chuckled to himself as he took down the notice and headed over to the bar to speak with the bar tender.

"Tryin' to fool me," he mumbled to himself before hailing the keeper over. "Yo pops, I need a word."

"Whatcha want kid?" the burley middle aged man asked as he wiped his hands on his apron.

"Firstly, for you not to call me kid," Melodin was quick to say. "And second, this notice says to speak to you."

The bar tender looked to the notice, a serious expression on his face as he looked back to Melodin. The man seemed to size him up for a few seconds before he shrugged and pointed up stairs.

"Room twenty," said the burly man, "Good luck."

Melodin's brow furrowed slightly at the remark, but he was quick to dismiss it and headed for the stairs. Before he began up the steps he glanced to the notice board expecting to see the stranger still standing there, but the dark haired man was nowhere to be seen.

An odd feeling followed Melodin as he ascended the stairs to a mezzanine dining area.

With Dog right beside him he took the next flight of stairs up into the levels of



accommodation. The music drifted up from below, sounding dull to the ear, and a light haze of smoke from the kitchen fires filled the air, causing the light to cast patterns in the void over the balcony.

Coming to room twenty he knocked loudly and waited for a reply.

“Hello in there,” Melodin called out as he banged on the wooden door again.

The sounds of movements could be heard beyond the door and he let out a sigh as he waited for the occupant to answer. He was about to bang loudly again when the door suddenly swung inwards, opened by a tall woman wearing nothing but a light robe.

Melodin’s mouth fell open as he looked upon the woman’s beautiful features, long brown hair that was swept across the front of one shoulder so that the ends of her tresses dangled around her ample cleavage.

“Can I help you child?” the woman asked, a harsh tone in her voice.

“Notice,” Melodin stammered holding up the piece of paper as he tried to keep his eye on the woman’s pretty features and not her bosom. “Job offer.”

“Really?” the woman raised a shapely eyebrow and her deep brown eyes sized him up slowly. “Very well come in, my dear.”

Dog growled as the woman floated back into the small room, but Melodin ignored his companion and followed, his eyes fixed on the woman’s backside.

“Please sit down,” the woman motioned to the single chair at a small table beside the bed.

“Do you have a name?”

“Melodin.” He replied sitting down as he watched the woman take up a seat on the bed.

Resting back on her hands she casually crossed her legs, causing the split in the gown to fall away, revealing her long legs.

“Who..? What’s your name?” Melodin asked, finally remembering his manners.

“You may call me Visteen,” the woman replied with a smile.

“Nice to meet you,” he replied, a stupid grin coming to his face.

Dog let out a low growl and an awkward silence filled the room.

“You’re here about the job?” Visteen finally asked.

“Yes,” Melodin replied quickly, as if coming from a daze.

“Well, do you have questions?” the woman prompted.

“I only need to know what it is I’m retrieving,” Melodin replied, a confident grin coming to his face. “Tell me where it is, and I’ll get it for you. That’s my word, and I’m always true to my word.”

Dog growled low again as she lay on the floor at Melodin’s side.

“Truly?” Visteen smiled, her brown eyes sparkling, “That is good to hear. In that case, the item I want is in the Becklinds palace vault.”

Melodin’s eye brow raised slightly, “And what is it that I’m getting?”

“An heirloom,” Visteen replied, “A ring with a silver band and an uncut pink diamond mounted upon it.”

“Wait,” Melodin said, his brow furrowed, “If this ring is a heirloom, why don’t you just go and get it from the King.”

“I tried that already,” Visteen said harshly, “The man refused. It’s not like you’d be stealing it, think of it as taking back what already belongs to me.”

Melodin crossed his arms across his chest and chewed on his bottom lip in thought.

“Will you not help a lady in need?” Visteen asked sweetly, a pleading look coming to her face as she played with the ends of her hair. “If the reward is not enough, perhaps we could come to some sport of agreement?”

Melodin clenched his teeth together, trying his hardest not to smile as his heart beat increased tenfold and his eyes watched Visteen fingers play with her hair that dangled around her cleavage.

“You’re right,” Melodin replied, trying to sound serious, “The reward is not enough, not nearly enough. If I’m going to break into a royal vault I’m going to need some kind of security. If you

get my meaning?”

“I can’t help you if you get caught,” Visteen stated simply. “But maybe I could pay you a small sum in advance?”

“I guess that will do,” Melodin said after a brief pause to consider the proposal. “We can talk about the rest of the agreement once I return with this ring.”

He gave a sly wink to the woman who smiled playfully in response, causing Dog to growl yet again.

“Agreed,” Visteen smiled and she stood up offering her hand to Melodin along with a small pouch of coins.

He took the offered handshake, and coins, as he also stood and Visteen showed him to the door.

“Good luck, my hero,” Visteen said sweetly and gave him a kiss on the cheek as he left.

“Any time,” Melodin replied with a giddy smile, but Visteen had already shut the door, leaving him on the balcony with Dog who gave him a distasteful look. “What?”

With a snort Dog trotted off along the balcony and down the stairs.

“Hey what’s your problem Dog?” Melodin wondered as he raced after his companion, “Wait, I know, you’re wondering how we’re going to get into the palace, aren’t you?”

Dog did not reply, and together they departed from the tavern.

“I don’t see why you’re worried,” Melodin continued, “We’ve broken into the palace the last time we were here. You’re right that wasn’t into the actual vault, but come on, how hard could it be?”

Melodin gave a smile to his furry companion, who just looked at him with her vivid green eyes.

“Always so judging,” Melodin sighed heavily. “Come on, we should go and see an old friend before we head to the castle.”

## Chapter Three

There was a small mote surrounding the castle of Becklinds, forded by a single bridge that had a large gate on both sides. The gatehouse on the approach to the mote and at the high walls on the other side were both heavily manned by soldiers wearing bright mail and wielding long halberds. The evening sun sparkled off the gentle waters and caused the guards armour to shine brightly in Solordorr's crimson eyes as he stood at the window of a building near the gatehouse.

A gentle breeze came in from the west, sending the flags on the parapets dancing and blowing back his golden hair.

"The girl and her party have been in there for ages," the Halfling Snatch groaned loudly as he and Theo played a game of cards at a table in their rented room. "Do you think they'll ever come back out Solordorr?"

"No," replied Solordorr without turning from the window.

"Then why are we here?" Snatch was quick to ask.

Solordorr did not bother to reply.

"Hey," Theo's dim-witted voice spoke up curiously, "Why is that girl and her friend even going into the castle? Do they know the King or something?"

"Something," Solordorr replied flatly.

"So what are we to do then?" Snatch asked irritably.

"Nothing," said Solordorr.

"Nothing?" echoed Snatch, "So, you going to pay us to do nothing are you?"

"No. I no longer need your services."

Solordorr heard the two thugs stop playing cards as he continued to watch the castle walls.

“Well, in that case I guess we’ll be going,” Snatch said simply, the sound of his chair sliding on the floorboards screeched as he stood up, followed by the sound of Theo’s chair. “Just pay us the agreed amount and we’ll leave you to your staring.”

Without replying, or turning to the thugs, Solordorr took a pouch of coins from his belt and tossed it over his shoulder.

He could hear the two chuckling as they looked at the gold coins, but they did not leave the room.

“You know,” Snatch spoke up, “We was thinking that we want double.”

“Yeah,” Theo agreed seriously.

“Double?” Solordorr narrowed his eyes, but continued to look out the window.

“That’s right,” Snatch replied confidently, “Theo here might be a moron, but I ain’t. And I know there’s more to this then you’ve said, a lot more.”

Solordorr smirked at that, “You think you know what’s going on, do you?”

“I know enough to-”

“To what?” Solordorr cut in abruptly.

There was no reply and he could feel Snatch shift uncomfortably.

“It don’t matter what,” the Halfling finally said, “It only matters whether you’re willing to risk it or not. So, pay us double.”

Solodorr turned slowly from the window, a sly smile on his face and a gleam in his red eyes.

“You’re right,” he said to Snatch and Theo, “I am not willing to risk what you may know, or think you know, becoming common knowledge in every tavern in Becklinds.”

The two thugs laughed to each other and Snatch held out his hand.

“Pay up and we’ll keep quiet,” grinned the Halfling.

But that grin vanished in a flash as a strange aura of energy suddenly swirled around Solordorr. Both Snatch and Theo shuffled back a few steps, thinking to flee, but they were

too slow and the energies surrounding Solordorr lashed out at the two thugs. They tried to cry out, but no noise was heard as a beam of light shot through Theo's chest and another flash of light ripped off Snatch's head.

The glow in Solordorr's eyes diminished along with the aura of light and both Theo and Snatch dropped dead to the floor, smoke drifting from their bodies as Solordorr turned his gaze back out the window.

"Such greed," he sneered distastefully before his mind turned back to the palace. "If you came to the castle then you must be after it. Tis' bold move, and one that will cost you dearly, little girl."

\* \* \*

Dog growled low as they turned another corner along the waterway beneath Becklinds.

"I told you we're going the right way," Melodin reassured his companion, "Old Boots, has never steered me wrong."

Again Dog growled.

"Alright, maybe he did one time," he admitted, "But remember the last time we broke into the palace? That was Old Boots who gave us directions through these waterways. Although, if I remember rightly, that was a different path that time, and it does look very different now, do you think they renovated this place?"

Melodin turned his eyes to the high arched ceilings and deep waters that ran several meters below the pathway. The sound of running water echoed constantly around them as they passed by cascades and waterfalls that could only be avoided by walking narrow bridges covered in slime and moss.

"It's all quiet remarkable when you think about it," Melodin mused, "This is all an underground river that connects to the other rivers above ground. I wonder how long it took them to build this place? And why is it such a maze down here? Not to mention, why'd they bother installing light crystals everywhere? It just makes my journey so much easier."

The path he was following took another turn and began to head up a flight of stairs that ran parallel to a slide of water. The rushing water was not deep, barely a trickle even, but likely providing an overflow path to another canal at the top of the stairs.

“We should be there soon,” Melodin remarked, “These are the forth stairs, right Dog?”

The mutt barked lightly, her voice echoing off the stone and reverberating far through the maze of waterways and arches.

He was feeling cheerful as he climbed the last leg of the staircase, for it had not been a long trek and it seemed that they would be inside the castle before the night reached its mid-way point. But as he got to the landing Melodin paused and a frown came to his face.

“What did Old Boots say again?” he asked aloud, scratching his head, “That’s right: after the forth lot of stairs you’ll come to a branch in the path.”

Melodin nodded as he looked at another flight of stairs ahead of him and a narrowed bridge that crossed the canal to the side at the stair’s base.

“You must take the middle path, he said,” Melodin continued, but his frown deepened, “I only see two paths though. The stairs and the bridge. Dog?”

Dog had no answers for him and sat down, a faint whine sounding from her maul.

Melodin sighed heavily as he continued to look about the area. The waterway to the side looked deep and cold as it rushed away, off into the dimly lit cavern. A narrow path followed it from the bridge that arched across the spill-over, which lapped noisily in his ears. The stairs opposite him reached up into the stonework, its feint lights casting it in rather unpleasant shadows, making Melodin chew at the inside of his cheek in annoyance before looking away.

“Surely he doesn’t mean we are to try and climb up that slide?” Melodin asked aloud, indicating to the narrow sluice that ran down beside the stairs before rushing into the canal.

“Its way too steep and all covered in slime. We’ll just end up in the water if we try.”

Dog growled again, seemingly in agreement.

“Hold up,” Melodin said as he narrowed his eyes and moved closer to the stone between the stair case and the sluice. “Look Dog, there are steps in the stone that head up alongside the water slide. Come on, this must be it.”

Carefully placing his feet Melodin led the way along the narrow path and up the sluice. Amazingly Dog managed to follow him, taking long a deliberate steps and somehow balancing herself on the thin footsteps. It was much darker going this way, but the dim light did not bother Melodin much as he hugged the uneven wall closely, taking one step at a time until they reached the top.

After many minutes of climbing, and with his calf muscles burning from the precarious ascent they finally reached some flat ground that followed the water course through a tight passageway. Here the walls and floor were unworked, but by no means less mouldy.

A smile came to Melodin’s face as a single crystal light reached out through the darkness, illuminating the water way as it rushed out from under the stone along with the single staircase that moved up into the rock.

“Not more stairs,” Melodin grumbled quietly, but with a sigh he headed up with Dog alongside him.

Fortunately the ascent was short, and in fact came to an abrupt end as a large stone tablet blocked his way. Gritting his teeth Melodin set his hands against the stone and pushed up with all his strength. Slowly the heavy slab of rock cracked open enough for him to wedge his fingers underneath to slide it across with a great heave.

“You could have helped mutt,” Melodin said unhappily to Dog as they carefully moved up from the waterways and into a dimly lit cellar.

A heavy musk filled his nose and curiously he looked around at the shelved wheels of cheeses. Beside the stacks of cheese were also hundreds of dusty old bottles with expensive looking labels slapped upon them.

“We just need some cracker’ ‘ay Dog?” Melodin chuckled quietly and paused to brush the dust off one bottle. “Don’t know why rich folk like old wines? It’s just alcohol, right Dog?”



His companion growled low as she moved towards the cellar exit, and Melodin was quick to catch up. Carefully he wedged open the door that led into the kitchens, and seeing the area was clear he crept into the room. For such a big kitchen it was odd to see that only one of the stoves and ovens were being used, which of course he had to stop at and inspect what was cooking.

“Is this mushroom soup?” Melodin exclaimed quietly, lifting the lid off one pot and greedily grabbed the spoon to sip the creamy liquid. “It’s so good. Needs some more pepper though.”

Grabbing the jar of pepper from the bench next to the stove Melodin took a pinch, but a sudden tug on his pants caused him to tip and large amount from the jar into the cooking pot.

“What is wrong-” Melodin hissed at Dog, but stopped his words short as he heard the sound of voices coming from the other room as the chef’s returned.

Hurriedly he put the pepper back in its place and quietly put the lid back on the pot before he darted for a hiding spot. Slipping out another door just as the chef’s came into the kitchen Melodin breathed a sigh of relief and gave Dog a pat on the head.

“Good call,” he said he laughed quietly. “Right, time to get serious Dog, let’s find that vault.”

The palace was quiet as Melodin led the way through the hallways, staying close to the long shadows and pausing every once in a while to listen for footsteps of patrolling guards. But whenever a patrol did come by it was simple enough to find a place to hide among the extensive and lavish décor.

“These guards are pretty thick,” Melodin remarked quietly as he and Dog stood up from behind a recliner, “And why does it seem so quiet around here?”

Dog seemed to shrug with her eyes in reply and Melodin continued on the way. It was not until many minutes later when they finally snuck into the private library of the King that he began to relax slightly.

“Shouldn’t be any guards in here,” said Melodin, closing the door quietly behind him before creeping into the large room filled with bookcases.

A large fire sat opposite the entrance, burning low and casting the room in dancing shadows. The plush carpet underfoot stifled his steps and made him confident that none would hear them as he searched for the entrance to the vault.

“Old Boots said there was a hidden door to the right of the fireplace,” Melodin said to Dog as he moved closer to the shelves, “Can’t imagine how he’d know though. Now, where are you ‘Tales of the Fae’?”

Melodin’s eyes narrowed as his fingers flicked across the leather bound book spines, their titles all written in golden letters. His hand stopped abruptly and a wide smile came to his face as he found the large book and confidently he pushed the title further onto the shelf. There came a click from behind the bookcase and a small doorway swung inwards letting a golden glow stream into the dark library.

Shooting a triumphant grin to Dog, Melodin raced in through the door. His grin became twice as wide as he looked upon the large room that was filled with valuable items and artwork. Ancient weapons were mounted on the walls alongside famous paintings, and atop the tables were boxes of jewellery, stone carvings, or even some fancifully designed vase. Unfortunately there were no piles of gold coins, or stacks of jewels and gem stones, but that did not matter. The yellow light of the crystals shone warmly across the wide array of items, making them glow with inner magic and making them sparkle in his eyes.

Suddenly Melodin stopped gaping at the riches and shook his head.

“Focus Dog,” he said seriously, “There’s no way we could carry all this stuff out. We’re here for the ring remember, and the reward for its return will be enough to satisfy us, alright?”

Dog gave him a blank expression before Melodin turned away and began searching through the jewellery for the specific ring. Picking up one small box a strange tingle rippled up his arms, causing the shiver to run up his spine. A smile came to his face, but he stopped just as he was about to open the lid and cocked his head to the side.

“Did you hear that Dog?” Melodin asked, looking to his companion who stood facing the only exit from the vault.

A low growl sounded from Dog and another distant thud echoed from deep within the castle.

“What do you think is happening?” Melodin wondered, “Reckon they’re onto us?”

Before Dog could respond the whole floor shook violently, knocking Melodin from his feet and causing him to drop the box he was holding. As he landed heavily on the stone floor the box smashed down next to him, spilling the contents and a single ring bounced across the floor.

Melodin scrambled to grab it, but fortunately it stopped dead after one bounce making him regard it curiously before he picked it up. As his fingers touched the cold metal the strange tingle crept up his arm again and with some effort he picked the ring off the ground and held it in his palm.

“This thing is weird,” Melodin remarked to Dog, as he looked at the unusually heavy piece of jewellery, its single mounted diamond burning with an inner light.

Just then another violent shake ruptured through the palace, but this time he managed to keep his feet before sprinting for the exit.

“The hell is going on? Time to get out of here,” Melodin exclaimed as he pocketed the ring and skipped out the door.

With Dog close behind him he made sure to close the vault before racing back through the castle. But just outside the private library the sounds of fighting rang out and made him rethink the path he was about to take.

“What’s going on?” he asked aloud and looked to his companion, but Dog had no answers for him. “Well, looks like we’ll have to find another way out of here, the way we came sounds dangerous.”

With a brief thought he sprinted off along the hallway of the upper level with Dog right beside him. Coming around a corner one side fell away to a balcony overlooking a small courtyard where dozens of guards were fighting. Blasts of fire and other energy ricocheted about the area, smashing statues, and thundering into the combatants. Some fired guns while others wield sword with glowing flames and shields of stone.

Melodin paused and looked down upon the fighting, unable to tell who the guards were engaged with, but their distinctive armour gave all indication they were soldiers from Reparian.

“What is-” he began to wonder, but his voice was stolen as a fork of lightning bounced off a shield and thundered into the stone work above his head.

“I guess it doesn’t matter,” Melodin breathed as he got back to his feet and continued to race from the area.

He did not get far though and he slid to a stop and a trio of guards charged across the hallway ahead of him. Fortunately, they did not notice he was there as they rushed to battle, but regardless Melodin changed direction and pushed his way through a side door and along several other passageways before it lead out onto the parapets.

Sliding to a stop again, his mouth fell open in surprise as he looked into the large courtyard where dozens more soldiers and guards were fighting. Their abilities and talents made for a grand showing, with more balls of fire lighting up the night, and Melodin even noticed two combatants that both had immense strength duelling with huge war-hammers. But above the rumbles of powers were the cries of death and the aura of fear which stole away any sense of awe he had as he looked upon the fighting.

“It can’t be Reparian attacking, right Dog?” Melodin asked his companion as they watched the fighting.

His answers came as a great airship soared over his head where, proudly upon its haul, was the Reparian coat of arms: a black lion’s head on a crimson field. As the craft hovered over the top of the large courtyard its doors opened up and dozens more soldiers dropped into the fight quickly turning the tide of the battle.

“Why would Reparian attack the royal castle?” Melodin wondered aloud, “Shirten is a neutral state in the war between Reparian and Solegrad.”

The pull on his pants from Dog caused the thoughts to leave his mind and reminded him of the situation.

“You’re right, let’s get out of here,” Melodin nodded and quickly followed Dog along the top of the wall.

Before they got far though Melodin skidded to a stop once again as several Reparian soldiers dropped down from the aircraft right in his path. Unlike the palace guards from earlier, these guys noticed him immediately.

“You there,” one of the soldiers holding a large axe shouted, “Don’t move.”

“Any ideas Dog?” Melodin asked, his concern growing.

It seemed that Dog did have one idea and barked at him before sprinting to the edge of the battlement and jumping out into the night.

“Are you insane?” Melodin cried, but dog had already gone and he hesitantly looked back to the approaching soldiers.

“Don’t do anything stupid kid,” the lead soldier called out as he and his men approached slowly. “We don’t want to kill you, but we will if we have to.”

Melodin frowned at the soldiers and firmed his jaw, “Don’t call me kid, you Reparian pig.”

Before the soldier could respond Melodin sprinted for the ledge that Dog had jumped from and he lunged out into the darkness. He did not shut his eyes tight, but he could not see anything as the abyss engulfed him. The wind whistled by his ears as he turned in the air and looked back up to the parapets and the dumb expressions on the soldiers faces.

Next instant there was a deafening crash as the cold water of the mote slapped him in the face. It became ten times darker and Melodin held his breath as he struggled against the pull of his wet clothes and began kicking his feet, clawing his way towards what he hoped was the surface. After what seemed like hours his head burst above the surface and he sucked in the fresh air. The barks from Dog on the bank pulled his attention away from the castle wall a hundred feet above and slowly he swam to the bank.

With a great heave he pulled himself up onto the jetty used by the guards that patrolled the mote, soaked through, his joints ached from the impact, but somehow he was alive.

“You’re insane mutt,” Melodin breathed as he lay on the stone, causing Dog to growl low and shake the water from her fur and sprinkle him over his face. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

With a deep breath he pushed himself to his feet and with Dog beside him he skipped up the short stairs and through the empty post that guarded access to the mote before he and Dog disappeared into the city streets.

## Chapter Four

Melodin stopped abruptly and looked over his shoulder, his eyes darting about the alleyway and to the roof tops.

In the distance smoke still rose from inside the castle walls, clouding up the early morning skies and reminding him as to why he felt so uneasy. The great Reparian Airship that had flown in last night was no longer there, and even more strangely there were no soldiers of Reparian marching the streets and announcing their invasion. In fact Melodin had seen practically no guards or military of any kind on his way back from the castle.

“Strange, I keep getting the feeling someone is following me Dog,” he remarked nervously as he rubbed away the tingling on the back of his neck. “I’m not going crazy, right?”

Dog gave a slight whimper and cocked her head to the side curiously.

“Well, I guess you’d smell someone if they were tailing us,” Melodin said with a nod. “You would, right?”

Dog gave no reply and she started trotting off down the road again.

“The sooner I dish off this ring the better I think,” Melodin said as he began to follow, tapping his pocket in process.

“What?” he exclaimed when his hand felt nothing and he scrambled through his pockets in search of the item, “No, no, no. Lost? I can’t have lost it. Not after all that.”

With rapid breath Melodin frantically searched each of his pockets thoroughly, he even checked down his underpants.

“Where is it Dog? Where is it?” he asked, his mind filled with panic.

His hands ran down his legs quickly, checking every inch of his body and even his shoes, but to no avail. But something knocked against his knuckle, just below his knee where his loose pants were buttoned off, something that sent tingles up his arm.

“Is that?” Melodin exclaimed with glee and he took a firmer hold, “It is. But how’d it get down there Dog? Looks like it slipped into the lining of my pants, what luck.”

Slowly he managed to edge the ring back up his pants and through the hole in his pocket before he held it front of his eyes and smiled.

“You little devil,” Melodin chuckled, “Thought you could get away from me? Ha. There’s nothing lost that, I, Melodin the great, cannot find.”

He turned a smug look to Dog who replied with a roll of her eyes.

“What would you know about greatness mongrel?” he mumbled angrily as he looked back to the diamond mounted ring, “Now for you, my little precious. Don’t think you can get away from me.”

Slipping the ring onto his finger he turned back to Dog and continued along the road. He had gone but a few paces before he noticed a sharp tingling in his hand that wore the ring.

“Stupid thing,” he grunted away the feeling, flexing his numb fingers and wringing his hand.

“It just had to be filled with some kind of magic didn’t it? Couldn’t just be a normal heirloom now could it? Boy am I going to be glad to get rid of this thing. Well, not long until I can, ‘ay Dog, we’re nearly back at The Priates Den.”

Melodin licked his lips eagerly.

“Just think, it won’t be long until I can get the reward from Visteen,” he giggled gleefully and Dog growled low. “Now she’s what I call a woman. Long legs, great tits, and those eyes, stunning.”

He laughed to himself and rubbed his hands together.

“I wonder what kind of arrangement she had in mind?” Melodin wondered aloud and abruptly bent down to tussle Dog around the ears. “You know what I’m hoping it is, right Dog?”

His furry companion growled angrily and half-heartedly snapped at him.



“What put you in a grump?” he asked as he backed away from the canine. “I know maybe we can find you a big half-wolf to mess around with?”

Angrily Dog nipped at his leg forcing Melodin to jump away in surprise, but a playful laugh erupted from his gut and Dog did not continue the play.

“Alright, alright,” Melodin sighed, “I’m sorry Dog. But you know; you’re kinda weird, not to mention way too smart for your own good, and mine. I’ll tell you what, after we finish this deal, and I finish with the lovely Visteen, I’ll buy you a nice juicy steak, how ‘bout that?”

This time Dog’s ear pricked up excitedly and she jumped up alongside Melodin, her head coming close to his shoulder as she playfully bumped into him.

“Good thinking,” Melodin laughed as he broke into a run, “The quicker we get there the quicker I can bed Vistee- I mean, the quicker we can have steak.”

Dog barked happily and she was quick to chase after him as they raced down the alleyway and into the main road.

It was still early morning, but the city was already wide awake and bustling with activity, making it hard for Melodin to agilely jump around the people and carts. Most that were out and about were moving towards the castle in curious trepidation, their faces marked with concern. Melodin caught a few remarks from the crowds as he moved through the township, all were gossiping about the fighting at the castle last night and wondering what had transpired.

Other townsfolk seemed not to care and continued with their daily chores, setting up their businesses and getting ready for the day. The smell of cooking bread and fish drifted on the fresh air, making his stomach grumble and his mouth salivate, but he had no time to stop and drool over the food. It was still several miles to The Pirate’s Den and at an easy jog he knew he would get there before the kitchen stopped making breakfast. He only hoped that he would be finished with Visteen in time for the breakfast specials.

The thought of running his hands over that woman's smooth skin made him so giddy he nearly tripped over a stray cat that decided to cross his path as he veered down a side street.

The black cat was agile enough to jump out of the way and Melodin light enough on his feet to stop himself from falling flat on his face, but the encounter did not sit well with him.

"Stupid moggy," Melodin cursed, "Just my luck to have a black cat cross my path on a day like this. It's bad luck you know Dog, and I'm not even superstitious."

Dog barked as she took up the lead, jumping over some crates, and he tried to put the thought from his mind. Today would be a good day, despite the intrusions of some random cat.

The smile was quick to return to his face, and he followed Dog around the corner to see the old sign of The Pirate's Den swinging noisily above the door to the tavern.

"I'm tingling with excitement," Melodin remarked to Dog as they entered, "Or is that just this stupid ring. Either way, you wait down her Dog, I'd like to have some privacy with the sultry Miss Visteen."

Dog growled at him as they moved for the stairs, but the sight of someone sitting in the corner of the tavern caught his eye and he stopped.

"Hey Dog," Melodin said to his companion, "Isn't that the girl we saw on the road, the one fighting the Trunkins with those two guys?"

Dog cocked her head to the side curiously and looked in the direction he was subtly indicating.

"Where are her friends I wonder?" he asked quietly and his eyes made a quick scan of the room, but he did not see the tall elf or bald guy that had been with her before. "Is it just me, or does she look out of place and kinda worried?"

Dog whined slightly before she trotted off towards the young woman's table.

"Hey Dog, what are you-?" Melodin hissed, but his companion was already half way to the girl's booth in the corner.

Taking a deep breath Melodin swallowed his nerves and tried to act aloof as he followed Dog over to the table. Surprisingly the young woman did not notice Dog until a furry face jumped up onto the seat next to her and stuck a wet nose in the her face.

The young woman jumped back in shock before a beautiful smile came to her face and she patted Dog on the neck.

“You must be special,” Melodin remarked loudly, stopping side on to the table, “Dog doesn’t usually make friends, but I can see she likes you.”

The young woman regarded him suspiciously, her blue eyes darting to Dog and back to him.

“Is she your dog?” the girl asked politely, an unusual tone in her voice.

“I wouldn’t say she’s mine,” he scratched the back of his head, “But Dog has been my friend for as long as I can remember.”

“Dog?” the girl looked at him curiously, “You named her Dog?”

“It’s a name isn’t it?” he shrugged, “Just like mine’s Melodin. What’s yours?”

The young woman hesitated, “Nim.”

“Well Nim,” Melodin said as he slid into the seat opposite her, “It’s nice to meet you, are you here by yourself?”

“I’m meeting some friends,” she replied stiffly, still stroking Dog’s coat.

“They late?” Nim looked at him suspiciously and he shrugged, “You look worried.”

The young woman looked away to the door of the bar.

“They are late,” she said quietly.

“Don’t worry,” Melodin said with a big smile and relaxed back in his chair, “I’ll hang with you until they get here.”

“What?” Nim again looked at him with suspicious eyes, “Why? I don’t think you should.”

“Well, it’s not my decision,” Melodin said with an apologetic tone and nodded to Dog, who was thoroughly enjoying the petting from Nim, “Dog says we stay and keep you company until your friends get here.”

The girl frowned at him but as she looked back to Dog it turned into a wide smile.

“Alright,” Nim finally agreed, “But only until my companions come for me.”

“Sure thing,” nodded Melodin before he suddenly jumped up from his relaxed posture,

“Damn, I almost forgot I got to go see this lady about this ring I’ve got.”

With a laugh he showed Nim the diamond mounted ring on his finger which caused a look of shock to come to the girl’s face.

“How’d you-?” Nim began to ask, but she cut herself short, worry displayed clearly in her eyes.

“What?” asked Melodin, pausing halfway up from his seat.

“No, it’s nothing,” Nim was quick to dismiss his curiosity. “That looks like another ring I know of.”

“Really?” Melodin looked to his hand and the gemstone gleaming faintly upon the silver band. “I got this at ... I mean I found it in the street. A lady hired me to find it, ‘cause she lost it, you see.”

“Right,” Nim said, her suspicious look returning to her face.

“Yeah, anyway,” Melodin got to his feet and scratched the back of his head, “I’m going to go see her now. You staying here Dog?”

The mutt barked happily, her tail wagging as she sat right next to Nim.

Just then the door to the tavern opened and Nim looked with eagerness to who was entering, but her shoulders slumped immediately.

“Not one of your friends I’m guessing?” Melodin stated more than asked as he watched the unusual man with blonde hair and red eyes move carefully through the tables.

Melodin's eyes narrowed slightly as he watched the man, something about this newcomer unsettled him. Maybe it was the way the man seemed to float across the floor, his strides so smooth and precise, or maybe it was the feeling that the man's red eyes were watching him and the girl intently even though he was not even looking at them.

"No, I don't know him," Nim replied quietly, and Melodin sat back down slowly.

"Is it just me, or does that guy unnerve you?" he asked softly, a cold sweat strangely forming on his brow.

Dog growled low and menacingly, her ears flat against her head as her green eyes starred at the red eyed man.

"It's not just you," Nim replied her voice filled with worry and her eyes darted to the bar entrance again, as if praying her friends would arrive then.

"Perhaps I should wait down here until your friends arrive, and not go and see Visteen just yet," Melodin remarked, and he could see a slight sense of relief come to the girl's face.

Curiously he glanced over his shoulder again towards the bar where the man stood sipping from a glass, seeming unobtrusive and yet emanating such unnerving energy. Melodin's eyes narrowed, for this man was no ordinary patron. His black coat was of expensive material and clearly tailored for him, as was his white shirt and black pants. Those high boots with metal plating were also items of obvious wealth, and upon his hands were several rings with different coloured gemstones.

Trying not to think much on it Melodin turned his eyes from the traveller and across the room as two more individuals entered the tavern. He recognised the man immediately as the same one who had tried to dissuade him from taking the job in the castle. As for the woman at the man's side though, Melodin could only assume that she was the partner the man had referred to when they were talking.

The duo paused at the entrance briefly before the dark haired man spotted Melodin and made a straight line towards him. His unusual chains dangled animatedly across his bare chest which was free for the world to see thanks to his open shirt and sleeveless jacket. A

ringed hand roughly knocked aside a chair as he rushed closer, and Melodin could feel his palms getting moist as a knot twisted in his stomach.

He thought about making a run for it, but he had promised Nim he would stay until her companions arrived. Giving a concern looked to Dog, Melodin took a deep breath and looked back to the duo just as they reached his table.

“You must give me the ring immediately,” the man demanded, his dark eyes no longer sparkling.

“What makes you think I got it,” Melodin replied, trying to sound calm as he subtly hid his hand beneath the other one.

“I can feel the magic in its stone even from here,” the tall woman to the man’s side aid seriously, “He has it alright.”

Melodin looked to the beautiful elven woman briefly, his eyes quickly going over her long braided hair, and golden eyes. Her garb was similar to the man’s except there was substantially less of it, which caused his gaze to linger on certain areas of her body.

“There’s no use lying kid,” the dark haired man said seriously, “Eclair here knows a great deal about magic. Now hand it over.”

“Don’t call me kid,” Melodin bristled, “And I got the ring, so go away. You lost, deal with it.”

With a smug expression he turned back to Nim who was regarding the scene with a good deal of concern.

“This is not about winning or losing fool,” the man replied harshly, “This about life or death.”

Melodin’s brow furrowed at that and he turned back to the duo.

“Look, Reith, his hand,” Eclair said with concern.

Abruptly the dark haired man grabbed Melodin by the wrist and pulled his arm away to reveal the ring on his finger.

“You idiot, you put it on,” Reith exclaimed, a grave look on his face.

“What is your deal?” Melodin pulled away from Reith’s grasp. “It’s just a ring with some magic in it.”

“Just some ring?”

The exclamation from the base of the stairs caught everyone’s attention and both Reith and Eclairé turned about quickly as if expecting an attack.

“You foolish boy,” Visteen laughed aloud as she walked from the stairs through the tables and few patrons looking on at the scene with growing unease. “Although, I must congratulate you on actually getting it from the castle vaults, well done, now hand it over like a good child.”

“So it is that ring.” Melodin heard Nim exclaim quietly.

“Look guys,” Melodin said loudly as he got up from his seat and moved into a bit of space on Nim’s side of the table, “It’s just a ring. Nothing special.”

To accentuate his point Melodin grabbed the ring around his finger and tried to pull it off, but it would not budge.

“What the hell?” Melodin grumbled as he continued to tug at it, “Damn things not coming off.”

“See what I mean,” Reith hissed at him, “No magical item is just an item.”

“I can take it off for you,” Visteen spoke up sweetly.

“Really?” Melodin’s eyes brightened.

“And along with your finger no doubt,” Eclairé cut in vehemently.

“Hey now, no one’s chopping off my finger,” he was quick to say, holding his hand close to his chest.

“Regardless,” Visteen spoke up seriously, “I paid you to retrieve it, so I would appreciate it if you hand it over. Now.”

She held out her hand towards him and Melodin felt a strange sensation tug at him. To his surprise his own feet started walking towards the woman without his approval.

“Hey, what the hell,” Melodin exclaimed, “Stop this.”

Dog was quick to try and jump to the rescue and she took a mouthful of one of his trouser legs and began pulling him back with no success. In fact Dog only succeeded in ripping his pants.

“Enough.” Eclairé said commandingly and a bright light flashed in front of Melodin causing the force that was controlling him to diminish.

“Trust me Eclairé, you don’t want to interfere,” Visteen said darkly, “I did not recognise you before, be it from some spell you cast or illusion you placed over yourself, but I can see you clearly now, my old student. You may have grown stronger over these many decades, but I assure you that you will never be a match for me.”

As Visteen spoke a strange aura began to glow around her body, sending wisps into the air and scorching into the tables beside her.

The patrons that remained in the room quickly vacated the premises as if it had caught on fire, their eyes wide as they scrambled to get out of harms way.

“Step aside.” Visteen said darkly, her eyes promising death.

Melodin’s mouth fell agape and he shuffled back a step, bumping into Nim, who had stood up from her seat, and she subconsciously grabbed hold of his shirt. He did not notice the touch; instead his focus was on both Reith and Eclairé who seemed as uneasy as he was.

Strangely Eclairé suddenly relaxed and turned to Reith with a smile, “Make this right Reith. Go, my love.”

“Wait, don’t-” Reith began to call out, but his voice became distorted to Melodin’s ears and his lunge towards the woman slowed to a halt.

In fact the whole room began to act strangely as it twisted shape and bulged like glass being heated. Melodin looked about in wonder as specks of light pieced through the strange veil and dissolved the bar around him, Dog, Nim, and the man Reith.

“What the..?” Melodin began to say, but no sound escaped his lips.



Right before his whole world went white he saw Eclair turn back to Visteen, and even more curiously he saw the red eyed man, still leaning against the bar, as he calmly watched the sight, drink in hand.

The red eyes of the unnerving traveller looked to him piecing right though him seconds before the world went white and his sight went black. That look from the red eyed stranger did no sit well with him as he descended into the darkness, he could feel the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

## Chapter Five

“...Hell is going on?” Melodin exclaimed, his voice coming back to him all of a sudden.

Blinking away the stars in his eyes he looked about in confusion. No longer was he standing in the middle of the tavern, but instead he was in a small room with stone walls and wooden floor boards.

“Dog? Nim?” he asked turning to the girl and his faithful companion, “You guys alright?”

Nim nodded and Dog barked, but her response was drowned out by a loud cry of despair and Reith dropped to his knees in front of them, his hand grasping towards something that was no longer there.

“Damn it Eclair. Why?” Reith cried out again, his face dropping towards the strange circular design carved into the floorboards and held all four of them in its circumference. “Curse you Visteen.”

With an awkward look to Nim and Dog, Melodin cautiously took a step towards the distraught man. But he froze as Reith threw his head back and a primal roar erupted from within him. The man’s black hair suddenly changed shape, standing up on its ends as hues of light blue flickered in the strands. A similar bluish aura rippled around his shoulders and Melodin stumbled back a few steps in horror as the room began to shake.

Dog started barking uneasily as the surge of energy coming from Reith continued to grow, the weight of it pressing against Melodin’s temples and making him wince in pain.

“Damn man. Get a hold of yourself.” Melodin cried out and tried to approach Reith, but the pressure of his energy pushed back against him.

A wave of power gushed forth, knocking Melodin backwards past Dog and Nim and into the wall, causing him to whack his head against the stone and send stars dancing across his eyes.

“Stop it.” Nim suddenly screamed as loud as she could, disorientating Melodin even more as the piecing sound rung in his ears.

Finally the screaming stopped and he shook the dizziness from his head before looking back to Reith. The energy around the man had disappeared and he stood up slowly before turning an embarrassed look towards them.

“Forgive me,” Reith said awkwardly, his dark hair once again falling loosely around his face and neck. “Are you alright?”

Dog barked uneasily and Nim gave a quick nod of the head as she stepped aside and Reith walked over to Melodin.

“Here let me help you,” the dark haired man offered a hand to Melodin.

His head still swirling Melodin went to accept the offered hand but as he did his eye fell upon the ring on his finger and he recoiled his hand, shooting Reith a suspicious look at the same time.

“I don’t want that cursed ring,” Reith said as he stood back from Melodin. “Not like you’d be able to get it off your finger anyway.”

Slowly Melodin got to his feet, using the wall for support, his eyes looking about the small room curiously.

“Where are we? What happened?” he wondered, looking to Reith for answers as the man headed for the single door to the room.

“Eclair used a recall spell,” the man said seriously and pulled open the door. “We are at our home in the Strand Mountains.”

Reith moved out of the room and into a large cavern-like loft that was built into the very rock of the mountains. Following closely behind Melodin’s eyes widened as he looked about the large cavern. He stood alongside Nim and Dog on the second level of the cavern, looking out over a living room and kitchen that opened out onto a large balcony which offered views far down the mountain side.

"This is nice," Melodin exclaimed, following Reith slowly down the stairs and into the living space. "So, what is this whole thing with this ring and Visteen about?"

"By the Gods," Reith exclaimed and looked to Melodin with shock. "I'm baffled in the face of your ignorance."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Melodin scrunched up his face.

"Did you really break into a royal palace to steal something you knew nothing about?" Reith asked in reply, "And then proceed to put a magical ring on your finger with no knowledge about what it was or what it would do?"

"Well, I put it on my finger so as not to lose it," shrugged Melodin, giving an innocent look to Nim and Dog who stood silently watching the exchange. "How was I to know it was cursed?"

"It's not cursed." The dark haired man said with frustration.

"Well perhaps you could enlighten us?" Melodin said with equal irritation and looked to Nim and Dog, "I assume you guys know nothing about it either?"

Dog gave him a blank look, whilst Nim shrugged and glanced away strangely.

"We're all ears," Melodin looked back to Reith.

"Fine," the man sighed heavily, "Listen well, for I will not repeat myself. Do you want a parchment and quill to take notes so you won't forget?"

"I think I'll be alright," smiled Melodin, ignoring Reith's sarcasm.

Reith fixed him with a dark look before taking a deep breath.

"The ring is not cursed," the dark haired man began, "It is part of a group of seven rings made ages ago-"

"How long ago?" Melodin cut in curiously as he took up a seat to listen.

"A millennia."

"Really?"

“I don’t know how long ago exactly,” Reith sighed heavily, “But it was long before the world looked the way it did now, alright?”

“Sure.”

“It is unclear who actually made the rings,” Reith continued, “But the ritual involved capturing the spirits and binding them in a gem stone to be controlled.”

“Wait what kind of spirits are we talking about?” Melodin cut in again.

“The ones that are known are the spirits of wind, water, earth, fire, and ice,” explained Reith, “The other two are unknown.”

“And let me guess there is one ring that rules them all.” Melodin said with a wide grin.

“Don’t be a fool,” Reith replied harshly, “There would be no power great enough to control all seven rings.”

“So what’s this one?” Melodin held up his hand.

“Wind.”

“So that means I can wield the power of the wind?” a wide grin came to Melodin’s face as he looked at the diamond on the silver band.

A subtle flare lit up from within the depths of the gemstone, angrily lashing out at him.

“No,” Reith said seriously, “There can be no controlling of the powers within these rings. It’s true that whoever put on a ring can access some of the energy within, but in return the spirits consumes your life force. Sucking bare your natural powers or talent first, and once the foolish wielder is depleted of energy, the spirits will devour your soul.”

“That sounds grim,” Melodin replied flatly. “What if the person wearing it has no natural born powers?”

Reith’s eyes narrowed slightly as he regarded him more closely, “I cannot say.”

“But I heard there are those that can use the ring’s power,” Nim spoke up, drawing a surprised look from Melodin.

“There are a select few, yes,” Reith replied, “Those that have an affinity with the spirit can use the power to its full limits. But the cost is still high. If the ring’s power is used too much the spirit will end up possessing the wielder for its own gain. The creatures trapped inside the gems are pure evil.”

“Really?” Melodin asked, still looking at the ring on his hand, “Sounds like they just want to get free. Is there a way to release the spirits?”

“That I don’t know,” Reith shrugged, “But unless you can remove that ring from your hand it will destroy you.”

“What would I do with it if I could remove it?”

“There is a ritual that can destroy the rings along with the spirits,” explained the dark haired man, “But it requires that all rings be present for it to work.”

Melodin nodded slightly, still looking at the ring on his finger thoughtfully.

“How do you know all this Mister Reith?” Nim asked curiously.

“I only know what Eclairé told me,” he replied sadly, “It was her who devoted her time to researching the items. And, for future reference, just call me Reith.”

“So have you found any other of these rings?” asked Melodin as he stretched back in the seat.

“Two others,” nodded the man, “The one for the element of ice, and that of water. But now, with Eclairé gone, I have only the one of ice.”

Reith held up his hand so that Melodin and Nim could see the silver banded ring on his finger and the blue topaz mounted upon it.

“You’re wearing one too?” Melodin jumped to his feet, “Then why the hell you get upset at me for putting it on?”

“Because you made the same mistake I did,” Reith replied bitterly, his admittance easing Melodin’s annoyance.

“Did Eclairé wear the ring as well?” Nim asked with concern.

“No,” Raith shook his head, “She keeps it in a special satchel on her belt. Or rather, she did.”

“What’s with the past tense?” Melodin asked, “She’s probably alright. What makes you think she’s dead?”

“Visteen,” stated Reith.

“The sultry lady,” nodded Melodin.

“The sorceress Visteen is not known for leaving enemies alive,” Reith said stiffly, his eyes burning with anger.

Melodin bit down on his bottom lip awkwardly and glanced to Nim, who seemed to share his unease. Dog whined sadly as she lay at Nim’s feet and Melodin scratched the back of his head, not knowing what to say to offer hope to Reith.

“It occurs to me I do not know either of your names,” Reith spoke up curiously, “And yet you know much, and I’ve told you much, about myself and Eclairé.”

“I’m Melodin,” he replied, slapping himself in the chest before motioning to his companion, “And this is Dog.”

Dog barked happily and wagged her tail.

“My name is Nim.”

“Would that be sort for Nimrodell?” Reith asked curiously, causing a flash of concern to come to Nim’s eyes.

“How’d you-”

“A common name among girls your age,” Reith cut in, his eyes sparkling beneath the strands of his hair. “Were you in Becklinds by yourself, Nim?”

“I arrived with two companions,” Nim replied hesitantly, “But we got separated and I was waiting for them in The Pirate’s Den.”

“Were you’re companions an elf and a bald man?” Reth continued to ask unusual questions.

“How do you know that?” exclaimed Nim, drawing a sly smile from Reith.

“I happened to see them as the Reparien Airship was disrupting my own flight over the castle last night.” explained the dark haired man.

“Yeah I saw that ship too,” Melodin began to say, but Nim spoke over the top of him.

“Do you know if they are alright?” Nim asked with concern.

“I’d say it was likely that they were captured by the Reparien soldiers,” Reith stated simply.

“No,” gasped the young woman before she got up from her seat and briskly headed out onto the balcony.

“What’s that about?” Melodin asked in bewilderment, turning a stupid look towards Reith, whose eyes were sparkling knowingly.

“Not something to concern yourself with,” Reith stated and with another look to Nim he headed off into his home leaving Melodin and Dog sitting awkwardly in the living space.

“What do you think Dog?” Melodin asked quietly as he held his ringed hand before his eyes.

“You think this Reith guy is telling the truth?”

Dog winged anxiously and jumped up onto the lounge beside him.

“Yeah, it does seem bad,” he gave Dog a scratch behind the ears, “But hey, we’ve lived through worse right.”

His furry companion licked his cheek and barked happily, before she looked to Nim out on the balcony.

With a sigh he rested his hand back on his lap and followed Dog’s gaze towards Nim, who stood at the edge of the balcony staring off down the valley.

\* \* \*

The Pirate’s Den had been reduced to a pile of splintered wood and shattered glass, leaving tails of smoke drifting up from the smouldering wood into the air. The building that stood alongside the popular tavern was also badly damaged and many bricks lay about the street as well.



“What the devil happened ‘ere?” asked a citizen as he pushed his way to the front of the crowd that had gathered.

“Two sorceresses were a fightin’,” replied an older man, who many recognised as the owner of the pub, “Balls of magic flyin’ all directions it were. I barely got outta there afore the whole place went up in smoke.”

“What” you sayin’ them ladies are under that rubble?” the citizen asked in surprise.

“Nah, not at all,” the barman shook his head, “Last I saw the lady Visteen had the blue haired lass beat and broken, but that were afore the windows smashed and the roof caved in, like as not they both got outta there.”

“Even the blued haired one being all wounded?” asked a woman close in the crowd.

“Can’t say for right,” shrugged the tavern owner, “I think I saw lady Visteen teleport them both away.”

“How is it you know this Visteen lady and not the other one?”

“She were stayin’ here you see.”

“I hope no one got crushed under there,” another citizen remarked grimly, “That’ll be a nasty surprise for you when you’re cleaning this place up.”

“Did everyone get out?”

“All but one,” said the barman seriously, “I got ‘em but for this one fellow who insisted on staying to watch the fight. Damned fool.”

“Dead fool most like,” a bystander shook his head, “Can’t believe he’d risk his life just to see a couple of sorceresses go at it.”

“Probably didn’t think the whole place would cave in.”

“Look. You see that?” one citizen spoke up in surprise and pointed to the rubble.

All eyes darted to the smoking pile of wood and brick to see it bulge out strangely and crumble away, opening a path for a man to calmly walk out from the disaster.

“Impossible.” Breathed the bartender in horror, “That’s the fella. Hey buddy how are you alive? Are you mad, why didn’t you get out with the rest of us?”

The tavern owner stopped the red eyed man and the crowd gathered around in awe.

“I had not finished my drink yet,” the man replied simply, his crimson eyes gleaming.

Pushing past the barman the crowd parted allowing him to walk casually down the road and off into the city.

Stopping at the end of the street Solordorr glanced back at the stunned crowd in front of the ruined building before he started off towards the castle. By now the Reparian army had decided to make their presence known and hundreds of soldiers marched the street sticking up notices and handing out pamphlets declaring that Shirten was now under their rule.

A dark shadow drifted over him as the great Reparian warship drifted over head. Suddenly another Aircraft launched out from the west side docking station, moving at full speed towards the north. However, it did not fly very far and it ended in a ball of smoke and fire as the Reparian warship fired all of its guns at once. The energy blasts roared through the air before thundering into the haul of the feeling craft, sending it spiralling towards the ground just outside the city walls.

“Long live the empire,” the leader of a squad of soldiers shouted loudly right near Solordorr, “You see that citizens, if you try and flee to Solegrad you will be destroyed.”

“I doubt you’ll keep this attack quiet for long,” Solordorr spoke up seriously.

“Long enough for our main command to arrive,” the heavily armoured man replied, “Here have a pamphlet.”

Solordorr took the piece of propaganda, giving the soldier a blank look before continuing down the street. With one hand he crunched up the parchment and tossed it to the gutter where it landed alongside several other discarded pamphlets.

It had been a bold move by Reparian to invade Shirten, and although their attack had been an attempt to capture the exiled princess that was reported to be here, it was a cunning manoeuvre in their war against Solegrad. One that would break the peace treaty between

the two nations and likely instigate more fighting to the north, and with Reparian still at war with Narglefarr Solordorr wondered if the empire was not stretching its lines a bit thin.

“But they failed to catch you, didn’t they little princess,” Solordorr mused quietly, “And now, thanks to their eagerness to quell the uprising in Lakelinds and Delaforr, you have slipped between their fingers and vanished to who knows where.”

Solordorr stopped walking in the centre of a bridge that ran over the city’s two rivers. Looking upon the damaged castle and the Reparian Aircraft that drifted in the sky above it his crimson eyes narrowed.

“Well, it seems that at least a few people know where,” he stated to himself and sly smile crept across his face.

## Chapter Six

“Mamma. Pappa,” he cried out and wiped his running nose on his sleeve.

“Get a hold of yourself kid,” the older boy said seriously, “We gotta find a place to hide until the fighting stops. Come on.”

The older boy pulled him to his feet and tugged him from the main road.

“No,” he screamed as loud as he could and pulled away.

Ripping his arm from the boy’s grip he took off in the other direction. He did not hear the older boy call after him and only the sound of his own breath and sobbing echoed in his ears. He had to get away from there, away from the smoke and fires. Away from the people fighting. He had to get home, where it was safe in the arms of his parents. They would hold him tight, tell him everything was alright. And it would be, everything would be alright so long as he got back home.

But where was he? He did not recognise this part of town even though he was sure he was just playing in his street when the first attacks rocked his neighbourhood. Around him the buildings were in ruins, consumed by fire and smoke. Nothing looked like he remembered.

Tears blurred his vision as he continued to run through the debris. Suddenly there were people all around him, but they were no one he knew and they were all angry and fighting each other. Balls of fire and forks of lightning scorched over his head as screams filled his ears. Desperately he kept on running through the melee, then suddenly he was falling as something as something from the side knocked into him. The mud came up to meet his face and he felt the pain as the rocks bit into his flesh.

“Mamma,” he cried out as he pushed himself up from the slippery ground, but it was not mud that his hands and face was slick with, this substance was red and smelt sickly sweet.

Tears filled his eyes again and through the battlefield he ran, as fast as he could back home.

It felt like hour he had been running, and yet he did not seem to get anywhere, everything looked the same: ruined and burning. There were people lying in the street everywhere he looked, making him wonder why they were resting when they should be running. Running from the screams and explosions. They should be running to where it was safe and warm, and where nothing could hurt them.

His lungs burned and his legs felt weak forcing him to slow down and take more heed of his surroundings. Amazingly he recognised the corner store his mother would buy food from, half its roof had caved in and the windows were smashed, but he recognised the happy sign hanging above the entrance. The owner was sitting down in the doorway, slumped over with half his white shirt stained with red. He was about to ask the nice store owner if he had seen his mother, but he thought it was better to let the man rest, after all his face was quite pale.

Regardless he knew the way home now and relief surged within him, giving him strength to run the last few streets back to the embrace of his parents. The relief he felt as he raced down his street was overtaken by a strange feeling of fear which he did not understand. It clung to him like a cold wet jacket, making him shiver as he looked at the wrecked houses along the road. That cold dread swelled within him as he saw his own house lying in a pile of bricks and broken beams.

Tears welled in his eyes again but he told himself it would be alright. His mother and father would make it alright. They would hug him close and this nightmare would end. It would be just like waking from a bad dream, it felt scary, but it was just a dream.

He slowed as he reached his house and slowly picked his way through the rubble.

“Mamma. Pappa.” He cried out over the sounds of crackling flames and creaking timber.

There was no answer and he felt the emptiness of despair take control of him. But hope came as he saw his mother’s favourite shall between some bricks and he raced over. Sliding to his knee he ignored the scrapes and tears in his trousers as he strained to move the debris from his mother’s body, some were wet and red, making it slippery work but he managed.

“Mamma get up.” He called out once he had managed to move all the bricks. “It’s okay you can move now.”

His mother did not reply, and the faint glimmer of hope within him was quickly snuffed out. But he did not understand the feeling of terror inside him, nor the ache in his heart.

“Come on, wake up,” he cried, tears falling down his cheeks again, “It’s me Melodin.”

Sucking in a deep breath he slowly woke from his dreams and stretched his arms and legs out.

“Feels good,” Melodin groaned as he yawned and opened his eyes, “Hey Dog?”

On the large couch at his feet Dog lay on her back, legs in the air and tongue hanging out. Absently one of her legs kicked at something and her nose twitched slightly.

“Yo, wake up you lazy mongrel.” Melodin said sleepily and rubbed his bare foot on his companion’s stomach.

Dog woke up and rolled to her side as she fixed a look on him, one of her ears flipped back comically on her head.

Melodin chuckled as he sat up, fixing Dog’s ear as he gave her rough pat around the head and neck. A whine sounded from Dog and she cocked her head to the side, fixing him with a curious look.

“What’s up Dog?” he asked happily and scratched his messy head.

She winged again and rubbed her nose with her paw drawing a perplexed look to his face as he brought his own hand up to his face to feel the wetness on his cheeks.

Feeling the other side of his face as well he rubbed his eyes and realised he had been crying.

Biting down on his bottom lip Melodin quickly wiped his face before looking to Dog sadly.

“I had that dream again,” he said quietly as he slowly stroked Dog’s ear.

Suddenly his companion sat up and planted a wet tongue on his face, causing him to recoil and fall back to the fluffy pillow of the couch. Dog pushed against his chest and continued to plant licks over his face making him laugh out and push her away.

“Cut it out Dog,” Melodin smiled and playfully pushed the mutt away.

With a heavy sigh he sat back up and absently turned to gaze out through the large glass doors. The views were spectacular from Reith’s mansion in the mountains and he could see far down the ravine and across the Wolfrun Valley where a light mist floated over the rolling hills and forest, catching the light of the dawning sun and glowing beautifully. It was still early, the ice still clung to the edges of the doors, by some magic the inside of the house kept at a constant warm temperature.

Melodin yawned wide and stood up, rubbing his eyes and adjusting his clothes that had become all ruffled.

“I’m starving,” he remarked as he headed over to the bench top that sat like an island in the room, dividing the kitchen space from the rest.

On that bench was a large bowl of fruit which he eyed greedily and licked his lips.

“Do you think Reith would mind if we have one of those juicy apples?” he asked, looking to Dog who was right beside him, a similar look of hunger on her face. “It’s just one apple, right?”

Nervously he glanced up to the second floor balcony that overlooked the living space, and to the door that led to the man’s private rooms. His eyes flicked back to the fruit bowl and hesitantly he rubbed his hand across his chin. With one final glance to Reith’s bedroom door he swiped the biggest apple on top of the pile and eagerly bit into the flesh. A loud crunch echoed around the empty room and sweet juices filled his mouth, making his taste buds dance.

“Delicious,” he remarked once he had swallowed the first mouthful, before he quickly crunch down another.

Dog followed him with anticipation as he absently wandered along the bench, his gaze moving about the beautifully designed house as he decided to have a look around. Without much thought on his direction Melodin moved through the door right beside the kitchen and into a wide open cavern. A cold breeze suddenly whipped about him, sending a shiver up his spine as it blew in through the gaping hole in the rock. Bits of old airships sat in piles at the far end of the cavern and near the door were several tables covered in diagrams and drawings of sky flying crafts.

“This is an airship land dock,” Melodin exclaimed to himself, a feeling of excitement building within him. “Nice. Shame there’s no airship though. Hey dog, do you think this Reith guy is a sky pirate? Or just a wealthy merchant?”

Dog whined slightly, not having any answers as her green eyes continued to watch the apple he was eating very closely.

Melodin took another great mouthful of his apple and moved closer to the drawings on the nearby desk. He munched slowly on the juicy morsel as he flicked through the designs.

“Man, these are some awesome designs,” he remarked to Dog.

“I’m glad you like them,” the voice of Reith made him jump and spin about.

Quickly he hid the nearly eaten apple behind his back and with a flick of his wrist tossed it to Dog. His companion knew the drill and was quick to grab it in the air before taking it behind the desks to finish off.

“Most of them are my own designs,” Reith continued, moving into the land dock from the living room. “Although I have pulled some inspiration from the Solegrad and Nargelfarr crafts in particular.”

“Are you a sky pirate?” Melodin asked curiously once he had swallowed the mouthful of apple.

The dark haired man shrugged as if it did not matter, “I have been called that before. But I like to think myself as a purveyor of rare goods.”

“You do fly an airship though, right?” he was quick to ask excitedly.



“Yes, but she would still be in the landing dock back in Becklinds,” Reith sighed and looked out the large cave opening. “It’s going to cost a fortune in parking fees by the time I pick her up.”

“So you’re intending to go straight back to Shirten then?”

Reith nodded, “Of course.”

“I see,” Melodin scratched the back of his head awkwardly.

“Before I forget my manners again,” Reith suddenly spoke up, “Would you like me to show you around, I forgot to when we first arrived.”

“Sure, that would be nice.”

“Follow me then,” Reith said and motioned for Melodin to follow as he headed around the desks and through another door.

Melodin was quick to follow the man, and with Dog at his heels they headed into a long gallery filled with unusual and amazing items.

With wide eyes and gaping mouth, Melodin looked about at the wondrous items that were being displayed in boxes and mounted on the walls. There were weapons of all kinds, strange ornaments, and even dazzling jewels that caught the light perfectly.

“This is my collection,” Reith explained as he walked towards far door.

“It’s amazing,” gasped Melodin, “Are they all magically endowed?”

“Hardly,” Reith scoffed, “They’re just a few odds and ends Eclairé and I have collected over the years. The really rare things we keep well away from sticky fingers.”

The man shot a look over his shoulder at Melodin, his dark eyes sparkling behind his strands of hair. The look made Melodin laugh awkwardly as he carefully placed a strange egg back on its pedestal and jumped to catch up to the sky pirate.

“Through here is the library,” Reith continued the tour and they headed through another door. “It’s mainly Eclairé’s collection, and I recall her saying that she had in fact read them all.”

“Really?” exclaimed Melodin as he looked about at the massive books shelves filled to bursting with old tomes and scrolls that looked as if they would fall apart if he tried picking them up.

“Come on,” said Reith without slowing his pace, “Through here we move into more a recreational area where there is a hot spring and a mountain river.”

Pushing through a heavy door the pirate lead the way into a large open space covered in redwood planking that framed the natural rocks of the mountain. The sound of running water greeted them and a cloud of steam drifting up from the large hot pool turned the air moist.

“You wouldn’t believe how difficult it was to keep this damp from the books next door,” Reith said with a slight chuckle, “But Eclairé found a way through her spells, as she always did.”

Reith’s shoulders drooped slightly and a look of pain came to his proud features.

“If only I had known about this last night,” Melodin laughed aloud, trying to distract the man, “I would have just slept in the hot pool.”

Reith did not see the amusement and continued on passed the pool and the cool mountain stream that gushed through the rocks and along a carved channel at the far wall.

“The door on the right is a small cloak room,” Reith explained as they headed for the door on the left. “And this leads back into the main living space.”

Just then the cloak room door opened outwards and Nim casually walked out wearing nothing but a towel. She was singing lightly to herself, but the tune got stuck in her throat as she noticed them. Both Melodin and Reith had stopped in their tracks, completely surprised by the unexpected appearance of the young woman.

Shrinking back Nim screamed in surprise her arms moving defensively close to her body.

“What are you two doing in here?” she exclaimed, horrified. “I locked the door.”

“We came through the other door,” Reith explained calmly, “Really my lady, you could have used the ensuite in the rooms you slept in, and avoided this embarrassment.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Nim said in reply, gathering some of her composure, “That ensuite was too small.”

“I always enjoy a nice dip in a hot pool in the mornings,” Melodin spoke up once he had overcome his surprise. “Care for some company Nim?”

She looked at him with a shocked expression, and stumbled over a response.

“Come on,” Reith said with a sigh and pushed Melodin along by the shoulder, “Let’s leave her to her bath.”

Dog barked in agreement as they headed for the main door, causing Melodin to grumble unhappily under his breath and glance one last time over his shoulder to Nim in her bath towel.

“And that concludes the little tour,” Reith announced as they moved into the main room and he closed the door to the hot pool behind them. “The door to the right near the stairs is the guest bedroom, as you know, and up on the second level is the room we first arrived in and my private rooms.”

Melodin nodded absently as he continued to look to the closed door to the hot pools, thinking of Nim relaxing in the steamy waters before taking a dip into the icy stream afterwards. The thought was a good one, and caused him to nearly trip over Dog as he slowly walked to the couch.

“Come on Dog,” Melodin exclaimed in surprise as she stumbled over her, making Dog give him a bark and growl.

With a disappointed shake of his head at his canine companion Melodin followed Reith back to the kitchen space where the pirate had begun chopping up some fruit.

“Care for something to eat Melodin?” Reith looked up from the chopping board, his dark eyes sparkling. “An apple perhaps?”

“I’m good, thanks any way,” replied Melodin, sending a sideways glance down to Dog.

“You’re sure?” the pirate asked in surprise, “I think you’ll like them, they’re very juicy, with a slight tartness to them that really makes the taste buds tingle.”

“No thanks,” he said sheepishly, leaning on the bench-top. “But those almonds look tasty.”

Reith narrowed his eyes slightly before he handed the large bowl of nuts over to Melodin who happily took a large handful.

“These almonds are the best in Nargelfarr,” Reith explained as he went back to chopping some more fruit and putting the slices into two bowls. “From the famous plantations outside of Solaris.”

“How’d you get them delivered here?” asked Melodin, his mouth full.

“Delivered?” Reith raised an eyebrow, “Don’t be foolish. I bought them from the plantation owner myself, on my way back from Zarkadia last month.”

“Zarkadia?” Melodin said with surprise, “I thought airships couldn’t fly over the deserts far to the east.”

“You can, if you know how,” Reith replied, “But it can be quite dangerous with all the sandstorms they have. Trust me, if you want to find parts for an airships you just need to head to the Graveyard Basin in Zarkadia, the place is littered with downed ships.”

“Is that why you were there?” asked Melodin as he tossed an almond to Dog.

“No,” the pirate shook his head, “Eclair and I were there exploring some of the old ruins that had been uncovered by the last great sandstorm in the region.”

“Did you find anything?”

Reith shrugged, “Bones and dust.”

“Monsters?”

“Some.”

“That would have been awesome,” Melodin exclaimed, turning his sparkling eyes to Dog who barked with enthusiasm. “We have to go there one day. Write it down Dog, we’ll be famous explorers of Zarkadia.”

Dog barked again and wagged her tail excitedly.

“My lady,” Reith called out, drawing Melodin’s attention to the back of the room where Nim was walking from her room. “Care for some breakfast? Likely it is not what you are used to, but I’m sure it will suffice.”

“You don’t know what I’m used to,” Nim replied abruptly, but she accepted the bowl of fruit salad from the pirate.

“What’s the deal Reith?” Melodin spoke up curiously, “Why do you call Nim ‘my lady’ all the time?”

The man gave him a perplexed look, “I suppose you’d be too young to remember. How old are you? Sixteen? Seventeen?”

Melodin scoffed, “Please, I’m twenty years old.”

Reith laughed at that, and Nim gave him a confused look, even dog growled low.

“Don’t take us for fools kid,” Reith smirked.

“Then don’t call me kid.” Melodin was quick to snap.

“How old were you when Delafarr was overtaken by Reparian?” Reith asked curiously, ignoring Melodin’s annoyance. “Five? Six?”

“Six.” He replied stiffly.

“A year older than the King’s daughter,” the pirate nodded, “Do you remember the girls name at all?”

Melodin scratched his head thoughtfully before his eyes slowly drifted to Nim, who was looking uncomfortable as she ate her meal.

“It was Nimrodell, right?” Melodin asked slowly.

“That’s right,” a sly smile came to Reith’s face before he looked to Nim, “Shall I introduce you properly? Or do I have it all wrong?”

“Yes I think you do have it wrong,” Nim replied abruptly.

“Wait?” Melodin exclaimed, noticing the lie in the girl’s voice, “You’re princess Nimrodell? The exiled queen?”

Nim let out a deep breath and nodded hesitantly.

“Which means you’re two friends you were waiting for at The Pirates Den were of the Kingsguard.” Melodin looked away as the realisation struck him hard.

“Yes,” Nim replied curtly, “And I would ask that both of you do not spread word of this to anyone. My journey is to be in secret until I return to Delaforr to aid the resistance.”

“I’d say that secret is in the open now, princess,” Reith replied flatly, drawing a curious look from Nim. “Why else do you think Reparian attack Becklinds castle if not to get to you?”

Nim’s eyes widened suddenly before a pained look came to her face.

“This is bizarre,” Melodin remarked with a laugh, “To think I’m meeting the princess in the home of a famous sky pirate. Talk about a dream come true, ay Dog?”

Dog whined awkwardly and looked away, causing him to turn back to Nim and Reith with a confused look on his face.

“Did I say something wrong?” Melodin asked stupidly and Reith just ran a hand over his face.

“Sky pirate?” Nim asked curiously, looking to Reith.

“Indeed,” Reith nodded his head respectfully, “Though I doubt I’m as famous as Melodin believes.”

“But you have an airship, correct?” Nim continued.

“I do,” the pirate replied cautiously, “Unfortunately it was left behind in Becklinds when we were teleported here. Why do you ask?”

“I need to get to City State,” Nim said seriously.

“But aren’t your companions back in Becklinds?” Melodin asked curiously.

“They are,” nodded the young woman, a sad look in her eyes, “But they both told me explicitly that if we were to separate that I should seek help in City State. And the fastest way to get there is by airship, Reith, do you not have another one?”

“No,” the man shook his head, and Nim’s shoulders slumped. “It’s easy enough to walk on foot to the town of heroes though.”

“I,” Nim stammered, “I don’t know the way.”

“Hey, no problem,” Melodin was quick to speak up, “I’ll show you the way, been there not too long ago myself. Amazing place.”

Dog growled low at his remark.

Nim looked to him and smiled wide, causing a feeling of warmth to swell within him.

“You coming too Reith?” Melodin turned his smile towards the pirate.

“I hardly see the need to,” the man replied flatly, “Besides, my airship, and Eclair are both back in Becklinds.”

“But you want this ring don’t you?” Melodin held up his hand and waved it before the pirate’s eyes causing Reith to clench his jaw subtly.

“I can pay you,” Nim added hopefully, “Please, your help would be invaluable.”

Reith took a deep breath, his dark eyes lingering on the ring on Melodin’s finger.

“Fine, I’ll come,” decided the pirate, though his eyes were no longer sparkling.

## Chapter Seven

“Halt there buddy,” demanded a Reparian soldier as Solordorr approached the bridge leading to the Becklinds castle. “This palace is under our control, that means no admittance for churls like you.”

The other soldiers beside the leader chuckled at that as they leaned lazily on their halberds.

“I am an envoy from the southern towns,” Solordorr stated seriously, “I have diplomatic authority to enter the castle and speak with the king.”

The soldiers looked to each other curiously, likely trying to understand what he just said.

“Which town you from?” asked one of the lazy soldiers.

“Nitibboh.”

“Never heard of it.”

“You’re Reparian soldiers,” Solordorr replied flatly, “I doubt you even know what city you just attacked.”

“I don’t like you tone diplomat,” the leader said seriously, his eyes narrowing.

“More like diplo-fat,” laughed the other lazy soldier.

“Good one,” cheered the other soldier with a spear, “Except he’s not fat you moron.”

“Shut it you two,” growled the leader, “And pat him down, see if he’s got any weapons on him.”

“You going to let him enter?” exclaimed one of the soldiers.

“Commander said it’s alright to let envoys come in,” explained the leader confidently, “So this fella can go in, so long as he is who he says he is.”

A dark smile came to the leader’s face as one of the soldiers began searching Solordorr for any weapons.



Calmly Solordorr raised his arms out wide for the soldier to see better, holding back his amusement.

“What ‘ave we got here?” the soldier announced loudly as he pulled a dagger from Solordorr’s belt that was hidden behind his back, beneath his coat. “What’s a diplomat carrying a dagger for?”

The soldier slipped the dagger into his own belt and Solordorr shrugged.

“The roads are dangerous,” he replied simply as the soldier continued to search him.

“Boy has this guy got a lot of pockets,” the soldier grumbled as he searched Solordorr’s pockets.

“You fight with a dagger?” asked the leader curiously, “What’s your power?”

“Don’t you know its bad manners to ask someone their talent?” Solordorr asked back, his crimson eyes hard.

“Hey, I’m askin’ the questions here,” snapped the leader of the squad. “Guess it don’t matter now. What’ve you got there Skid?”

“Papers sir,” the soldier searching Solordorr replied, “Notes and letters it looks like.”

“Hand ‘em here,” said the leader seriously.

“Wait, I need those,” Solordorr jumped to try and grab the letters back, but the leader ripped them away as the other soldier held Solordorr at bay.

“Well, well, what have we got here then?” laughed the leader, “Don’t want us to look at these papers ay?”

Solordorr clenched his jaw in frustration as he continued to fight against the soldier holding him back.

“It’s nothing, really,” Solordorr said desperately, “Just personal notes about my trip and a letter from my family.”

“Settle down afore I gut you, diplomat,” growled the soldier and pushed Solordorr back a few steps.

“If these are just what you say they are, then what’s the problem?” the leader asked slyly, a thin smile on his face.

Solordorr took a deep breath and steadied himself, his crimson eyes sparkling.

As the leader looked through the papers his expression of amusement slowly turned to curiosity, before going deadly serious.

“Grab him Skid,” the leader said suddenly, and before Solordorr could react the soldier had cast magical bindings around his wrists that pulled his hands together with a glowing chain. Just as quickly Skid had levelled the tip of his spear inches from Solordorr’s throat.

“What is the meaning of this?” demanded Solordorr, his voice shaking slightly, “I’m a diplomat here representing the southern towns for this surrender of Shirten to Reparian.”

“Sure you are,” smirked the leader, “And I’m Emperor Algion IV, rulers of the great Reparian empire.”

Skid laughed at that, but the other soldier looked quite bored as he watched the interaction, not even bothering to stop leaning on his halberd.

“You’re a bloody spy from Solegrad,” the leader continued angrily, “Tryin’ to fool me. But I’m smarter than you’ll ever be scum. You should’ve burned these letters of instruction bearing the Arch Eden seal, you moron. Pathetic.”

Skid laughed again and licked his lips, “Let’s run him through sir. Stick his head on spike for all to see.”

“Easy there Skid,” the leader smiled, “Commander Visteen will want a word with him before we do that. But I’m tellin’ you spy, you’re going to wish I let me boy Skid run you through, ‘cause you see the Lady Visteen like a bit of torture she does. Her rooms on the airship Ananimus are filled with weird and painful contraptions which you’re going to get real acquainted with. Take him away to the Ananimus, Skid, chuck him in the cells with the others we captured.”

Solordorr’s eyes glimmered and he held back his smile as the soldier roughly grabbed him by the arm and shoved him along the bridge towards the castle keep.

“You’re in for a treat spy,” Skid chuckled as he pushed Solordorr through the castle bailey and towards the great airship that hovered over the northern end of the keep. “You should see what Lady Visteen’s done to the Sorceress she caught.”

Solordorr’s eyes narrowed slightly, “Do you know the Sorceress’s name?”

“Eclarren or some such,” the soldier shrugged, “Why do you care?”

“So that was Lady Eclair back in the Pirate’s Den,” Solordorr said quietly to himself, “You’ve certainly changed since last we met.”

“What you say?” the soldier grumbled loudly.

“Nothing,” replied Solordorr, his eyes going to the Ananimus that loomed overhead. “Is the Sorceress still alive?”

“Last I heard she was,” said the soldier, a shrug in his voice, “Not for much longer I’ll wager. Just like you it seems scum. Stop here.”

Skid grabbed his shoulder, forcing him to stop in the middle of a large circle that was etched into the stone pavers directly below the hull of the airship.

“Transfer.” Skid said simply and the carved lines on the ground glowed brightly.

Solordorr closed his eyes as the world around them distorted and elongated as they were teleported up into the aircraft. When he opened his eyes he was standing on an identical rune etching in the middle of a large gallery in the heart of the Ananimus.

“Get moving,” Skid said as he pushed him in the back, forcing him to walk through the high ceilinged auditorium.

There were many other soldiers about, running drills and errands, or practicing their combat in a specialised arena. A few smaller aircrafts were docked in bays at the far end, opposite the stairs that skid was directing him towards.

Solordorr’s eyes darted about the gallery, taking in the layout and memorising it before they left the area and then headed down many corridors and narrow hallways. After taking

several flights of stairs downwards and following the corridors they eventually reached the cells and Skid grabbed Solordorr's shoulder to stop him.

"No sudden movements now," the soldier said seriously and Solordorr could hear the sounds of moving bolts as Skid unlocked the prison door and opened it outwards. "In you go, time to meet your roommates."

Inside was dimly lit, but Solordorr's eyes made out the shapes of two men chained to opposite walls with glowing shackles.

"These two are Kingsguard you know," Skid chuckled as he pushed Solordorr towards the vacant wall. "But in 'ere, with them shackles on, they're just weaklings with no way of using their powers. Just like you."

"Who said I don't have any powers?" Solordorr asked darkly, his crimson eyes flaring brightly.

Skid started to laugh at that, but suddenly his voice was caught in his throat as Solordorr turned around to face the soldier directly.

"Wha-?" Skid choked out, his eyes wide he dropped his spear and began clawing at his neck as if some unseen hand was crushing his throat.

Wisps of golden light drifted up from Solordorr's shoulders and his eyes continued to glow as he stared at the soldier. Casually he twisted his shackled wrists and the glowing bindings shattered, releasing his hands.

"This is mine," Solordorr said calmly as he took the dagger from the soldier's belt and returned it behind his back.

The soldier fell to his knee as wheezing noises escaped his blue lips. Blood ran from dozens of self-inflicted scratches on his neck and with bloodshot eyes Skid manage to look back up at Solordorr.

Squatting down in front of the soldier, so their eyes were level, he watched impassively as the last gasps were choked from Skid. The soldier's eyes rolled back in his head and his

clawing hands fell limp at his sides. Still under Solordorr's control the soldier's body remained upright and kneeling as if an invisible hand still held him about the throat.

As Solordorr stood up Skid's body finally slumped to the ground and the golden tendrils of energy around Solordorr's shoulders vanished. Taking a deep breath he smiled slightly and turned his attention to the two other prisoners in the cell, both of whom were giving him perplexed expressions.

"Who are you?" asked the noble elf, his expression a mixture of fear and hope.

"My name is Solordorr," he replied calmly, "And you are Lancer, of the Kingsguard, correct?"

The elf nodded, a look of concern coming to his eyes.

"Which means you are Tama, yes?" Solordorr turned to the other captive and the bald man nodded.

"That's right," replied Tama, "So why are you here? Come to free us I hope?"

A slight smile came to his face as he looked back and forth between the two captured Kingsguard.

"First, I would like it if you answer a simple question of mine," Solordorr replied seriously, and the two Kingsguard exchanged suspicious glances. "Where did you tell princess Nimrodell to go if your party was divided?"

"I'm not sure I know what you're talking about," the elf said seriously.

Solordorr's eyes narrowed dangerously and he slowly walked over in front of Lancer.

"Please don't take me for a fool." He said darkly, his crimson eyes flashing. "I know you and Tama have been watching over the princess since you bundled her out of Delaforr twelve years ago. I know you were accompanying her back to the capitol of Lakelinds. I know you were separated from the princess when Reparian sacked this city. What I don't know is where she would turn if she ever ended up on her own. So, if you would be so kind as to complete my knowledge."

The elf smirked, "If you know so much, I'm sure you realise that we'll never tell you."

“I had hoped you valued your life,” Solordorr replied simply as he unsheathed the dagger from his belt and held the sharp edge to Lancer’s neck.

The elf narrowed his eyes and firmed his jaw in defiance, “You can go to hell.”

Solordorr sighed and shook his head before he slid the blade across Lancer’s neck. The razor edge sliced easily through the elf’s skin, biting deep into his flesh and spilling his blood. Lancer’s eyes widened as he choked on his own blood and gritted his teeth as Solordorr turned away and casually walked over to Tama.

“You bastard,” the bald man spat, his eyes filled with utter rage.

“Have you got another statement for me?” Solordorr asked seriously as he wiped the warm blood off his dagger on Tama’s cheeks.

“I am going to kill you.” said Tama, his voice deathly calm.

“Wrong.” Solordorr sighed and sliced open the bald man’s throat.

Blood splattered the ground and ran freely down Tama’s muscled torso as he coughed and spat. But then the wound across his neck sealed itself and his blood stopped flowing.

“Tama the Immortal,” Solordorr smiled nastily, “The man who can never be killed. Shame for you that you still feel pain.”

As he made the statement Solordorr drove the dagger deep into Tama’s gut, making the man cry out in pain and grit his teeth.

“I wonder what will happen if I leave the blade in?” mused Solordorr, “Will you simply heal around it? Or will it stay an open wound?”

Tama did not reply and the bloody wound sealed itself around the knife. Solordorr smirked, seeing his answer and proceeded to twist the blade around, causing the bald man to cry out again.

“The hell is going on here!” someone shouted from the open door to the cell and stepped inside.

“Stupid soldiers,” Solordorr muttered and stretched his hand towards the soldier.

Spheres of golden energy streamed from his fingertips and thundered into the soldier, ripping through her armour and flesh before blasting out her back. As he clenched his fist the balls of light went into a murderous flurry, searing through the soldier from all angles and sending a mist of red into the air. The unfortunate soldier did not even have time to scream before she dropped dead in the doorway and Solordorr turned back to Tama.

“I hate interruptions,” he explained casually, “Now where were we? Of course, you were about to tell me where the princess would go.”

“You have my answer.” Tama growled, his eyes fierce.

“You know, it’s rather amusing,” Solordorr replied, “These shackles that bind you are designed to nullify magic and other natural born talents or powers, and yet you can still heal yourself as if they were not clasped to your wrists.”

To accentuate his point Solordorr wrenched free his dagger making Tama yell out in pain.

“You are going to be locked in here for the rest of your worthless life,” Solordorr stated, flicking the blood off his blade. “And I will find the princess one way or another. The only question you need to be asking yourself is: how much pain can I endure?”

Tama smirked at him before spitting in his face, “Reparian scum.”

Solordorr took a step back and grimaced in disgust, glaring at the captive as he took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped away the red spittle.

“What makes you think I’m from Reparian?” Solordorr asked calmly, but his eyes were seething. “Do I really look like one of those Emperor worshiping puppets?”

“You’re from Solgrad then,” Tama shrugged, “You just want the princess so you can marry her off to one of your princes and therefore have Lakelinds under your control. But know this: Lakelinds will be a free nation once again. Princess Nimrodell will take the throne and steer my homeland into a new age of prosperity and sovereignty.”

“Solgrad is closer to the truth,” Solordorr admitted, “But your opinion as to my motives is quite misguided.”

“Then what the hell do you want?” growled Tama.

“Tell me where Nimrodell is heading.” Solordorr stepped closer to the prisoner, his face inches away from Tama, his crimson eyes burning.

Tama smirked, “You can torture me all you want, but I’m not about to tell you anything.”

Anger swelled within Solordorr, but taking a deep breath he let it slide and stretched his neck uncomfortably.

“Have it your way,” he replied evenly, taking a step back and turning for the exit. “Know this Kingsguard: I will find her, and you will forever know that you were trapped in here with no way of helping.”

With that Solordorr headed for the door.

“And know this,” Tama called out, making Solordorr stop at the exit, “I will kill you for what you did to Lancer. Next time we meet, I will rip you apart.”

A smirk came to Solordorr’s face, “I look forward to it.”

With that he swiftly walked from the cell and along the corridor, his annoyance marked clearly upon his face, but it was not for naught, he still had one more avenue to try. The soldiers had said the sorceress Eclairé was being held in this airship as well, likely in Visteen’s private rooms.

He clenched his jaw irritably, Eclairé was not someone he was eager to question, but it seemed he had little choice in the matter, especially if her were to locate the princess.

Solordorr stopped walking suddenly and slunk into a recess in the corridor wall as a trio of guards moved across the doorway ahead of him. Clenching his jaw in frustration he weighed up his options, of course it would be no hassle to fight his way through these pathetic excuses for soldiers, but that would draw attention from more powerful individuals, namely Visteen, and he was in no mood to engage in battle with that particular sorceress. No, a more stealthy approach would be needed, and for that he needed a disguise. Fortunately for him, he was in the barracks and slipping through the next door a smile came to his face as he looked about the bunk beds and dirty laundry.



He cringed as he pulled out a uniform from the washing basket, it did not smell appealing, but this was his best option. With a sigh he took the clothes into the bathroom to get changed. Wearing dirty clothes was a small price to pay if he learnt of the princess's destination.

## Chapter Eight

Melodin shivered and pulled his fur cloak closer around his shoulders. It was cold along these mountain paths, very cold. The fire they had built in the small cave was weak and provided little warmth, and neither did it cook their dinner very well.

Dog whined slightly as she lay down beside him and Melodin wrapped some of his cloak over her back.

Bringing his hands up to his mouth he breathed into them, trying to warm them up some as he looked to his two other companions. Nim looked similarly miserable, hugging her own fur coat close about her and staring into the flames. But Reith on the other hand wore no cloak and was happily engaged in working on his bow.

“What are you doing over there Reith?” Melodin asked curiously, as he watched the man carve some symbol into the wood of the bow.

“Writing some enchantments,” the sky pirate explained without looking up from his work.

“Really? I didn’t think you were a mage.”

“I’m not,” Reith replied, “But Eclairé has taught me a few things over the years.”

“So, she’s a mage then?” asked Melodin curiously.

“She is a woman, so the correct term is Sorceress.”

“Is it true you can extend your age and change your appearance with magic?” Melodin asked, drawing a brief glance from Reith.

“Yes.”

“That’s cool,” Melodin remarked, “So what enchantment are you doing?”

“One that will hopefully strengthen the wood of the bow.”

“Strengthen?” Melodin scrunched up his face, “But didn’t you have a whole bunch of powerful weapons in your collection? Wasn’t there a better one among them?”

“I do have a very powerful bow in my collection,” Reith replied as he leaned back from the bow to admire his work, “But it is still on my airship, the Banshee, and that is still in Becklinds. I don’t even want to think about the fines I’ll get for leaving it in that dock.”

The sky pirate groaned and let out a deep breath before leaning close to his bow again, turning it slightly so the dim light of the fire would illuminate the enchantment better.

“Banshee,” Melodin repeated, a glimmer coming to his eyes, “That’s a cool name for an airship. What are we going to name ours Dog?”

His companion turned her green eyes up to him, a perplexed look on her face.

“How about ‘Strom Rider?’” he grinned, “Or ‘Lightning Chaser?’”

Dog whined and put her head back to the stone, covering her nose with her paw.

“What do you know about cool names anyway?” Melodin huffed, before looking back to Reith as he put the last touches on his inscription.

Blowing away the specks of wood the sky pirate went into his pack and rummaged around for a few seconds before pulling out a small silver box. Placing it carefully on the stone he opened it and grabbed a small salt shaker. Taking a deep breath he held the shaker over the carved enchantment before tapping it a few times, causing some sparkling dust, that was clearly not salt, to sprinkle down upon the carving. As the dust landed Reith mumbled a few words under his breath and the symbol he carved started to glow brightly.

With a satisfied smile the sky pirate leaned back from his work and nodded to himself before returning the shaker to the box, and the box to his satchel.

“Did that work then?” Melodin asked curiously as the glow of the enchantment subsided.

Reith nodded, “Yes. Not the best, or strongest, enchantment, but it will do.”

“Couldn’t you have just got a better bow?”

Reith looked to him, “This was my father’s bow.”

“So why isn’t it already really strong, or have some secret power to it?”

“You read to many stories,” chuckled Reith, “My father was a ranger, like his father before him, and this was just a simple bow handed down through the generations. Nothing special or unique about it, and I would have liked to keep it that way. But it is old, and hopefully this enchantment will keep it from breaking so that I may one day hand it to my own son.”

“Are you any good with it?” Melodin asked, the sparkle returning to his eyes.

“I’m alright,” Reith shrugged offhandedly.

“Is your natural power connected to archery?” asked Melodin, drawing a slight frown from the sky pirate.

“It’s impolite to ask someone about their talents,” Reith replied calmly, causing Melodin’s shoulders to slump a bit. “But no, my powers have nothing to do with archery, or being a ranger, unlike my father and grandfather.”

“What about you Nim?” Melodin asked curiously, drawing a surprised look from the girl. “Is your talents related to the pistol you carry?”

Blinking as if just awakening from a dream she glanced down to her holstered gun before looking back to Melodin and Reith awkwardly.

“No,” she stammered.

“So you must be really good with it then,” Melodin pressed, “Can I have a look?”

Hesitantly Nim drew forth the pistol and held it out in front of her with both hands so he and Reith could get a good look.

“Wait, that’s a Reparian style pistol,” Melodin observed with a frown, his eyes going to Nims’.

“Why would you carry that? Don’t you hate the Empire?”

“I do.” she replied through tight lips, “But a pistol is the only weapon I can wield with sufficient skill, plus it is a reminder.”

“Of what?” asked Melodin.

“Of how much I hate Reparian.”

Melodin bit down on his lip awkwardly, and glanced to Reith who simply shrugged with his eyes. Dog whined quietly and a still silence filled the cave, the only sound to be heard was the crackle of the twigs in the fire and the howl of the wind outside.

“What about you Melodin?” Reith broke the awkwardness, “What weapon do you favour?”

“Me?” Melodin asked back in surprise and hesitated, “Well, I don’t carry any weapon. Never have really.”

“Never?” Nim asked curiously.

Melodin shook his head, “Never had the need to.”

“What is your talent, if you don’t mind me asking?” Reith inquired curiously.

“Well,” a smug look came to Melodin’s face and he puffed his chest up slightly, “You could say I have a knack for finding things that are lost, if you get my meaning?”

“Not really,” Nim gave him a confused look, and Dog growled slightly.

“That’s why I work the notice boards you see,” explained Melodin, “I take jobs to track down lost and stolen items. Never not completed a job.”

“You’re a professional thief.” Reith stated more than asked, stealing Melodin’s bluster.

“I suppose you could say that,” replied Melodin, his shoulder slumping a bit. “But I’m really good at it.”

“If you say so,” Reith remarked quietly, a bemused look on his face.

“I got this ring before you did remember?” Melodin waved his hand at the sky pirate who narrowed his dark eyes in return. “And now that I have it, I’ll bet I can use the wind magic of the spirit inside it.”

“If you did that you’d be more of a fool than I thought you were,” Reith was quick to say seriously. “Do you have any idea the dangers that ring will bring to your life?”

“Yes, you already told me,” Melodin sighed heavily, “And constantly bring it up every time I mention the ring.”

“Well, if I say it enough times perhaps you will understand the gravity of the situation.”

“I do already understand.”

“Really?” Reith pretended to be surprised. “Tell me, has the spirit trapped in that ring spoken to you yet?”

Melodin glanced curiously to Nim and back to Reith before he shook his head.

“Soon you will hear it,” the sky pirate continued, his features grave, “Whispers. Suggestions. Offers of power. Just use its power once, just once. Maybe you’ll be faced with an obstacle, maybe an enemy, and the spirit will speak to you. Its voice will be sweet and encouraging. Let me help you, it will say. Let me share with you my powers this once. Do not heed its words, for it will never be once, and if you do give in to the temptation you will obtain incredible powers sure, but in return it will you will have to surrender part of your very life force.

“But perhaps you’re stronger than that. Perhaps you do not listen to the voice. The spirit will stop trying, right? You’d be a fool to think that. The whispers never stop. They will come to you in your dreams. They will pursue you constantly. Every waking hour of every day the spirit will tempt you, plead with you until you break. And you will break. Just this once, you will think, just this once I will use the powers of this ring and the whispers will be silenced. And then it will be too late, by then the demonic spirit will draw on your life energy until there is nothing left of you but a withered corpse.”

Silence filled the cave once more and Melodin glance to Nim again who was eying the ring on his hand with great concern.

“Well,” Melodin said quietly, looking back to Reith, “You really know how to lighten the mood.”

The sky pirate shook his head at Melodin in disgust, “And you fail to see the seriousness of this situation, yet again.”

With that the man lied down on his bed roll and rolled over so that his back was to the fire, and to Melodin. Nim followed suit, curling up in her coat and putting her feet as close to the fire as she could, leaving Melodin awake.

He did not want to admit it, but Reith words lingered in his mind, filling him with concern. Dog whined to him and placed her head on his knee, her green eyes seeing the distress flowing through him.

"It'll be alright Dog," Melodin said quietly as he patted her head. "No spirit is going to eat my soul."

With a sigh he too decided to sleep for the night and lying down next to his companion he hugged Dog close sharing body heat to keep them both warm throughout the night.

As he drifted off to sleep a strange thought came to his head: Reith lies.

\* \* \*

The chair squeaked and scrapped across the wooden floorboards of the room as he casually dragged it behind him. Its grating sound echoed around the small room causing the person chained to a wooden table at the centre to startle awake.

The noise stopped as he placed the chair loudly at the end of the table near the captive's feet. Grabbing the hanging chains Solordorr tugged on it causing the suspended table to angle up, allowing the prisoner to face him.

"My, my," remarked Solordorr as he looked at the nearly naked prisoner who bore hundreds of wounds across her body, "Visteen has certainly had fun with you. I glad she left your face alone though."

"Who are you?" the prisoner stammer weakly, her eyes barely open.

Solordorr sighed as he sat down, "My dear Eclair, I'm disappointed you don't recognise an old friend."

The elven sorceress blinked a few times and tried hard to focus her eyes on him.

"Solordorr, is that you?" stammered Eclair, "Am I dreaming? Is this some spell Visteen has cast to send me into delusion?"

Solordorr turned his eyes to the walls and tables that were covered in a startling diversity of torture devices and tools.

“No. I am real,” he replied as he looked back to the elf.

“If you are then you must help me,” Eclairé replied, clarity starting to return to her mind.

“Free me before that bitch returns.”

“She is down in the castle overseeing some talks with the King and the mayors of the Shirten towns,” Solordorr said simply, “So she won’t be returning for a while. This is good, because I have many questions for you.”

Eclairé narrowed her eyes at him, “So you’ve come to continue Visteen’s work and not to help me.”

“Depends,” he replied, his crimson eyes watching the elf closely.

“On what?”

“How cooperative you will be.”

Eclairé firmed her jaw, her eyes narrowing.

Solordorr firmed his jaw and stood up abruptly, knocking the chair to the ground. Grabbing the dangling chains he gave them another tug which brought the torture table up, suspending Eclairé upright before him so their eyes were level.

“Our past relationship is just that: in the past,” Solordorr said seriously, “So I suggest you do answer my questions, for I will not draw out pain like Visteen so likes to do. I will kill you, make no mistake about that.”

“Our friendship means nothing then?” Eclairé asked back, tears rimming her eyes.

“It meant nothing.” He was quick to clarify, before turning away and kicking the chair across the floor.

“I’m sorry for what happened,” the chained elf said sadly.

“Now you apologise?” Solordorr wheeled back around, his crimson eyes flaring. “It’s been over twenty years since you betrayed me.”

“I didn’t know wh-”



“Enough.” He cut Eclairé off viciously and moved closer. “You did know what would happen. There was no way you could not. But it is done. And it is not why I’m here.”

Solordorr took a deep breath to calm himself.

“Where did you teleport Reith and the two kids?” he asked very deliberately, his face inches from hers, his eyes fierce.

“So it was you at the tavern. But know this: I didn’t tell Visteen after she tortured me for hours,” Eclairé stated, her expression resolute, “What makes you think I will tell you?”

Solordorr smirked and took a step back, “Visteen is after the Spirit Rings, where I care not for those trinkets.”

“Then what?”

“The girl,” he said simply, “She is Princess Nimrodell of Lakelinds, and I need to have some words with her.”

A confused look came to the elf’s features before her eyes widened, “So this has nothing to do with the rings?”

“Of course not. No one cares for those things anymore.”

“Free me,” Eclairé said suddenly, “Free me and I will take you the same place I sent them.”

Solordorr laughed at that, “Free you? Now why would I do that? There are other means at finding out where the girl is, you just happen to be the most convenient at the moment.”

“I said I will help you,” begged the prisoner, causing him to narrow his eyes at her.

“Help me, and then stab me in the back again? I can’t trust you.”

“You don’t need to,” Eclairé was quick to say, “I will take you to the same place I sent them. You have my word on that despite whether you believe me or not. But you’d be foolish not to see the mutual benefit for both of us here.”

Solordorr clenched his jaw, eyes unblinking.

“Or have you just come to seek your revenge?” Eclairé asked angrily, “If so, kill me now, it’ll save me from being tortured by that bitch.”

Narrowing his eyes Solordorr took a step towards her and raised his hand menacingly. A golden glow appeared around him as his eyes burned brightly. Balls of light shot forth from his hands, causing Eclairé to gasp and shut her eyes as they raced towards her, but he was not trying to kill her. The energies crashed into the shackled binding her wrists and ankles, disintegrating them and letting her drop to her feet. But her knees buckled underneath her and she collapsed to the floor, too weak from the torturing to stand.

“It will be hard to escape if you stay on the ground,” Solordorr replied simply, not bothering to move to help her.

Eclairé groaned and gasped in pain as she tried to stand with no effect.

“Give me a hand, damn it,” the elf glared at him.

Slowly he walked over and squatted down in front of her.

“So tell me: just how are you going to teleport us when you can’t even stand?” Solordorr asked, his eyes hard.

“There are some healing potions on the table over there,” Eclairé motioned to the side, drawing his gaze to the empty table.

“No there isn’t.”

Eclairé looked up in concern and grimaced.

“Why don’t you just cast a spell on yourself?” he asked flatly, even though he already knew the answer.

“I would’ve done that already if I could,” Eclairé snapped back, and Solordorr hid his smirk.

“Here, use this,” he said drawing the elf’s eye to his hand where a ball of energy glowed at the centre of his palm. “It should be enough to cast a healing spell upon yourself.”

Eclairé did not reply as she was quick to place her own hand over the top of the energy and close her eyes. As the elf muttered some words under her breath Solordorr could feel the energy being drawn away from the ball hovering in his palm and into the spell Eclairé was casting. The light of the energy disappeared and in its place Eclairé’s whole body glowed

faintly as the wounds began to heal themselves, leaving behind no scars on her smooth skin.

As the spell was completed Solordorr stood up and turned away, letting Eclairé stagger back to her feet.

“Shall we teleport then?” he asked glancing back to the elf, who looked rather pale and exhausted.

“I haven’t got the energy,” she replied even though it was obvious.

“I’m starting to think you’ll be more trouble than you’re worth,” he replied dryly and clenched his jaw.

“We’ll leave the same way you came,” Eclairé stated, drawing a scoff from Solordorr.

“That’s out of the question,” he replied, “Regardless, I’ll think of something. Shall we?”

Turning away he headed towards the door, but Eclairé moved in another direction towards the table she had pointed out before.

“Damn it, where are my things?” cursed the elf, her eyes darting about.

“They’re gone, let’s move,” Solordorr replied impatiently as he waited at the exit.

“I’m not wearing anything,” Eclairé snapped back.

“Then put that on,” he pointed to a pile of clothes in beside the door, “It’s a soldier’s uniform I used to sneak up here. It smells bad, but I’m sure it will fit. Maybe.”

Eclairé walked stiffly over to the bundle of clothes and picking the shirt up hesitantly she turned a disgusted look towards him.

“I’m not about to give you any more energy so you can conjure some garments,” he replied flatly and she frowned.

“Fine.” Eclairé grumbled and slowly pulled on the uniform, which barely fitted. “I can see this is going to be an enjoyable trip.”

“Would you like me to chain you back up?” Solordorr asked back irritably, “Or better yet just leave you behind to be caught? I’m sure Visteen would enjoy beating you senseless again.”

“Alright, let’s go,” Eclairé replied seriously, “We should head to the cargo bay. There we can steal a small airship, maybe even a fighter.”

“No,” Solordorr replied flatly, stopping her from reaching to the door handle. “Let’s be clear: you need me if you want to see the outside of this ship so you’ll do as I say. Exactly as I say.”

Eclairé narrowed her eyes slightly at him, but she nodded in agreement.

“What is your plan then?” she asked, and he hesitated.

“I am to be your prisoner,” he replied stiffly, “And you are to transfer me to the castle cells. Strange how history has a way of repeating itself, wouldn’t you say?”

## Chapter Nine

The morning was crisp and clear, with a gentle wind racing through the mountains bringing its icy touch to his cheeks. The dawn sparkled off the snow and caused the rising clouds to glow like fire before his eyes.

Having slept in another cave that night Reith led the other on the way through the mountain pass, but with a heavy snow fall last night the going was slow.

"I telling you guys, I'm sick of sleeping in caves," Melodin remarked as he trudged through the snow drift at the back of the trio. "All through the night I kept dreaming a crack was going to open up at the back of the cave and goblins were going to attack us."

Dog barked as she trotted across the top of the snow beside him.

Reith laughed, "You don't need to worry. Goblins aren't that smart."

"Did you sleep alright Nim?" Melodin asked curiously, catching up to the girl.

"Yes. Fine," she stammered in reply, glancing to him quickly out of the corner of her eye.

"Not a big talker 'ay?" Melodin replied, a slight frown coming to his face.

"Depends on the company," the princess said off-handily.

"I get it."

"Wait, no. That's not what I meant," Nim was quick to try and apologise. "It's just we are strangers."

"You're the one who wanted the help to get to City State," Melodin gave her a blank look.

"I do." she nodded.

"I see," Melodin said loudly, "We're just some bodyguards? Is that it? Not companions but servants for the princess?"

"What? No." Nim exclaimed angrily, "Do you think so little of me?"

“Relax,” he laughed in reply, “I was just teasing.”

Nim frowned at him and turned away causing his levity to subside in awkwardness. Slowing his pace the princess moved ahead of him and Melodin gave a baffled look to Dog who cocked her head to the side curiously. With a shrug he scratched his head and continued through the snow.

“Speaking of goblins,” he said suddenly, “Do you think we’ll come across any?”

“Unlikely,” Reith said over his shoulder, “Maybe once we move onto the main pass through the mountains. But like I said, they’re too stupid to lay ambushes. Goblins are mainly scavengers, picking up what has been left behind by larger, more dangerous creatures.”

“Like orcs?” Melodin’s eyes lit up with excitement.

“Not around these parts, no,” replied the sky pirate. “More like trolls.”

“What about bandits?”

“Not this high in the mountains.” Reith shook his head, “But that reminds me, you said you don’t carry a weapon, does that mean you can’t use one either?”

Both Reith and Nim stopped ahead of him and turned about as he glanced nervously to Dog.

“Of course I can use a weapon,” Melodin laughed slightly, “Who doesn’t?”

“Sword?” the sky pirate narrowed his eyes behind the strands of hair.

“What?” Melodin asked in surprise, “Yeah, that’s right. Swords my go to weapon when I need one.”

“Short sword? Long sword? Broad sword? What kind?”

“Well,” Melodin stammered, “Like I said, I don’t really wield a weapon, it’s not my forte.”

“You don’t have a preference then?”

“Well, I suppose if I had to choose I’d probably go for a katana,” Melodin said as he scratched his chin.

“Really?” Reith raised an eyebrow, “So you do in fact know a bit about weaponry, I’m surprised.”

Melodin gave the man a cocky grin before it vanished suddenly, “Wait. What do you mean you’re surprised? I know plenty about weaponry.”

Reith smirked before continuing along the path with Nim quick to follow.

“And not just about weaponry,” Melodin continued, jumping to catch up to them, “I know a bunch about all sorts of things.”

“That is surprising,” Reith called back and chuckled to himself.

Melodin stopped talking and frowned before glancing to Dog.

“I get the feeling he doesn’t really like me,” Melodin said quietly to his companion and Dog growled low in agreement.

The morning slowly drifted by as the sun reached ever higher into the clear skies, warming the day and turning the icy snow to slush under his feet. Clumps of snow that had gathered on the limbs of the many pines trees in the area dripped down as he passed underneath, sending cold droplets trickling under Melodin’s warm cloak and making him jump in surprise.

It was not until midday that they reached the main pass through the mountains which was wide and well-used, lined with fallen logs and lush plant life. But it was the middle of spring after all and it was only in the depths of winter did the mountain road become blocked off by snow.

The temperature was much warmer now that they had travelled below the snow line and Melodin was the first to remove the heavy cloak before stuffing it into the pack Reith had given him.

In the trees he could hear the birds chirp happily and all through the air dozens of butterflies fluttered about in their haphazard dance. The scent of many flowers flew on the cool breeze and among the rocks and pines he caught sight of the local animals racing to hide from them.

Dog spotted the small animals as well and as a rabbit rushed from the undergrowth ahead of them she took off in a flash of white fur.

“Sick ‘em Dog,” Melodin cheered as she disappeared into the trees in pursuit of the rabbit.

“Looks like we’ll have a nice meal tonight.”

“Should we wait for her?” Nim asked curiously, her eyes lingering on the spot Dog had vanished.

“Nah,” he replied with a grin, “She’ll catch up. Dog doesn’t get lost.”

His words proved true, for as they continued on the way down through the rocky pass they soon came upon Dog waiting patiently for them around a corner. Sitting comfortably in the shade, huffing heavily with her tongue hanging out and a dead rabbit by her side, a delighted look on her face.

“Good job Dog,” Melodin laughed and skipped into the lead to roughly pat his companion on the head and snatch up the dead animal. “Not much meat on this one, but rabbit stew will be better than the meat jerky we’ve had for the last few nights.”

Continuing on their way, the path began to wind down along a ravine with more rocks than trees about them, one side of the road fell away to meet a merry stream gushing alongside them, jumping over the rocks and twisting through the mountains before lunging over a tall waterfall.

As the path turned from the lip of the falls a spur of rock reached out towards the water where a single tree sat and alongside it stood a tall grey stone with a smooth surface and rounded top.

“Hey, look,” Melodin exclaimed as his eyes fell upon the sight, “A Way Stone.”

Breaking off from the group he skipped along the spur of rock to get a closer look.

“I wonder what zodiac constellation this one is for?” he wondered aloud as he dropped to his knees in front of the rock with Dog beside him.

As Reith and Nim joined him Melodin rubbed away the dirt and moss from the face of the Way Stone to reveal a feint, but beautiful, carving of a fox.



“Nice. It’s the fox,” Melodin exclaimed before he pulled off his pack and began rummaging through it. “Come on. I know I still have some incense left.”

“You’re going to make an offering?” Reith asked in surprise, “I didn’t pick you for the superstitious type.”

“Its bad luck if you don’t,” Melodin replied as he took out a small box. “You guys should do it as well.”

Reith scoffed and headed back to the road with Nim slowly following him.

“Four left Dog,” Melodin remarked quietly as he took out the incense sticks and stabbed them into the dirt at the base of the Way Stone. “Guess we’ll use them all. I doubt we’ll come across any other Way Stones before we reach City State.”

Dog seemed to agree and Melodin was quick to light the sticks with some matches. The tips of the incense flared alight and the fragrant smoke drifted into the air before being carried away on the wind.

“I think I was born in the year of the fox,” Melodin remarked, resting back on his feet, “Or was it the wolf? I can’t remember.”

“Done yet?” Reith called out from the road.

“Yes,” Melodin replied irritably and stood up, but stopped as his eyes spotted something between the roots of the trees. “Wait. One moment. I found some mushrooms to go with the rabbit stew tonight.”

Happily Melodin jumped to pluck up the large mushrooms, making sure to check them first to see if they were poisonous or not.

“Purple under the head means you won’t be dead,” he chuckled to himself as he stuffed them into a satchel before skipping back to the others. “See? I told you that making offerings to the Way Stones was good luck. We wouldn’t have mushrooms for our stew if I hadn’t.”

“Mushrooms are not that hard to find in the woodlands,” Reith replied as he took up the lead again. “If you wanted them, all you had to do was say so and I would have found some.”

“That’s right, you were a ranger,” Nim remarked, “You could have hunted down a rabbit for dinner easily or perhaps even an elk.”

“Indeed,” the Sky Pirate replied over his shoulder, “A small task.”

“Perhaps tomorrow night you could then?” Nim asked eagerly and Reith gave a nod.

Walking alongside Melodin Dog growled low.

“Don’t worry Dog,” Melodin said quietly, “I’m grateful you caught that rabbit.”

Dog’s green eyes sparkled as she looked up at him, and a smile seemed to come to his furry companion’s face.

Letting out a sigh Melodin turned back to the pleasant scenery around them and the blue sky overhead. Twisting and turning the path continued to follow the ravine, dogging the river as it cascaded down the rapids and moving through small dells filled with pines with green ferns around their feet. It would still be a few days until they were out of the mountains, but at least now they could spend the night around a camp fire with the open sky overhead and not stuck in some stuffy cave that was likely once home to some troll.

As the day drifted by they passed by a few travellers taking the pass through the Strand Mountains, some on foot but most either atop a horse or driving a vehicle.

“Look Dog, a car,” Melodin remarked as an old truck came down the road, forcing them to move to the side to let it pass. “You don’t see many of those outside City State, and usually they’re all broken.”

The truck pattered noisily past them, coughing exhaust fumes into the crisp air and making Melodin pinch his nose in disgust.

“I doubt he’ll make it through the mountains,” Melodin continued, “You won’t find any fuel for it outside City State.”

“I hear Reparian have been experimenting with such cars,” Reith remarked over his shoulder, “Trying to get them to run on Crystal Core energy.”

“I hope not,” Melodin replied.

“It won’t work probably,” Reith shrugged.

“But don’t airships use Crustal Core?” Nim asked curiously.

“Yes,” replied Reith, “But, Crystal Cores are used to produce the energy; it is the turbine rings and engines that allow airships to fly. Without the correct application of the Crystal Cores they’re pretty useless. So for it to work in cars they would have to remake the whole engine from scratch, which I don’t think Repararian have the time or resources to do. Especially with the wars they are fighting against Solegrad and Narglefarr.”

“Why don’t City State try using Crystal Core energy for their cars then?” Nim asked curiously.

“Because they make too much money off the fuel they dig up,” Melodin replied simply before Reith could answer, drawing a curious look from the others.

“Exactly,” agreed the Sky Pirate. “City State owns all the fuel resources used by their cars, which is why you don’t see many of them in other reaches of Middenland.”

“Smelly things any way,” Melodin remarked, “I’m glad they aren’t everywhere.”

Dog barked in agreement and Melodin noticed Nim’s lips go thin as she stopped asking Reith questions.

The day passed by with no troubles and by night time they were camping beneath the bows of the tall pines that populated the stretch of a long vale.

“Best stew ever,” Melodin exclaimed happily and slapped his full stomach. “Thank you Dog for that rabbit, and thank you Fox zodiac for those mushrooms. Told you guys that Way Stone would bring good fortune, those mushrooms were simply delicious.”

“They were,” agreed Reith as he finished his meal as well, causing Melodin to grin wide and pat Dog on the head.

“Won’t get mushrooms like that in City State,” Melodin remarked, “Although they do have some interesting foods there.”

“When was the last time you were in City State?” Reith asked curiously, and Melodin turned his eyes towards the sky thoughtfully.

“Let me think,” he mumbled and scratched his chin, “It was just before we sailed to Shirten, so about a year. Is that right Dog?”

Too busy finishing off the scraps of the rabbit Dog did not reply.

“A while anyway,” Melodin said firmly, looking back to the Sky Pirate.

“What’s it like?” Nim spoke up, her eyes turning to Reith. “City State I mean?”

“Very different,” the dark eyed man shrugged.

“Is it true that the entire realm is filled with tall buildings?” asked Nim, drawing a slight smirk from the Sky Pirate.

“Not quite,” Reith replied, as he rested back between the roots of a pine tree, “There are about four or five main cities spread out across the region, and in between are many smaller towns, all connected by roads made of tarmac. There is still country sides and mountains filled with forests and rivers, but I don’t think you could go anywhere and not see some kind of buildings or road. Unlike the rest of Middenland.”

“Truly,” Nim replied quietly in wonder.

“It’s also the most populated region,” Melodin replied, “With the most number of people with talents, which is why they have the Hero Association.”

“I’ve heard of the Association,” Nim nodded slightly.

“They need it too,” Melodin continued, “There are heaps of people with talents that go around causing trouble. I’m sure you can imagine I didn’t get much work when I was in City State, that’s why we didn’t stay long. Hey Dog?”

Melodin looked to his fury companion and frown as he noticed Dog was fast asleep and not listening to him.

“And they don’t have airships, right?” Nim looked back to Reith.

“There are some,” Reith replied, “Mostly those of merchants and adventurers such as myself travelling between the realms of Middenland. There are some wealthy types in City State who have their own airships, but most use cars and other such vehicles.”

“I see,” Nim said quietly, her eyes falling to the meal she was still eating.

“So who is it you’re looking for in City State anyway?” Melodin asked curiously.

“Someone important,” Nim stammered hesitantly.

“Someone who used to be in the Delaforr Kingsguard perhaps?” Reith asked, drawing Nim’s eyes to his and she nodded.

“They would probably be in the Hero Associations, right?” Melodin asked, and groaned slightly.

“Not a fan of the Association, Melodin?” Reith asked, his dark eyes sparking.

“No, it’s just. Never mind,” stammered Melodin in reply, drawing curious looks from both Nim and Reith.

“But I would think you are right,” Reith continued, “It is likely that someone of the Kingsguard would join the Hero Association.”

“So they will be easy to find?” Nim asked hopefully, drawing a nod from the Sky Pirate.

“I would think so,” replied Reith as he moved around in the nook between the tree roots and closed his eyes. “We’ll find out once we get there.”

Melodin rolled onto his back as Nim looked back to meal she had hardly touched. Staring up at the stars between the branches he let out a deep sigh and closed his eyes, drifting off to sleep with the sounds of Dog snoring in his ear.

\* \* \*

“Damn this uniform,” Eclairé cursed quietly as she arranged the back of her pants for the tenth time. “And the smell.”

“Comfortable, aren’t they,” Solordorr remarked sarcastically as he walked with his hands bound in front of him.

“That’s not how I would describe them,” the elf replied unhappily as she led him by the arm along the hallway. “What I wouldn’t give to conjure my own clothes.”

I would not describe what you used to wear as clothing,” Solordorr replied with a smirk, “More like a random assortment of rags, that in no way looked comfortable.”

Eclaire laughed softly at that, “I’d have you know they were very comfortable, but my wardrobe has changed somewhat since those days. You should have seen what Visteen was wearing whilst she was torturing me? Now that would have fitted your description better.”

“Sorry I missed it,” he replied with a smirk, “She was always a strange one.”

Their conversation stopped abruptly as a trio of soldiers came around the corner ahead of them, fully armed and armoured, and talking amongst themselves. Solordorr clenched his jaw as they passed by, giving him and Eclaire no notice, and continued on their way.

“I’m surprised they didn’t pay attention to us,” Eclaire breathed a sigh of relief, “I mean, I’m practically busting out of this shirt.”

“A noteworthy sight indeed,” he replied dryly, “It will be different once we reach the transfer pad.”

Eclaire took a deep breath and nodded in agreement.

“I do hope you remember what I told you,” Solordorr continued his voice low, “Else we will both have front row seats to Visteen’s scandalous wardrobe as she tortures us.”

“Don’t worry,” the elf replied confidently, “I’ve done things of a similar nature before.”

He did not reply as Eclaire lead him by the arm through a doorway and out into the large hanger where many soldiers were running about. The wind picked up and the sound of engines roared as two smaller crafts took off from their loading bays and headed out the opening at the far end of the hanger. Fortunately the other soldiers were too busy to pay him and Eclaire much attention, most racing by with no signs of recognition coming to their faces.

But the ease of their escape soon came to an end as they approached the transfer pad that would take them down into the Becklinds Castle bailey.

“Hold there soldier,” the officer regulating the transfer pad raised his hand as they approached.

“Prisoner transfer sir,” Eclairé said as she straightened her shoulders and firmed her jaw.

Unfortunately at the same time she accentuated the bad fit of her uniform, and even caused the top button of her shirt to pop open drawing a perplexed look from the officer.

“It’s laundry day sir,” Eclairé stammered awkwardly, “It’s the only uniform I had that was clean.”

The officer laughed at that and shook his head, “You should spend your wage on new gear soldier.”

“I will sir, sorry sir,” replied Eclairé sheepishly as she buttoned up her top button again.

“Transfer you say?” the officer turned his attention to Solordorr, who stared despondently ahead, avoiding eye contact.

“He was captured during the assault,” Eclairé explained, “Just some common low-life we’re handing over to the castle dungeons.”

“Really?” remarked the officer as he looked through his files, “I’ve got no mention of it in my log. Who signed this off?”

“Visteen sir,” replied Eclairé, “I was told all the paper work had been sorted.”

“Doesn’t look like it,” said the officer as he continued to search his papers.

“Should I take him back to the cells?”

“No, go ahead and take him down,” the officer sighed, “Visteen has her hands full with that sorceress we captured, I guess she hasn’t had time to file the paper work for this one. We’ll sort it out later and get a more appropriate fitting uniform in town before you come back up soldier. I hear there is a good tailor over in the south side of Becklinds.”

“Yes sir,” Eclairé saluted before pushing Solordorr towards the transfer plate.

“See?” Solordorr remarked quietly, “I told you it would work.”

Before Eclairé could utter a reply an alarm sounded out through the entire airship causing them to stop in their tracks and glance about.

“Prisoner escape,” a voice announced through a loud speaker, “All hands on high alert. Repeat prisoner escape.”

Eclairé’s eyes widened as she looked to him.

“Hold it soldier,” the officer called suddenly, his voice grave. “Did you say you got this man from the cells?”

“Yes sir,” Eclairé replied as they turned about, her voice nearly breaking.

“Did you see anything suspicious?” the man asked seriously, his eyes looking hard at Solordorr.

“No sir, I don’t think so.”

“Captain,” another soldier called out as he raced towards them, grabbing the officer’s attention.

“Report soldier,” the officer demanded, “What’s happening?”

“That Kingsguard we captured sir,” the soldier said between heavy breaths, “The bald one, Sama I think his name is, he’s escaped sir. Killed several of our men in the process.”

“What of the elf that was in the same cell as him?”

“Dead sir.”

“What? How?”

“Throat slit from ear to ear,” reported the soldier, causing Eclairé’s eyes to look in horror towards Solordorr.

“Did Tama kill his comrade?” the captain demanded.

“Doesn’t look like it sir.”



“Thanks for the report son,” the officer said after he let out a deep breath, “If Tama is still on the ship proceed with extreme caution, that man is highly dangerous.”

“Yes sir.”

With that the soldier took off to spread the news and the captain turned a grave expression towards Solodorr and Eclairé.

“Right,” the captain said seriously, “You two best get a move on then. Step onto the rune etchings and I’ll transfer you down into the bailey.”

Eclairé nodded before roughly shoving Solodorr onto the transfer plate. Hiding back his smile at the elf’s change in demeanour he did not say anything as the ship around them disappeared and was replaced with the stone of the castle keep.

“I can’t believe you,” Eclairé hissed quietly as they walked from the transfer plate and through the bailey. “You killed Lancer, one of the greatest Kingsguard to ever live.”

“Doesn’t say much for the Kingsguard,” he replied flatly as he casually removed the bindings around his wrists. “Besides, he was in my way.”

“You’ve changed Solodorr,” Eclairé let out a deep breath and shook her head.

“And I wonder what the reason for that could be?” he was quick to reply, fixing the elf sorceress with a fierce look. “Now follow me and keep your mouth shut.”

She did, but he could feel her judgemental stare burning into the back of his head, making him clench his jaw irritably and start to regret freeing her.

## Chapter Ten

“Can you stop being so slow?” he asked flatly as he looked back over his shoulder to see the elf lagging a dozen paces behind him.

“Easy for you to say,” Eclairé replied irritably as she caught up to him and rested on her haunches, her face pale. “You weren’t being tortured several hours ago.”

Solordorr sighed and turned to look back of them to where the alleyway moved out into the main street.

“If you gave me some more energy I could teleport us out of the city,” Eclairé remarked thoughtfully as she gathered her breath.

“No,” Solordorr replied simply. “Even if I was inclined to, Visteen has already put wards in place to stop any teleportation out, or into, the city. We’ll go by aircraft. But perhaps you should find some different clothes first.”

He looked back to the elf in the soldier’s uniform she still wore.

“Again, some energy from you will allow me to conjure some garments,” Eclairé replied, her frustration obvious.

“You will get no more energy from me,” he said flatly, making the elf narrow her eyes at him.

“Fine,” she said as she stood up and headed for the alley exit, “I’ll just get some from our airship.”

Just as Eclairé finished her sentence he quickly grabbed her by the arm, pulling her backwards and roughly into the wall of the building. The elf tried to cry out but his hand slapped over her mouth to muffle any noise.

“Be quiet.” Solordorr hissed in her ear just as squad of heavily armoured soldiers stomped along the main road in front of the alleyway.

Eclaire remained quiet, but once the soldier's had passed she roughly shoved his arm away from her.

"They're just soldiers," Eclaire snapped angrily, her eyes glaring at him.

"Just soldiers?" he asked back in surprise, "Your espionage skills have clearly dulled Eclaire. By now your escape would be known, why do you think I've been going through these haphazard alleyways?"

The elf did not reply, but her expression clearly displayed her annoyance with him.

"You said you had an airship?" he ignored the glare, "Perhaps that is something you could have mentioned earlier. Where is it?"

Eclaire took a deep breath and clenched her jaw slightly, "Hanger thirty-two," she finally said.

"Is Visteen aware of it?"

"No. Why would she be?"

"So you didn't blurt it out whilst she was torturing you?"

"My espionage skills haven't dulled that much," Eclaire replied flatly.

Solordorr narrowed his eyes slightly before slowly nodding and looking back to the exit of the alleyway.

"Alright," he said as he glanced out into the open and the passing crowds, "There are no soldiers in sight. But," he glanced back to the elf, "Take off your shirt before we head to the hanger."

"What?" Eclaire made no move to follow his instruction, "I have no bra on. There's no way I'm walking around the city like that."

"Just do it," Solordorr sighed irritably and began taking off his own shirt and jacket. "You wear these."

Tossing his garments to the elf he turned back to the road, again cautiously looking for any signs of trouble. But all seemed quiet enough, the sun was shining brightly through the trees

and a light breeze was causing the parasols and flags to flap gently above the heads of the many citizens going about their daily chores. Merchants operating roadside stalls were calling out to the people passing by, trying to sell their goods and be heard over the noise of buskers and street performers. A rattling cart pulled by two horses moved slowly down the wide street, forcing people to move out of the way as children chased after it playing some kind of game.

“Perfect fit,” Eclairé remarked, drawing his attention from the road, “These are some powerfully imbued clothes you have.”

Solordorr nodded slightly, “They are, so you had best return them once you have your own. Let’s go.”

“What of you?” Eclairé asked before he took a step.

Solordorr glanced down at his naked torso and shrugged, “I’ll be fine, let’s go. And try to keep up this time.”

With that being said he swiftly turned about and strode out into the main street, merging with the crowd as he headed for the airship hangers in the western side of the city. Eclairé was close behind him and together they filtered through the people, constantly on the lookout for passing Reparian soldiers. Fortune was with them and as the minutes passed they came across few soldiers, all of which were heading in another direction or were easily avoided.

It was early afternoon by the time they reached hanger thirty-two and were stopped by a station manager who wore an unhappy look upon his face.

“You two,” the man growled as they reached the door, “Is this your airship in there? It’s well past your departure time. Do you know the hassle this has caused? Now come one, pay up?”

Solordorr looked at the man blankly before he turned to Eclairé who shrugged.

“Don’t look at me, I have no money on me,” said the elf, causing him to grit his teeth.

“Well one of you better pay.” The manager demanded. “Five hundred your fine is.”

Narrowing his eyes at the man Solordorr slowly reached into a pouch at the back of his belt and took out a small coin purse, which he tossed to the man.

“How much did you give him?” Ecalire asked quietly as he pushed the way through the door and into the hanger.

“More than enough,” he replied darkly. “But I’ve wasted enough time on fools.”

The corridor was short and dimly lit as it led into a large circular room with an open roof. At the centre of the hanger sat a beautiful and stream lined airship, its wooden hull painted black and the canvas wings stark white. The front of the hull was shaped into the likeness of an eagle with golden wings and in large letters right beside it was the name of the craft: Banshee.

“Speaking of fools,” Solordorr growled irritably as several men moved out from the shadows to greet them.

“I’ll handle this,” Eclairé was quick to say.

“Finally,” one of the men said loudly as he and the others moved to block their path to the airship. “Eclairé, you don’t look so well. And where is Reith?”

“Not here obviously,” the elf replied simply, “What do you want Brausch?”

“You know exactly what I want,” the man was quick to say, “You two owe Jar’bon a lot of money. Ten thousand to be exact. Did that expedition to the Graveyard Basin actually find you anything?”

“Tell Jar’bon he’ll have his money in due time,” Eclairé replied confidently.

“You’ve had enough time,” one of Brauch’s associates snapped angrily.

“He’s right you know,” Brausch smirked, “It’s time you paid up.”

“Listen, what we found in Zarkadia is taking a bit longer to sell than we thought,” Eclairé replied, “But tell Jar’bon if he just waits a little bit longer he’ll have all his money, plus an extra twenty percent.”

Brausch narrowed his eyes at the elf, "Twenty percent?"

Eclaire nodded and glanced to Solordorr, "We're off to see the buyer right now."

"Fine," Brausch sighed irritably, "You have one week, and if you don't pay by then you'll be paying in flesh and blood. Remember that."

Eclaire smiled and nodded as the debt collectors headed from the hanger looking disappointed.

"I didn't think you'd be one to get a loan from a man like Jar'bon," Solordorr remarked offhandedly as they walked for the airship.

"Desperate times," Eclaire replied as they ducked under the wing of the ship, passed the turbine engines and to the back of the craft where a gangplank opened up, allowing them to walk up into the ship.

"Did you actually find anything other than sand in the Graveyard Basin?"

"Nope."

Solordorr chuckled at that as he followed the elf through the ship and up towards the bridge.

"Visteen doesn't know this airship so our flight permit should still work," Eclaire explained, "We should be out of the city with no troubles, and then I think we should head to Emperious."

Solordorr narrowed his eyes dangerously.

"During the interrogation Visteen alluded to research being done on the Spirit Rings," Eclaire continued, as she led the way, "Said they could be used to harness immense power. There's a laboratory-"

Solordorr's eyes flashed brightly and Eclaire's words were interrupted by a scream of pain that escaped her lips. Energy snaked across her body as she went rigid then dropped to her knees in agony.

"What is this?" the elf managed to stammer out through the spasms that wracked her body, forcing her back to straighten and her arms to be pinned to her sides.

Calmly Solordorr walked around in front of the elf, wisps of energy drifting from his shoulder as he squatted down in front of Eclairé.

“You said it yourself,” Solordorr said seriously, his crimson eyes staring hard at the elf, “My clothes are powerfully imbued.”

Eclairé did not reply as a groan of pain pushed its way through her clenched teeth.

“Let me make this crystal clear for you,” Solordorr said slowly, his eyes unblinking, “The only reason you are here is to take me to the same place you teleported princess Nimrodell. If you refuse to cooperate I will take you back to Visteen without a second thought. I might even stay for a while and watch her torture you some more.”

Eclairé’s body twisted in pain again and a tear trickled from her eye.

“You don’t trust me,” Solordorr stated flatly, “That is obvious from past actions, and be certain that I do not trust you anymore. So, I am posed with a problem: there is nothing stopping you from teleporting away, or sending me to some far off place, the moment you get your energy to cast spell.”

Sticking his hand into his pouch he pulled forth a delicate necklace with a pink diamond pendant dangling on it.

“I’m sure you know what this is,” Solordorr said darkly as Eclairé’s eyes became filled with fear.

“Don’t put that on me,” the elf begged to his impassive expression.

“I’m sorry to say that this is my only insurance that you’ll do as I say.”

“Please,” Eclairé said fearfully, “Don’t. You don’t need to, you can trust me. I won’t betray you.”

“Again you mean. No Eclairé, this is the only way I can be certain you will do as I say.”

The elf shut her eyes tight as he leant forward and clasped the chain around her neck. The silver of the metal slowly vanished into Eclairé’s skin and as he pressed the large pendant

onto her sternum between her breasts slight wisps of smoke drifted into the air as it too was absorbed partially into her body.

Solordorr stood up, the tendrils of energy dissipating from his shoulders and the power that bound Eclairé diminished causing her to fall forwards onto her hands. Sucking in deep breaths she slowly sat back on her feet and looked down at the stone shimmering in her skin at the centre of her chest.

“I hope you rot in the Void, Solordorr,” Eclairé said angrily, her eyes burning as she looked up at him.

“I’m sure we both will,” he replied evenly, “Now, go get changed and fly us out of here.”

\* \* \*

The jagged blade swished passed his face, narrowly missing him and causing Melodin to stumble backwards. In his desperation his feet moved too quickly and got snagged on a tree root, sending him sprawling on his back. At the same time an arrow whistled over his head and thudded into the ground.

But he had no time to wonder if the fall was actually good luck for the orc was looming over him, its rusty sword poised to strike. Eyes wide, his mind raced for something to help him out of the situation, but nothing came and his hands grabbed hold of a stick to his side. With no other option Melodin quickly brought the branch up to intercept the orcs sword and to his surprise it did not break under the impact.

The orc seemed just as surprised as he was and looked stupidly to its weapon. Suddenly an arrow whistled into its face, dropping it to the grassy turf and allowing Melodin to jump back to his feet and look for a way to help his comrades out of the orc ambush.

Another orc arrow flew by his head, grabbing his attention, coming from the bushes at the other side of the road. He was about to call for Dog to hunt down the archer when the creature stumbled out of the brush with an arrow through its neck.

Melodin quickly traced the line of the missile back to Reith who was decimating the orc ranks with his deadly shots. Twisting around the orcs that were attacking him Reith used his



arrows to stab at the creature's weak points before notching it and firing it at another orc that rushed from the trees.

Each arrow left a trail of blue energy and Melodin's mouth fell open slightly as he noticed wisps of blue light drift around the sky Pirate. A bark from Dog pulled his mind from the sight towards his fury friend and Nim who looked like she would be in trouble soon.

Using her pistol she stood at the centre of the road firing at the orcs, dropping some of them, but many were drawing closer and Melodin knew Dog would not be able to stop the assault.

Gripping his newly acquired branch Melodin rushed to aid them, reaching Nim just in time to intercept and orc.

Again his stick managed to deflect the orcs sword easily, but he had no time to ponder the strange occurrence and countered with a heavy strike to the creature's face. As the wood connected with the orc's nose its head exploded, showering the other creatures in blood and brain matter.

The whole battle seemed to stop then and Melodin looked in horror at the branch in his hands. The wood was smooth and straight, with a slight dappling across its greyish surface. But in all appearances it was just a normal tree limb.

Attack. Kill.

Melodin's brow furrowed, "Did the stick just talk?" he asked aloud and looked to the closest orc questioningly.

The creature, still gobsmacked from seeing its companion's head explode, did not reply. It did not even have a chance to try and attack Melodin, for all of a sudden there was a flash of blue light as an arrow cracked into the side of its head. The orc dropped to the road along with the three others that had been around and Melodin looked in surprise as Reith casually walked over to him and the others, all the orcs behind him dead.

"You idiot," Reith said loudly at Melodin, "I told you not to use the power of your ring."

"What?" Melodin balked in reply and looked to his hand and the ring that shimmered.

"It'll only get worse now," the sky pirate shook his head as he slung his bow over his shoulder.

"Hey, it's not like I intended to do it," Melodin snapped angrily, "I thought it was this branch."

Reith's brow furrowed as he noticed the stick, "Give me a look."

The man held out his hand and Melodin gave him the branch.

After a brief examination Reith smirked and shook his head, "This is exactly how these rings find ways to make you use their power."

"What do you mean?" Melodin scrunched up his face and looked to Nim, who looked similarly baffled.

"This is a branch from a Nolem tree," Reith explained and tossed the branch off to the side of the road, "A rare species, whose wood is very good at conducting magical energy. The elves use it to craft their bows and arrows."

"But it was just luck that I picked that up," Melodin shrugged.

"Luck?" Reith smirked, his dark eyes sparkling, "There's no such thing."

"Then how do you explain it?" Melodin pushed and the man shrugged as he started off down the road.

"I don't know how, but these Spirit Rings have some kind of influence on the surrounding world," Reith said as Melodin and the others followed.

"So you're saying this ring made that Nolem branch appear there?" asked Melodin, though he clearly did not believe it.

"Perhaps," shrugged the sky pirate, "Or maybe it made the orcs attack so you would find the branch."

"That sounds, creepy," Melodin replied and looked to the ring on his finger.

"It helped you though," Nim remarked, drawing his eyes to hers, "And you saved me."

"Well," stammered Melodin, feeling his cheeks go warm from the rush of blood. "It was nothing."

Dog barked, interrupting Melodin and grabbing the princess's attention.

"Yes, and thank you too Dog," Nim laughed lightly, "You're so brave."

Melodin glared at the mongrel and let out a deep breath, turning his eyes to the surrounding woodlands.

It was their first day down from the Strand Mountains and they were following the road as it meandered through the Wolfrun Valley, climbing over the gentle hills and following the line of the rivers as they danced through the trees. Although a pleasant region it was infamous for orcs, as they found out, and bandits that ambushed travellers on the roads. And they had seen quite a few travellers as well, many on horseback or in carriages, even some cars from City State passed them by heading north.

"Hey Reith," Melodin spoke up as they crossed an old stone bridge over a bubbling river.

"You're pretty good with that bow of yours. What was that blue energy? Is that what the rune you carved does?"

"No," the sky pirate answered over his shoulder, "That's a result of wearing this ring. Remember I said the spirits within always find ways to force you to use their powers."

"So you're using its power without even intending to?" Melodin asked in surprise and the dark haired man nodded. "I'm guessing that's bad."

"Yes," Reith replied solemnly, "Like I said, using the power drains your life energy until you only have but months to live."

"I hope you're not going to drop dead in a couple of months," Melodin joked, but the others did not see the humour.

"Perhaps not months," Reith replied, "But, unfortunately, Eclair and I calculated that I have but five years left."

"Are you serious?" Melodin balked, "Damn that sucks."

"Is there no way to prevent it?" Nim asked with concern.

Reith shook his head and half shrugged, "That is what I have been searching for, but so far found nothing. And this little jaunt in Becklinds has made that search even harder it would seem."

An awkward silence fell over the group and drifted up into the trees, seeming to even make the birds stop chirping and the butterflies stop dancing on the wind. A cloud drifted across the sun, casting the woodland in shadow and bringing a stillness to the area.

Awkwardly Melodin chewed on his lip, trying to think of something to say as he stared through the trees to the fields beyond, but nothing came to him and the realisation that he was in the same predicament as Reith slowly sunk in and making him feel as if there was an invisible belt around his chest, restricting his breathing.

## Chapter Eleven

Breathing heavily his eyes darted about the dim alleyway, jumping from shadow to shadow. The sounds of pursuit had lessened and glancing over his shoulder it did not seem as if he had been followed.

A sudden crash to the side caught his attention and he reflexively dived away to the other side of the alley before wheeling about to face his attackers. With his heart on his throat he readied his fists at the black cat that scooted off down the path.

A slight laugh escaped his lips and he relaxed, shaking his bald head at his own unease.

“They say a black cat crossing your path is bad luck.”

The moment the first words were spoken he was back at the ready, fists balled in anticipation of an enemy attack. His eyes darted about the alleyway again, searching for the person who had spoken, but there was no one else there, he was alone.

“There is no need to be so agitated Sir Tama of the Kingsguard,” the voice spoke again, seeming to float on the very air around him.

“Who are you?” Tama demanded angrily, “Show yourself.”

“Only if you promise not to punch poor little old me,” replied the woman sweetly and Tama slowly lowered his guard.

“That depends on who you are and what you want,” he said seriously, his eyes still searching for the speaker.

“I only want to talk,” the woman replied, “You left before we even got the chance.”

He narrowed his dark eyes, “What do you mean?”

Just then, several paces in front of him, black smoke appeared in the air before dissipating quickly to reveal a tall woman. Her long brown hair fell loosely around her shoulders, framing

her beautiful features and sparkling eyes. She wore a black robe which showed as much skin as it covered and highlighted her natural curves.

“Visteen.” Tama spat, recognising the woman immediately, and readying his fighting stance.

“Relax, Sir Tama,” Visteen smiled disarmingly, “If I wanted to fight you not only would I be a fool, but we would not be talking right now.”

“What could we possibly talk about?” Tama replied, still on guard.

“I only realised who was on board my airship when I saw the body of your dear friend, Sir Lancer,” Visteen replied sadly, “Such a noble warrior. If I had known the two of you were captured during the siege it would not have happened, because you both would have been given private rooms, right next to my own. Sir Lancer’s death is a great loss to us all.”

“Have you simply come to offer condolences?” Tama scoffed, “Last time I checked you were an enemy of the Kingsguard and the royal family of Lakelinds.”

“I currently work for Reparian, it’s true,” Visteen nodded as she casually walked to the side to sit atop a wooden crate. “But I can still acknowledge a great man and feel saddened by his cowardly murder. Killed whilst bound in chains, disgusting. Do you know what kind of man does such a thing?”

“No,” Tama replied grimly, “But be certain that I will find him, and avenge Lancer.”

“Perhaps I can help you,” Visteen suggested, causing Tama to narrow his eyes at the sorceress.

“And what would you want in return?” he asked suspiciously.

“Nothing.”

“Think I’d believe that?”

Visteen pouted at him, “I have no reason to lie to you, and you have nothing I want. But I can see you will never believe that, so here is the information: the man who killed Sir Lancer is a very dangerous agent of Solgrad, and is in fact, in desperate search of your princess Nimrodell.”

Tama did not reply.

“I see you already knew as much,” Visteen guessed, “But do you have a name to go with that?”

Again Tama did not reply.

“No?” she looked at him in mock surprise, “Does the name Solordorr sound familiar to you?”

Tama’s eyes widened, “Solordorr. I heard he was dead.”

“He’s very much alive I’m afraid to say,” Visteen was quick to reply, “And in fact quite a bit stronger than he once was. It seems that what doesn’t kill you indeed makes you stronger. Well in Solordorr’s case anyway.”

“You know where he is?” Tama asked seriously, his jaw firming.

“No, I don’t,” the sorceress shrugged. “But I too search for him.”

“Why?” he was quick to asked, “I doubt you want vengeance for the death of one Kingsguard.”

“I don’t,” Visteen admitted, “But he took something that belongs to me, and I want it back.”

“So what?” Tama asked suspiciously, “You are offering an alliance.”

“That is up to you,” shrugged the sorceress, “I’ve told you enough information to allow you to hunt on your own. But I am offering access to my resources and knowledge, and perhaps even my skills once we meet with Solordorr.”

Tama’s eyes drifted to the grimy cobblestones under his feet, “Lakelinds and Reparian are at war, which means you are my enemy and it would be treason to form an alliance with you.”

Visteen laughter caught him by surprise and he looked back to the woman.

“Really Sir Tama,” she giggled, slipping down from the crate and moving closer towards him, “Do you really think I care about the politics behind this little disagreement between the realms? My allegiances, if you could call them that, with Reparian are completely personal. I could not care less if little princess Nimrodell took back her nation and forced out the empires army to rule Lakelinds.”

“What are your interests then?” Tama asked cautiously, “What did Solordorr take?”

Visteen looked at him with disappointment, “Come now Sir Tama, if I tell you everything our mutual agreement might start to look like something more. Not that I’d be opposed to us being closer.”

As she spoke the sorceress took a long step so that she was barely a foot from him, her dark eyes sparkling as she looked wistfully into his dark orbs. Tama took a step back, once again his muscles going tight as if readying for a battle.

“I don’t trust you,” he stated flatly.

“Good,” replied Visteen mischievously, “Because I do not trust you either. So do we have an agreement?”

The sorceress held out her hand to Tama, causing him to clench his jaw as his dark eyes studied the offered hand of allegiance.

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He could feel the heat of the fire on his face and the sweat running down his back. Screams echoed loudly around him, silenced only by cries of anger and deafening explosions.

The remaining ruins of his home groaned in protest against the flames before it gave in and crumbled right before him. Large chunks of stone bounced around him, thudding into the turf and joining the other rocks on top on his mother. But she did not cry out in pain, or even seem to notice the heavy impact.

“Mama, get up,” he whimpered, kneeling beside her, his trousers soaked with red water. “I don’t like it here.”

The came no response, and for some reason he did not understand, he began to cry. Tears rolled down his cheeks, but he did not cry out for his voice could not get around the lump in his throat.

The sound of a whimper beside him caught his attention and slowly he tore his eyes from his mother’s body and to the white puppy sitting on the ground alongside him, it’s piercing green eyes filled with sorry as it looked up at him.



Suddenly the wind picked up, blowing the smoke and embers into his face, blinding him and melting away his flesh. He tried to cry out and swat the biting sparks away but he could not move, something was binding his wrists to his sides and holding his feet in place.

A groan forced its way from his gut, sounding too loudly in his ears, but somehow it stopped the embers from hurting and turned the wind into a cooling caress upon his cheek. The smoke then cleared and a white light filtered through the darkness as he opened his eyes to see the wooden beams of the roof above his bed.

Melodin yawned wide, forcing the dream from his mind, along with the cobwebs of lethargy, and tried to rub his eyes. But he could barely move his arms for Dog was lying right next to him, pinning the sheets of his single bed tight.

“Come on mongrel, wake up,” Melodin said sluggishly and gave the mutt a shove.

Dog woke with a start, rolling up onto her feet and off the bed as if ready to go somewhere. But when she realised he had just woken her so he could move in the bed she turned an annoyed expression towards him.

“What?” Melodin asked innocently, “It’s morning. Time to get up. Come on, it looks like the others are already awake.”

Dog trotted out of the room as Melodin pulled on some clothes and gathered his things before trailing behind. The inn that they had stayed the night at was quite small, in fact there were only three rooms ever available, and once out the door he followed the short corridor into the main lobby.

“Good morning,” he smiled at the elderly woman at the reception desk as he headed through an out the door where a few tables and chairs were positioned.

Melodin’s eye lit up as he saw his comrades sitting at one of the tables, just finishing of a platter of fresh fruit and nuts. Although there was no food left, he licked his lips and was about to ask where they had gotten the food.

“You’re awake,” Reith interrupted him and stood up, picking his pack off the ground, “Good let’s be off.”

Nim was quick to follow suit and the both took off without another word, leaving Melodin with his mouth hanging open and stomach grumbling.

Dog barked and raced off after Reith and Nim as Melodin sighed and rushed to catch up. Falling into line behind the others he pulled his backpack half off his shoulder and rummaged around for some food. Sadly all he found was an old apple, but with nothing else to eat he eagerly crunched into the surprisingly juicy fruit.

The town they had stayed the night at was actually quite small, only half a dozen buildings sat among the trees where three roads met. A merry river trickled slowly by the houses on one side of the village, pushing the mill wheel before drifting under a moss covered bridge that took the road southwards.

Those old wooden boards clunked under Melodin's feet as the company left the town, passing by a group of children making a game out of throwing sticks into the river. Finishing up his apple Melodin joined in the game and dropped the apple core from the railing as the kids dropped their sticks before rushing to the other side to see which one came from under the bridge first.

Not bothering to see if his apple core had won, Melodin continue over the crossing.

"No way." he heard the children exclaim behind him, drawing a smile across his face, "The apple was first."

Continuing from the old wooden bridge the road gently twisted through the trees, past a few log cabins, as it followed the river to the south. Birds chirped in the branches overhead, encouraging the sun light to filter through the leaves, casting the stone road in a dapple of shade and golden rays.

The road was fairly busy this particular morning, with many travellers heading in both directions, most on horseback. But the light toot of a car horn drew Melodin's attention back over his shoulder to see a car chugging along the path, forcing the travellers to move aside so it could pass. The vehicle darted by in a cloud of dust, causing Melodin to grumble under

his breath as he waved away the cloud. But the car was soon far ahead and once again the pleasant morning brought a smile back to his face.

By midday they had moved from the woodlands out into open fields where, in the distance, the great grey walls of City State could be seen, shimmering slightly in the sun.

“Not far now, Nim,” Melodin remarked excitedly as he walked alongside the princess who flashed him a very brief smile. “You don’t seem happy?”

“Getting to City State will be the easy part I think,” she replied thoughtfully, her eyes lingering on the distant walls, “I don’t know where to start looking once we reach it.”

“We’ll figure that out when we get there,” Melodin replied cheerfully, “No need to worry now.”

To accentuate his point Melodin stretched his arms high above his head and yawned wide.

“Look,” he said suddenly, pointing to the clear blue sky, “It’s a Type F Cruiser.”

In the distance a massive airship floated effortlessly through the sky, its white canvas wings flapping in the breeze as its haul sliced through the sparse clouds.

“They only transport people between the capitols of each realm,” Melodin continued excitedly, “I’ve only ever been on one once, had to save up a bunch of coins, but it was worth it. What a ride. Remember Dog?”

Dog barked as she trotted alongside him, her pink lounge flapping out the side of her mouth.

“She was too scared to go up onto the open deck,” Melodin whispered to Nim, drawing a growl from his fury companion. “Have you ever been on a cruiser, Nim?”

“No,” the princess shook her head, “I recall only ever travelling on foot. My guardians always said that it draws less attention.”

“Guardians?”

“The Kingsguard that were with me in Becklinds,” Nim explained, her eyes distant, “They had been charged with ensuring my safety. A lost cause now, it would seem.”

“Hey, don’t worry so much,” Melodin replied with a grin, “Like I said before, I’ll take care of you until we meet up with your Kingsguard again.”

Nim looked to him curiously, her eyes clearly showing her hesitation.

“But shouldn’t they be called Queensguard since the king is dead and you’ll be the one to rule Lakelinds?” Melodin asked thoughtfully.

“I’ll be sure to make the change of name my first point of call,” Nim replied stiffly before letting out an annoyed breath and picking up her walking pace until she was alongside Reith at the lead.

Melodin watched the princess go with a blank expression before looking down to Dog.

“Did I say something wrong?” Melodin asked with a perplexed expression.

Dog growled low and looked away, almost as if she were rolling her eyes at him, but that only made Melodin more confused.

The rest of the day past with him continuing to ponder how he had made Nim upset at him as he walked behind the others, following the road as it meandered through the fields. A few rusted husks of vehicles sat on the side of the road, their frames stripped bare and the plants slowly consuming them, and affording nothing more than a curious passing glance.

The walls of City State did not seem to get much closer as they walked the roads through the small woodlands and followed it as it curved around the rolling hills and over the streams and rivers. But by the time night had arrived the huge walls were looming high above them.

“We should make the city by midday tomorrow,” Reith said as they sat around a small camp fire in a dell just off from the main road.

The area was fairly clear, with a soft grassy carpet and a hole in the ground where they built their fire, almost as if this was a regular spot to stop for travellers.

“Midday?” Nim asked curiously, “But the city looks so close now.”

“That’s because the wall is so big,” Melodin replied with his mouth full, “It’s over a hundred feet tall and fifty foot thick. Not even the strongest magic or explosion can put a dint in its metal surface.”

“I think that’s a bit of an exaggeration,” Reith remarked seriously, finishing up his own meal.

“Understatement more likely,” Melodin rebutted, “No army has even damaged the wall of City State.”

“That’s because none have tried,” the sky pirate was quick to reply, “City State has always been neutral in the wars between the nations, it’s almost as if they don’t care what happens beyond their borders.”

“But I’ll bet no army could damage the wall,” Melodin stated confidently, “It was made by the dwarves you know, and heaps of the bearded bunch still live in City State. Hey isn’t their President a dwarf?”

“Rudolfess Greybeard,” Reith nodded, “He’s been City State’s ruler for nearly a century now.”

“Yeah that’s the guy,” Melodin took another big mouthful of his dinner, “He’s super popular too. But it’s strange how they’ve always been neutral in the wars, all the dwarves I’ve met were always eager for a good fight.”

“Some dwarves fight, others mine and craft,” Reith shrugged as if it did not matter and started to make himself comfortably up against the grass covered hill of the dell. “It’s your turn for first watch Melodin.”

Melodin did not argue as he continued to munch down his meal, dropping bits of food to Dog as he did. Reith was quick to fall asleep, joining Nim who had drifted off in the middle of the conversation about dwarves and leaving Melodin awake with only Dog to talk to.

That did not last long though and the moment there was no more food Dog was soon snoring by the fire.

Scratching his head Melodin looked about the dark branches overhead and to the underbrush. It was unlikely trouble would find them this close to City State, but it was better to be prepared for the worse other than sorry it happened.

Rubbing his eye Melodin held up his ringed hand in front of the fire, the flames causing the pink diamond to sparkly brilliantly in his eyes. It was strange, despite Reith’s warning about how dangerous the rings were and how malevolent the spirit with the stone was; he felt no

danger from it. But maybe that was part of it devilry. Maybe the spirit was just waiting for him to lower his guard to strike, just like Reith had said.

“Beware those that look fair, but feel foul, for they are the enemy,” Melodin mumbled to himself remembering the saying from some story he could not recall the title of. “This ring looks fair enough, but I feel no foulness from it.”

Letting out a deep breath he dropped his hand to his lap and looked up through the branches to the bright moon above.

“If only there was a way I might talk with the spirit,” he mused quietly, “I’m sure they’re not as bad as Reith says they are, just angry about being trapped in a rock for who knows how long. I mean, I would be angry too if I was in their position.”

The night drifted by as he continued to ponder the thought, and when it was finally time for him to sleep and Reith to take over the watch the idea of talking with the spirit filled his dreams.

## Chapter Twelve

The doors of Titan's Gate stood open, like a gaping maul of the metal beast that was the City State wall. At the entrance two giant statues stood holding up the structure, their muscled frames bending under the weight of the parapets above. No skin did the titans have and the fibers of their muscles could be seen clearly in rippling black stone. No skin did their faces have either and with macabre smiles and dead eyes they looked down upon the many travelers that moved through the gates.

"Incredible," Nim said quietly as she gazed up at the leering statues.

"Sure is," Melodin replied, his eyes wide as he also looked about, "Never fails to impress. You know last time I came to City State I came through here, and it's just as impressive as it was then. Right Dog?"

Walking alongside him Dog barked happily and wagged her tail.

"So many people too," Nim said with some surprise, as they walked with the hundreds of others through the gates.

Nodding absently Melodin looked about at the bustling crowd moving in both directions through the entrance. They were not just travellers either, lining the wide road were market stalls and small shops, and it was almost as if Titan's Gate were it's own little town sitting under the ever watchful eyes of the statues above them. All around people were sprucing their goods, chatting about their travels, or just standing about in the shade of the titans watching the crowd go past.

Melodin knew that this entrance, and the other two gates into City State, was always open so it only seemed a natural thing that people would build businesses to get the travellers heading in and out of the realm.

"Excuse me," Nim stammered as one traveller unceremoniously bumped into her.

Melodin was quick to lend a hand, but she brushed him aside.

“You know, for a princess I thought you’d be used to masses of people around you,” Melodin remarked with a slight laugh. “Where did you go after Delaforr fell?”

“I was taken to Narglefarr,” Nim replied a bit abruptly, “On the other side of the Jagged Sea. And no I was not surrounded by courtiers at all.”

“Quit dawdling you two,” Reith snapped irritably over his shoulder a few paces ahead of them as he pushed his way through the crowd.

They were quick to heed the Sky Pirate’s call, but as he set off Melodin caught the eye of a man standing to the side of the road who seemed a bit too interested in their party. But as soon as their eyes met, the man looked away with a dull expression and began talking to his friend beside him.

“She’s a cutie,” Melodin heard the man remark as he passed by.

Thinking no more of it he rushed to catch up to Reith and Nim as they moved beyond the bustle of people into the main city just beyond the gate. It was an incredible sight to behold, and if you looked away from the many cars that drove along the streets your eyes would be filled with tall buildings and even taller spires. Nowhere else in the kingdoms of Middenlands would you see structures more than three stories high, but in City State some went as high as ten. A truly impressive sight they towered over the top of the travellers below.

“This is amazing,” Nim exclaimed, her eyes sparkling, “Is all of City State just one big city?”

“No,” Reith replied over his shoulder, not bothering to slow his pace through the streets.

“This is the city of Collosium. Altor is far to the east and the main city, Governce, is to the south.”

“Governce is where the Hero Academy is located,” Melodin added, “But there are plenty of smaller towns in between the big ones, but they’re mainly mining or farming towns filled with country bumkins. Do you know where there Kingsguard who you’re looking for is?”

Nim shook her head, her eyes dropping towards the ground as a look of worry came to her features.



“Who is it that you’re after?” Reith asked curiously as he abruptly stopped and turned about.

Nim glanced about the street before she leaned close to Reith, “Lady Baywin,” she whispered quickly.

“Known as the Rain of Choas to her enemies,” Reith nodded, “I had not heard of one of the Kingsguard being in City State though.”

“I doubt she’s using her true identity,” Melodin jumped in, “No doubt she’s got an alias and is fighting crime with the Hero Academy. You know what, we should go to Governance and check with them.”

Reith nodded slightly before turning around and continuing through the streets. The day was still young and the sky blue, and Melodin’s eyes were filled with wonder as he constantly looked about the city sights. Only in this kingdom could you see so many cars about the place, and most of them were in good condition too, not like the ones seen throughout the rest of Middenland. The vehicles filled the streets, zipping along with their drivers at the wheel, underneath the bridged crossings and on the constant move until they reached their destination.

It was said that the roads in City State were designed so well that there was hardly any crashes and never any build-up of cars, they were constantly flowing down the roads with no troubles at all.

The hum of a crystal core turbine engine caught Melodin’s attention as they walked across a bridge over the road, and he turned his eyes skywards to see a small airship race by them before pulling into a large stopping bay at a raised platform.

“See Nim,” Melodin pointed to the docking ship, “They use airships for what they call public transport through, and between the cities. Isn’t that great?”

Nim regarded the sight with some interest but did not reply, and Melodin watched the small craft with a wide smile as the people got in and out before it took off once again.

“Even if I had one of those to fly about the realms it would be great, don’t you think Dog?”

Melodin replied excitedly and his friend barked loudly. “Hey, Reith, we should use an airship to get to Governance, they’re much faster than the cars you see Nim.”

“Obviously,” Reith muttered over his shoulder, and Nim gave Melodin a brief glance.

With the Sky Pirate’s guidance they made a sure path through the sprawling city streets, eventually arriving at a large auditorium-style building, where, inside, a large airship was docked.

“Look a Model G,” Melodin exclaimed and a wide smile came to his face as he looked upon the large airship, “They’ve upgraded their inter-city transport since I was here last. This is going to be great Dog, the Model G is the one with the increased overclock speed which will get us to Governance in no time.”

“Last call for the capitol,” a voice said over a loud speaker, “I repeat: the airship on dock one will be leaving for Governance in five minutes.”

“Come on,” Reith said and quickly made his way to the ticket booth beside the access gates.

“Looks like we got lucky,” Melodin remarked once they bought their tickets and were walking up the gang plank into the hull of the airship, “The next airship to Governance wouldn’t have been for a while if we’d missed this one.”

His smile widened as they walked into the main seating area of the airship which was a large hall with a high ceiling and many seats positioned about the floor. At the fore of the ship was a large standing area with large windows that looked out from the ship. There was a long hallway opposite the viewing deck that led to the private sitting rooms and to the side of the arched hallway a wide staircase led up onto the deck.

“Hey Nim, come with me and check this out,” Melodin said excitedly and took the girl by the wrist as he raced over to the hull viewing deck. “You gotta see the take-off from here.”

“Hey,” Nim exclaimed in surprise as she nearly tripped over her own feet. “Let go Melodin.”

He released Nim’s wrist but continued to eagerly wave her to follow him, and with Dog happily barking alongside she followed him to the viewing deck which currently looked back

onto the docking bay where the last of the passengers were boarding. Only a few stragglers remained on the platform and as the attendants were pulling up the boarding planks Melodin noticed a trio running from the access gates, desperately calling for the attendants to hold a moment. Fortunately for the trio, the attendants did wait, and Melodin's eyes narrowed slightly as he recognised one of the men from when they were entering the city.

Melodin shrugged away the coincidence and took hold of a support railing as the hum of the crystal core engines started up. Nim also took hold of the railings just as the airship began to drift towards the exit of the station. As the walls around them fell away the airship climbed up into the air and the city buildings grew smaller below them. As the buildings fell away the countryside if City State opened up he heard Nim gasp in awe at the sights.

The airship did not climb overly high into the air, but it was enough to make the buildings and cars below look like toys. The edges of Collosium came into view and he could see the main roads leave the city before reaching off into the distance. Far on the horizon the peaks of a mountain range could be seen and all throughout the land there was a mixture of green countryside and small hamlets of population.

Glancing from the scenery Melodin suddenly realised there was more beauty in Nim's radiance than that of the wide sight. His mouth fell open slightly as he watched the sparkle in his companion's eyes and the slight smile spreading to her face.

"Melodin?" Nim asked in surprise as she looked from the views to see him staring, "Is something the matter?"

"No, no, not at all," he stammered and looked away, feeling his cheeks go hot.

"Are you sure?" Nim asked curiously, "You look a bit flushed."

"It's nothing," Melodin laughed awkwardly, "High altitude always does it to me. Where's Reith gotten to?"

Nim looked away and he breathed a sigh of relief, silently chastising himself for acting so childish.

“I don’t see him,” Nim remarked, as she glanced about the large hall. “Maybe he went to the private sitting rooms.”

“We didn’t hire one,” Melodin replied, as he realised that Reith actually had gone somewhere. “See? Look on your ticket, we’re standing room only.”

Nim pulled her ticket out of her pocket to read what was printed upon it.

“He could have gone up stairs onto the deck. Let’s go check.”

Together they moved from the view deck, back across the hall and up the staircase, following it upwards through a gentle turn and out onto the open air deck. The wind greeted them eagerly, tossing about their hair and clothes, and if it were not for the specialised structure at the front of the deck shielding the gale, they would have likely been blown off.

“Not many here,” Melodin remarked as they wandered across the wooden deck, looking about for the dark hair of Reith.

“Probably because it’s too windy,” Nim remarked as she tried to keep her hair in place.

“Come on lets go back down.”

With a shrug and a nod Melodin gave one last glance about the place before following Nim back down the stairs and to the spot they last were with the Sky Pirate.

“Hey Dog, how about you put that nose to good work,” Melodin said as the thought came to him, “Track down Reith would you girl?”

Dog looked at him blankly, clearly not too impressed with the statement, but with a quick sniff of the area she slowly led them down the hallway that lead to the private rooms.

“You know, I don’t think Reith likes me that much,” Melodin sighed as he followed behind Dog.

“Why do you say that?” Nim asked curiously.

“He’s always grumpy when he talks to me,” he replied, “Like I’m some little kid who’s done something wrong. It annoys me no end.”

“I think he’s sad,” Nim remarked thoughtfully.

“What?” Melodin was quick to turn a confused eye towards the young woman.

“Well, he just got separated from his girlfriend when we met him,” Nim explained, “And who knows if she is even still alive. Plus he said the ring he wears will kill him in as little as a decade. Wouldn’t that make you sad?”

“Well, I’ve never had a girlfriend,” Melodin replied, turning his eyes towards the ceiling.

“Really?”

“Well, what I meant to say was that I’ve had loads of girls but none were serious,” Melodin laughed loudly and awkwardly scratched the back of his head, drawing a perplexed look from the princess. “Besides, I’m wearing one of these cursed rings too. Reith could be a little more empathetic.”

“People react differently to the same things,” Nim shrugged, “Honestly I’m surprised you can go on smiling, even though you know that ring will kill you long before your time. I don’t think I could, and to me it seems that Reith is in a dark place.”

Melodin looked to the young woman curiously, although he and Nim had spoken during this journey this was the first time she actually seemed to offer him a compliment, and in fact engage him in a decent conversation.

“Perhaps we could cheer him up somehow?” Melodin suggested with a grin. “What do you suppose he likes?”

“I,” Nim said thoughtfully, “I don’t know. Although we’ve been travelling together for a while we don’t really know each other, do we?”

“That’s a great idea,” Melodin said, drawing a surprised look from Nim, “Let’s buy some dinner and drinks that we can all share, that way we can all get to know each other a bit better. Maybe having some more friends will cheer Reith up a bit.”

“You think?”

Melodin grinned and nodded, “Trust me, I know how to cheer people up.”

For the first time Nim genuinely smiled at him, sending a warmth flowing through his body that seemed to swell within him and force his body to walk a bit taller, his chest puffed a bit more, and a smile to linger upon his face.

Feeling an overflowing sense of happiness inside him Melodin strutted along the corridors as they followed Dog past all of the private rooms and right to the back of the ship where the noise from the engines filled the air. There they spotted the Sky Pirate standing in a small recess beyond the last of the sitting rooms, staring out through a small window watching the ground drift by them.

“Reith, there you are,” Melodin exclaimed happily, drawing the man’s eyes from the window, “We’ve been looking for you.”

Reith did not reply and looked blankly back to the view as they passed over the Ferringorr Mountains. Awkwardly Melodin and Nim glanced to each other.

“Hey, we thought of a great idea,” Melodin said as he walked to join the man by the window. “Once we get to Goverance we should all go out and get some dinner at a nice restaurant.”

“Why?” Reith asked without turning from the sights.

“Well, we’ve been travelling together for a bit now and yet we still don’t really know each other,” Melodin explained, “This is a great opportunity to chat whilst we think of a way to find the Kingsguard Nim is searching for.”

Reith did not reply.

“Come on it’ll be fun,” Melodin continued, “We’ll get some food, some drinks, and we’ll all have a much needed laugh.”

“I think I’ll pass,” Reith said seriously as he left the window and moved past them, heading down the corridor towards the main hall.

“Please Reith,” Nim spoke up, stopping the Sky Pirate, “It’ll be my way of thanking you for all your help. I could not have come this far without your aid.”

Reith’s shoulder’s slumped as he let out a deep breath, “Fine. But consider it also a parting meal.”

“What?” Both Melodin and Nim exclaimed in surprise.

“Why?” Melodin balked, causing the man to turn about.

“My help is no longer required,” Reith stated simply, “Nim, you are in City State and you will find your Kingsgaurd with little trouble no doubt. You are a strong girl, you never needed my help.”

“Don’t you want this?” Melodin spoke up, waving the ringed hand in the air.

Immediately Melodin could see he made a mistake for a looked of anger flashed in the Sky Pirate’s dark eyes.

“As for you,” Reith said with control, “You’re a fool, and one that I’ll gladly wash my hands of. I cannot tell if you simply do not comprehend the seriousness of your situation, or whether you wilfully ignore it, either way your fate is your own. Use that ring and your time however you see fit.”

With that Reith turned abruptly and quickly headed off along the hallway, leaving both Nim and Melodin to watch him go with surprised looks on their faces.

Dog let out a low growl, breaking the trance and Melodin let out a heavy sigh.

“See what I mean?” Melodin said to Nim as she turned towards him, a look of pity on her face. “The guy hates me.”

“I wouldn’t say he hates you,” Nim replied weakly.

“What would you call it then?”

Nim bit down on her bottom lip and looked to Dog, who seemed surprised by the attention before she also looked away from Melodin.

“You two are really helpful, you know that,” grumbled Melodin as he slumped against the window and slid into a sitting position, his eyes drifting to the views of the Gotiem River as it flowed down from the mountains and meandered towards the great city of Goverance.

\* \* \*

The glass ball he placed on the table of the private room suddenly flashed alight and a voice spoke out from it.

“Are you sure it’s the girl?”

“Positive. One of her own companions called her Princess,” He replied seriously.

“This could be good. Where are you?”

“Currently flying over the Gotiem River towards Goverance,” he replied, glancing out the window.

“This is perfect.”

A manic laughter sounded out from the glass orb.

“You know what to do, and don’t mess this up.”

The glass ball went silent and the glow within its depths vanished as he placed it back in his pocket. Carefully he moved towards the door and slowly opened it, peaking out along the hallway just as a dark haired man walked past.



## Chapter Thirteen

“Boy, that was a great feed,” Melodin exclaimed as he slapped his full stomach. “Thanks for that Nim.”

“You’re welcome,” the princess replied as the group walked out of the restaurant and into the busy streets.

“I’m glad they let Dog eat as well,” Melodin continued, drawing a bark from his faithful companion. “It would’ve been sad if she had to sit outside.”

“We probably just got lucky in that we chose a restaurant owned by halflings,” Nim added as she squatted down to scratch Dog around the ears.

“Yeah, they’re usually really friendly people,” Melodin nodded, “Although, I’ve met a few who weren’t the nicest. Exceptions that prove the rule I guess. Hey, wait up Reith.”

“No,” the sky pirate was quick to say over his shoulder as he walked from the group. “Don’t follow me.”

“Reith, what do you mean?” Nim asked, making the man pause. “Where are you going?”

“Thank you for the dinner,” Reith sighed without turning, “I’m going to find a bar to get a drink.”

“That sounds like fun,” Melodin remarked cheerfully, “I’ll join-”

“No,” Reith cut in firmly, “I’d rather drink by myself.”

“You’re not thinking of leaving are you?” Nim asked with concern.

“I said I’ll help you find your Kingsguard, didn’t I?”

“Yes.”

“And I will,” Reith continued walking off again, “I’ll see you back at the inn.”

With that the dark haired man headed into the crowd and disappeared into the shadows cast by the street lights.

With a sigh Melodin turned back to Nim with a despondent look on his face. All the princess could offer him was a shrug and together they started off in the opposite direction. The streets of Eastside were busy this night, with many people walking about doing some late night shopping or enjoying the night life along the Gotiem River that split Governance into three distinct areas.

This part of Eastside was a rather popular spot, and in fact considered rather upper class among the locals. The amazing architecture of the dwarves could be seen all about the place in the very structured buildings and tall statues of a similar nature to the titans that had framed the gates. From the street lights to the cars that drove along the streets the city had a very industrial feel to it, and in many places the large cogs and wheels that kept the city filled with electricity were exposed for all to see.

But the cogs that Melodin could see were not all grimy and covered in dirt. Instead they shone brightly in the golden glow of the lights, as if the dwarves had made them a focal point for all to appreciate.

The loud chime of a clock drew his attention to the huge tower in the middle of the plaza. Its surface was glass, showing the large pendulum swinging in a steady rhythm beneath the bright clock face.

"Is that the time already?" Melodin exclaimed, reading the clock, "It's later than I thought. Perhaps we should head back to the inn to get some sleep?"

Nim nodded in reply, her eyes looking at the large clock tower with wonder.

"It's weird right?" Melodin asked, reading her expression. "City State is the only place that uses devices that can measure time, everywhere else we just go by the sun. You know, for some reason, I always feel more anxious knowing what time it is."

"It is quite strange," Nim replied, her eyes still on the clock.

“Although,” Melodin continued, “I heard that Reparien is taking on the dwarven clocks, and in fact they already have some towers like this one in Emperious.”

Nim did not reply and her features went hard at the mention of the nation that destroyed her home.

“Well, even if that clock lies I’m feeling pretty tired,” Melodin said and yawned wide, “Whereabouts is our inn again?”

“It was across the river, in Long Isle,” Nim replied, pointing down a road that led from the plaza.

“That’s right,” Melodin said cheerfully and took up the lead.

“Have you really been here before?” Nim asked curiously as they walked along.

“Yeah, why do you ask?” Melodin looked to her in surprise.

“You just do not seem to have a very good sense of direction,” Nim shrugged.

“What?” he exclaimed, “That’s a bit harsh princess. I’ll have you know I have the best sense of direction.”

Dog growled low, drawing a scowl from Melodin.

“And even if I didn’t know where I was going, Dog always does,” Melodin added with a smile.

This time Dog barked happily, bringing a smile to Nim’s face.

As they moved from the plaza the crowds slowly lessened and soon they were walking across the bridge to Long Isle with the waters of the Gotiem River flowing slowly below. Great wheels underneath the bridge slowly turned in the water, being lit up by colourful lights that made them glisten.

Many similar bridges crossed the river, connecting all areas of the city, and all illuminated by colourful lights. It was a wondrous sight really, and Melodin’s eyes sparkled as he walked through Goverance. City State could never match the untold beauty of the wilder lands of

Middenland, like the Water Steps or the beautiful regions of Lakelinds, but it had its own kind of beauty, a very dwarven type of beauty.

It was quite odd, now that he thought of it, although the buildings were built by the short statured dwarves they were quite tall, and all about were large statues of people. Granted the statues had beards and were looked dwarfish in build, but they were too tall.

Melodin shrugged the thought from his mind and turned his eyes back to the colourful lights of the city that sparkled off the river below.

“Melodin?” Nim’s voice, drew his gaze to her, “Do you think we’ll find Baywin in the city?”

“Of course,” he replied without a second thought, “Why wouldn’t we?”

“It’s just,” Nim paused and looked down, “It’s just that ever since I decided to return to Delaforr and help the resistance things have been going wrong at every turn. We had trouble finding passage across the Jagged Sea, a storm nearly destroyed our ship, and all through Shirten we were dogged by monsters. And then of course in Becklinds my companions and I were separated. It’s as if I’m cursed.”

“Don’t be silly,” Melodin replied with a smile, “There’s always going to be difficulties in life, you probably are just noticing them more now because your so focused on succeeding. I know that when I have a particular goal in mind I always see the obstacles in the way.”

Nim looked up to him, a slight look of surprise on her face.

“Did I say something wrong?” Melodin asked hesitantly.

“No,” Nim looked away, “I just never thought you could say something so profound.”

“No problem,” Melodin nodded before a look of surprise came to his face, “Wait. What’s that supposed to mean?”

Nim did not reply, and with a playful shrug she skipped ahead of him and around the corner as they reached the other side of the bridge.

“What did she mean by that Dog?” Melodin turned to his furry friend with concern.

Dog had no time to reply for a scream suddenly sounded from around the corner, grabbing his attention.

“Nim.” Melodin exclaimed and immediately took off at a sprint.

Skidding around the building Melodin spotted Nim cornered up against the wall by three dark looking individuals.

“Hey, you lot.” Melodin shouted angrily as he started towards the thugs. “Back away now.”

The group stopped and glanced uninterestedly towards him.

“It’s the kid,” scoffed the tallest of the group, and a man Melodin recognised from the ship they had travelled on from Collosium. “Sort him out Trollgarr.”

“No probs,” a gruff looking dwarf remarked and moved to intercept Melodin. “Back off kid, this don’t concern ye.”

“Don’t call me kid,” Melodin growled angrily, “And it’s you who’d better back off, or-”

“Else what?” Trollgarr interrupted, crossing his muscled arms across his barrel chest.

Melodin stopped and clenched his jaw irritably, his eyes darting around for something that might aid him.

“As I thought,” the dwarf laughed, “Ye got no talent, do ya boy?”

Melodin growled low and bared his teeth angrily.

“Run along ‘afore I hurt ye,” Trollgarr gave him a dismissive gesture and half turned away.

“I’ll show you,” Melodin growled low.

In a flash he darted ahead, grabbing up an old plank that was leaning up against the wall of the building along with some other rubbish. His movements were too fast for the dwarf and with all his might Melodin swung the plank into Trollgarr’s face.

Blood erupted forth and the plank burst apart as it connected heavily with the dwarf’s nose.

Not bothering to see if he had knocked out Trollgarr, Melodin rushed past, charging at the tall man with the remaining splinter of wood in his hands.

Nim seized the opportunity to kick the tall man in the groin, making him cry out in pain. Nim reached for the pistol holstered at her hip just as Melodin was about to stab the tall man in the shoulder.

But then, everything stopped.

It was as if time had become frozen, no longer was he moving, his hand stopped motionless right before the broken plank pierced the tall man's shoulder.

He could see out of the corner of his eye that Nim was also frozen still.

But time had not stopped, for the tall man was still moving and with a growl of pain he straightened up and glared at the princess.

"Good work Belet," the tall man said before glaring at Melodin.

"You underestimated this lot, Trast," the third of the group remarked as he walked into Melodin's line of sight.

Strange lines of light drifted from Belet's outstretched hands towards him and Nim, and it was then Melodin realised what had happened.

"I'll kill that runt," Trollgarr roared from behind Melodin.

"Stop. You'll kill him if you hit him Trollgarr, you're too strong," Trast held up his hand.

"The bastard broke me nose," the dwarf shouted back.

"Then let me," Trast smiled.

Pain suddenly erupted in Melodin's gut as Trast punched him hard, blasted the air from his lungs.

"Stop it." he heard Nim cry out as another blow thundered into his ribs followed by a blow to the cheek.

Lights flashed across his eyes as his mind reeled, he did not even notice the third blow to his torso. Blinking away the dizziness he gasped for breath and turned a defiant look towards the tall man. Suddenly a blur of white shot past him as Dog lunged at Trast, her jaw clamping onto his arm.

“Dog don’t,” Melodin cried out in fear.

But she was not listening and she continued to tear at the tall man’s arm as they both fell to the ground.

“Damn mutt,” Trast cried out in pain as he tried to get away from Dog, “Do something Belet.”

“I can only hold two at once,” the man replied calmly, seeming slightly amused by the sight.

“Trollgarr,” Trast cried out even as the dwarf stomped by Melodin.

“No. Don’t,” Melodin called out in despair, “She’s just a dog. Don’t kill her. Please.”

The dwarf ignored his pleas as he bent down and grabbed Dog around the body. Trast cried out again and Dog yelped as Trollgarr ripped her off the tall man and with an easy toss the dwarf threw her across the street to crash into a pile of crates and boxes. Nim cried out as wood splintered and Melodin heard Dog yelp in pain again before disappearing into the pile of rubble.

Tears filled his eyes as he stared at the rubbish, praying that Dog would get up, but there was no more sign of her.

“You moron,” Trast yelled at the dwarf as he held his torn forearm. “Damn well nearly tore me arm off.”

“Ye can heal yerself, can’t ya?” Trollgarr shrugged.

“It still hurts you damn stuntie.”

“What ye call me?” the dwarf flared angrily and took a threatening step towards the tall man.

“Really gentlemen,” Belet spoke up, “Perhaps we could deal with the princess and her boyfriend first?”

“You bastards,” Melodin cursed viciously as he struggled in vain against the psychic hold Belet had over him. “I’ll make you pay for this.”

“Sure sure,” Trast dismissed him as the wounds on his forearm healed themselves.

“Trollgarr, deal with the kid. Belet help me with the princess.”

“Don’t you touch her,” Melodin growled, but they both ignored him.

“Why does Quinn want this girl anyway?” Belet asked as they both moved to restrain Nim.

The psychic field holding Melodin suddenly dropped and he stumbled forwards a step.

Thinking quickly he tried to lunge towards Trast and Belet to help Nim, but a strong hand grabbed him by the front of his shirt and threw him backwards into the wall of the building.

Melodin cried out as his head connected heavily with the stone wall and the next thing he realised he was slumped on the ground. The wooden splinter was no longer in his hands, but through blurry eye he could see the group start to lead Nim away.

“You bastards,” Melodin swore loudly, “Think I’ll let you just walk away?”

“Well now,” Trollgarr said with surprise as the group stopped to regard him. “Yer tougher than ye look kid.”

“Melodin just run,” Nim cried out to him, but he ignored her, his eyes focused on the dwarf in front of him.

He had to do something to stop these men, to avenge Dog, anything. Firming his jaw Melodin balled his fist and charged at the dwarf. But his blow did not get anywhere near Trollgarr and again Belet suspended him with his psychic power.

“Ye can’t beat us kid,” the dwarf shrugged and shook his hairy head, “Especially when ye don’t got no powers of yer own.”

Casually Trollgarr raised his hand and slapped Melodin lightly on the cheek. Never had Melodin felt such a blow, and as his head snapped violently to the side darkness took him completely.

\* \* \*

The area was busy for a backend street, dozens of people walked about briskly. Some carrying planks of wood and others stone bricks. Those with talents of impossible strength carried ten times their own body weight whilst others could levitate the materials in the air to make their work so much easier.

Although the tavern of The Sky Pirate’s Den had been almost completely destroyed the locals had been quick to clean up and start rebuilding the iconic building.



There was little interest in the construction in Tama's eyes as he moved through the workmen towards the man who seemed as if he was in charge. He was here for a reason.

"You in charge?" Tama called loudly to the burly man, interrupting the conversation and causing the group to regard him curiously.

"That I am," nodded the tavern owner as he faced Tama fully, "And who might you be? Looking for work perhaps? We could use another strong arm, and I'm paying."

"No," Tama shook his bald head, "I'm looking for someone: an elf sorceress with light blue hair. I heard she was here when the place was destroyed."

"That's right," replied the owner, "She were the one fighting with the Lady Visteen. They caused the place to collapse you know. I've half a mind to go an ask that Visteen to pay for the damages, but I ain't that stupid."

"Where is the elf now?" asked Tama seriously.

"Visteen took her," one of the men beside the tavern owner replied. "You a friend?"

"Something like that. Was the elf by herself before the fight?"

"Well now," the tavern owner scratched his head thoughtfully, "I do recall her coming in with another right afore the fight happened. Don't know who it was though, and I had a customer so I didn't stop to see."

"She was with a dark haired man," another man spoke up, "Sky pirate I'd say, by what he was wearing and all. You can always tell with them lot. Theys rushed in and over to another a table where a young girl and boy were sitting with their dog. I remember watching it as I thought it rather odd in fact."

"What happened then?" Tama pressed curiously.

"Well they were talking about something, couldn't hear what," the man rubbed his chin.

"Next thing I see Visteen come down the stairs and that's when the fighting started. It seemed as if they all wanted something from the boy with the dog. But before Visteen could get it the blue haired sorceress teleported the boy, the dog, the girl and the sky pirate to

some place or rather. Then all of a sudden there was magic going off in all directions and I scampered out of there.”

“I see,” Tama said quietly as he pondered the words.

“Did you know ‘em?” someone asked, grabbing his attention.

“Do you know who the sky pirate was?” Tama ignored the man’s question.

“Well, I seem to recall a name,” the tavern owner replied thoughtfully. “What was it? Vythe? Wraith? Or something like that?”

“Reith?” a woman offered and the bar owner’s eye lit up.

“That were it,” nodded the burly man, “Reith was his name.”

“He’s a handsome one,” the woman nodded, “I heard he has one of the fastest aircrafts in all Middenland, but treasure hunters like him can always afford the best.”

“Reith,” Tama muttered to himself, “I know that name, but from where?”

The others had started to talk amongst themselves about sky pirates and the like. Tama thought to ask some more questions but he left it at that and swiftly left the area without thanking the friendly locals.

With all speed he headed for the airship docks in the western side of Becklinds. If it really was Reith with Eclair then it was clear that they would have come by airship to the city.

His suspicions proved right and after a brief chat with the clerk on duty at the docks he learnt that it was indeed Reith. But more interestingly he discovered that Eclair had left in that airship with a different man, one with crimson eyes.

“Did you see which way they flew?” Tama asked seriously.

“I was on duty then,” the clerk replied, his boredom clearly marked upon his face. “But I don’t know. Northwards. Maybe? Actually, yeah I think it was north.”

The young man ended with a wide yawn and Tama left the airship docks with all haste. Fire burned in his dark eyes as he stormed along through the city towards the castle.

“Lancer my dear friend,” Tama mumbled to himself, “You will be avenged. I will find this crimson eyed man and make him pay for his crimes. And if Eclair stands in my way, she too will feel my wrath.”

## Chapter Fourteen

“Professor.”

The call from the young man entering the room pulled his attention away from the work he was conducting on his desktop. Looking over his half-moon spectacles he regarded his assistant with a curious expression.

“It has arrived.” Continued the assistant with an eager expression on his face. “The item from Visteen has just arrived by private courier.”

“Excellent,” he smiled wide and stood up, licking his lips, “Take it to the laboratory at once to conduct preliminary assessments.”

“The assessments are already underway, Professor.”

“Excellent work Zulius,” the Professor nodded before he began to gather some books and papers from his desk. “Excellent work indeed.”

With his research under one arm the Professor quickly slipped round his desk and headed for the door where his assistant was standing.

“Finally, we are able to get our hands on another one of these fabled Spirit Rings,” the Professor remarked as the two of them moved swiftly through the doors and into the hallways. “After all the trouble we’ve had since Project Seven imploded, we are finally seeing some potential again. This is a day well worth remembering.”

The halls of the laboratory were smooth, the crystal lights glistening off the steely surface. With each step they took their boots sounded off the hard floor, echoing along the empty corridors and off into the distance. Many doors lined the hallway, each opening up into smaller laboratories or rooms dedicated to research where many scholars conducted their work and tested theories.

Such was the splendour of the finest building in all of Emperious, located at the heart of the city. This laboratory was the jewel of Reparian. From these very halls they had created the devastatingly powerful weapons of war that had successfully aided the invasion of Laklinds and taken the capitol of Delaforr, the dangerous pistols that fired magical blasts, and of course this was the laboratory that had designed the greatest aircrafts in all of Middenland.

Only the best were invited to work in these halls.

“Are the rings as cursed as they say?” Zulius asked as they walked along, causing the Professor to chuckle to himself.

“All legends are based in some truth,” replied the Professor vaguely, “It is our job to see how truthful they are.”

Zulius nodded, a look of apprehension flashing across his face which the Professor did not miss.

“That’s right,” chuckled the Professor, “You were not with us during the glory days when we were working with the Spirit Ring of Fire and Project Seven. Do not worry, this is a time of excitement and joy, not apprehension. Steel yourself Zulius for greatness awaits us.”

The young assistant firmed his jaw and nodded, a slight smile coming to his lips.

“Any further word from Quinn in City State?” asked the Professor, “Has he got the girl yet?”

“We haven’t heard anything recently,” Zulius shook his head, “Do you really think it was wise to hire that villain for assistance?”

“He was not hired,” replied the Professor, “Quinn contacted us.”

“That seems very odd. How could he have known we were searching for the girl?”

The Professor chuckled again, “You underestimate the influence of Visteen, Zulius. That sorceress is one shrewd lady.”

“You are aware that Quinn is a gang lord in City State,” Zulius continued to worry. “They call him The Harlequin. Half the city is in his pocket, not to mention he deranged. How can we trust him?”

“Of course we cannot trust the man,” the Professor replied quickly, “But he’ll get the job done, we’ll pay him, and that will be the end of it.”

“But the stories I’ve heard about him...”

“Forget about them,” the Professor cut in, “Stories are not our concern. We must focus on the task at hand and concentrate our efforts on unlocking the power held within the rings.”

“Yes, Professor.” Zulus nodded, firming his jaw.

\* \* \*

Solordorr sat silently, his gaze staring out the window of the Banshee. Clouds flashed by as the aircraft cut through the skies over the green lands of Solegrad below them. It was a land of windy planes and jagged ravines, where the great horses of Tharongarr raced and the infamous packs of black lions roamed.

Solegrad was a wilder country than Shirten, filled with dangers, and where the royal city of Arch Eden stood amid the planes and ravines like a shining spire of hope and righteousness.

A foul taste filled his mouth as he looked down upon the country he once called home and clenching his jaw Solordorr looked away from the window. With his hands in his lap Solordorr absently turned one palm towards the roof and summoned forth tiny wisps of energy that began to dance across his skin and in the air. The golden shards of light drifted slowly around each other, expanding, and contracting, a dance that reflected his empty thoughts.

With the Banshee flying on auto-pilot Eclair sat on the other side of the room, reading a book as she sat at a small desk in the corner. The crystal lights about the room causing the diamond embedded at the centre of her chest to sparkle.

Solordorr’s crimson eyes lingered on that diamond, a slight frown coming to his face.

“The Rain Drop Mountains, in Lakelinds,” Solordorr spoke up, pulling Eclair’s eyes to his.

“You teleported your lover and the two kids all the way there?”

“Yes,” Eclair replied simply, turning her eyes back to her book.

“That’s a very long teleportation,” he stated, his voice serious.

“I told you, I used a recall rune to teleport them.” She did not look at him.

Solordorr shifted in his seat, turning to face the elf directly and causing the wisps of energy he was playing with to disappear.

“I do hope you’re not lying to me,” he said gravely, drawing the elf’s eyes to his again.

“Why would I lie?” Eclairé blinked.

“I can think of a few reasons.”

The elf’s eyes narrowed at him and she put down her book.

“What happened to you Solordorr?” she asked seriously, “I remember a time when we trusted each other completely.”

He clenched his jaw, “You know exactly what happened.”

“And I already told you, countless times, I had no choice,” Eclairé replied sincerely. “If I had revealed that we were working together it would have destroyed the peace we both had worked so hard to create.”

“That peace was destroyed anyway,” he was quick to say, his crimson eyes flaring dangerously.

“Neither of us could have foreseen that,” Eclairé replied, her distress obvious. “Visteen outplayed us both. Please believe me, if I could go back and change what happened I would.”

Solordorr looked away from the elf, his fists clenched.

“We picked the wrong person to usurp the Reparian Emperor,” the elf sighed heavily. “The man made a slip and exposed everything. Neither of us could have stopped that.”

“So it was just bad luck that I was thrown to the mercy of Visteen’s malice?” Solordorr scoffed. “Was it bad luck also that I was abandoned?”

“I didn’t-”

Solordorr laughed aloud, cutting the elf off before he fixed her with a vicious look.

“You did abandon me,” he said slowly and coldly, “You, and Solegrad, left me to rot in the torture chambers of Reparian. You’re lying to yourself if you continue to deny it, for I knew the situation as well as you did.”

Eclaire took a deep breath, “I am sorry, Solordorr. How many times must I apologise for what happened?”

“If you said until the end of the worlds, it would still not be enough,” he looked away from the elf, his anger subsiding as a feeling of loss fell over him.

“Solordorr?” Eclaire spoke up, seeming to notice his change in demeanour. “What happened to you in those dungeons? What did Visteen do?”

He did not reply as he turned to stare out the window again, and turning his palm towards the ceiling the golden wisps of energy once again danced in the air above his hand.

\* \* \*

The wind sounded hollow in his ears as it whistled around him, picking up the dust and shifting the smoke that hung around him. The light of the fires glowed hot in the haze, pushing their heat upon his cheeks and arms.

The wind picked up again, blowing the smoke into his face and stinging his eyes.

Raising a hand to shield his eyes Melodin blinked away the pain and continued walking forwards. With each step his feet felt as if they weighed a tonne, and with each step he stumbled over a broken brick or dead body.

He knew this scene all too well. It was burned into his mind like a brand from a hot iron. This was the day Reparian invaded Delaforr.

The day his world was shattered.

Blinking away the smoke Melodin stopped walking as he spotted someone standing ahead of him, their delicate form cloaked by the haze of smoke.

“Hello?” Melodin called out, his voice echoing unnaturally in his ears. “Nim, is that you?”



The figure did not respond.

“Mum?”

The cloaked figure seemed to hear him, but it did not turn about, instead they began to walk away from him, deeper into the smoke and flying ash.

“Hey, wait?”

He cried out and tried to chase after the person, but his feet were too heavy and the figure disappeared into the haze.

“Stop.”

The fires around him flared to greater heights, reflecting in the smoke clouds and forming images in front of his eyes.

“Nim,” Melodin exclaimed, recognising the scene displayed before him as the thugs Belet and Trast took Nim away.

The images suddenly turned into forms and the thugs loomed over Nim as she cried.

“Damnit,” Melodin swore angrily, “I’ll get you for this.”

Balling his fists he tried to race at the thugs to save Nim, but his feet would not move and suddenly the bearded face of the dwarf Trolgarr laughed at him.

“What could ye possibly do?” the dwarf mocked him, “Ye got no talent kid.”

“Don’t call me kid.” Melodin roared in denial and tried to hit the dwarf.

But his attack never landed and Trolgarr continued to laugh as he raised his hand and slapped Melodin across the cheek. As the blow hit a rush of wind erupted, flying in Melodin’s face and pushing aside the haze of smoke. The forms of the thugs and Nim turned to ash and were cast into the air along with the destroyed buildings of Delaforr. The force of the wind pushed Melodin back a step and he raised his hand to protect his eyes, straining to see where the gust was coming from.

Then just as suddenly as it appeared the wind stopped and he blinked about at the empty white plane he was standing on.

“What the ... ?” Melodin mumbled as he turned about at the vast white nothingness that surrounded him.

Turning back around, he came face to face with a young woman, her blonde hair drifting playfully on an unfelt breeze, her bright blue eyes boring into him. She wore nothing but a light robe of white silk, that seemed almost see through as it danced about her form.

“Who are you?” Melodin asked in wonder.

“I am the wind,” the woman replied, though her mouth did not move.

“The wind?”

“A prisoner in that ring of yours.”

Melodin looked to his hand, but there was no ring on his finger. Curiously he looked back to the woman, a suspicious look coming to his face.

“You’re one of the evil spirits,” Melodin stated, “Reith warned me you would try and tempt me into using your power so you could drain my life force. It won’t work spirit.”

A slight look of amusement came to the woman face before she looked at him with pity.

“You could not save your girl because you have no power of your own,” the pleasant voice spoke in his mind. “Imagine if you had but a fraction of my power. Those thugs would never have stood a chance.”

“Your bribery won’t work on me lady,” Melodin smirked confidently.

“Then I guess you will forever be a burden to the ones you call friends.”

With that simple statement the spirit of the wind disappeared and everything went black.

It was then he noticed the wet feeling on his cheek and a slight whimper pierced through the darkness.

“What?” Melodin said groggily as he eyes fluttered open to see the friendly face of Dog staring down at him.

Dog licked him on the cheek again before she sat back and barked happily.

“Dog,” Melodin exclaimed as he sat upright, “You’re alright. I was sure you were done for. Are you hurt?”

Dog gave him a curious look before she jumped about in a circle and barked again, her tail wagging happily.

“I guess those old crates cushioned your fall,” Melodin remarked, “You’re one lucky mutt, I’ll give you that.”

Dog seemed to frown at him.

“But they got Nim, Dog,” Melodin continued pushing himself to his feet and wincing away the pain he felt all over. “What are we going to do?”

Dog whined in reply and cocked her head to the side as she watched him closely with her piecing green eyes.

“You can sniff ‘em down I’m sure,” Melodin said confidently, “But, even if we do find them, what can I possibly do?”

He sighed heavily and looked to his hands, his eyes falling on the ring on his finger.

“No,” he shook his head, “I can’t use that. We gotta find Reith, Dog. Come on.”

With that Melodin stated off down the street, heading back towards the popular night life area in Eastside. With his mind still groggy he nearly tripped over his own feet, but soon he was running at all speed back to the restaurant they had eaten at earlier that night.

“Is that really the time, Dog?” Melodin exclaimed as they passed the clock tower, “Damn, it’s almost morning. Maybe Reith went back to the hotel? Can you find him Dog?”

Dog barked loudly and as they reached the restaurant she began sniffing about the pavement. It only took her a few seconds to find Reith’s scent and with another bark she took off through the streets with Melodin struggling to keep up.

The eastern skies were slowly growing brighter as they raced through the deserted streets of the city, darting down a side street and up to the door of a dingy looking tavern.

Melodin skidded to a stop at the door and was about to head inside when dog barked and took off again.

“Make up your mind,” Melodin grumbled as he raced to catch up with her.

Minutes later they were running across one of the many bridges that crossed the river, leading into Long Isle.

“Looks like Reith did head back to the hotel,” Melodin said through heavy breaths as he struggled to keep up with Dog’s tireless gait.

As soon as they crossed the bridge Dog took a sharp turn and followed the path as it headed along the river down the stairs onto a boardwalk. It was then that Melodin noticed a single man leaning against the railings underneath a bridge, staring out across the water as it slowly drifted by him.

“Reith,” Melodin called out, recognising the sky pirate immediately.

“Can’t you just leave me alone?” Reith groaned as Melodin pulled up, breathing heavily.

“What do you want?”

With his hands on his knees Melodin sucked in some deep breaths before straightening to look the man in the eyes.

“It’s Nim,” explained Melodin between breaths. “Some thugs took her.”

“What?” Reith asked abruptly.

“There was a bunch of them,” Melodin continued, “They ambushed us and took her. Me and Dog barely survived.”

“Great,” Reith groaned as he grabbed his head with his hand. “Just what I needed. You couldn’t stop them?”

“How? I don’t have any talent,” Melodin blurted before quickly biting his lip. “And you told me not to use this ring.”

Reith regarded him curiously, his dark eyes narrowing slightly.

“Please help me save Nim,” Melodin implored when the sky pirate did not say anything.

“Alright,” Reith sighed heavily, pinching the bridge of his nose, “This would be so much easier if I weren’t still half drunk. So be it. Do you know who took her?”

“It was this tall guy named Trast, he was on the airship we took from Collosium,” Melodin explained quickly, “Him and two others jumped us on our way back from dinner. There was a dwarf who was really strong, and a guy called Belet who had some kind of psychic power.”

Reith looked at him with some annoyance, “Do you know anything more useful than that?”

“Yes,” Melodin was quick to say indignantly, “I’m not completely useless. They mentioned someone called Quinn.”

“Quinn?” Reith asked, his expression pained, “Great. I can see how this day is going to start.”

“What? Who’s Quinn?” inquired Melodin, “How do you know him?”

“He’s also called The Harlequin,” Reith explained, “You’ve heard that name before, right? He’s a gang lord in the city.”

“Harlequin?” Melodin exclaimed, a look of horror coming to his face. “The crazy guy that the Hero Association has been trying to get for ages?”

Reith nodded seriously, as he turned back to the river, grabbing the railing with his hands as he cursed quietly.

“Great, what are we going to do now?” Melodin groaned in defeat as he looked to Dog.

“Maybe I can help.”

The voice made Melodin jump in surprise and spin about to see a woman clad in black leather standing right behind him.

“Who are you?” Melodin asked as she stumbled back a few steps, almost bumping into Reith.

“You can call me Night Blade,” the woman replied calmly, her grey eyes sparkling behind her mask.

“You’re a hero with the Association?” Reith asked, moving ahead of Melodin.

“That’s right,” Night Blade replied, her cape dancing on the breeze off the river and flicking about in the street lamps. “I saw a young man running through the streets and thought someone was in need of help. Upon following you here I happened to overhear some of your conversation. Harlequin is a menace to this city, and has been for too long. His influence and power is great, but together I believe we can save you friend Nim. If you are willing to accept my aid.”

“Of course,” Melodin exclaimed, a wide smile coming to his face, “I’ve heard heaps of stories about you Night Blade. You’re amazing. Of course we’ll accept your help.”

The hero smiled in embarrassment at his praises and she looked away, suddenly seeming like a school girl talking to her secret crush rather than a famous hero of City State.

“If you’re done Melodin, perhaps we can get going?” Reith remarked dryly as he pushed past and headed towards the stairs leading back up to the streets.

## Chapter Fifteen

Steady sheets of rain drifted down from the dark clouds, splattering against the large windows that afforded long reaching views down the valley. Through the greyish haze of the rain fall he could see the large body of water a lake in the distance, one of many that were scattered about the region of Lakelinds and northern Reparian.

Joined together by hundreds of rivers and streams the great lakes sat like a band across the northern end of Midenland, running from the Water Steps in the east all the way to the western borders of Solegrad. In between all these great lakes were dozens of mountain ranges that provided a natural bulwark against the Wilderlands further to the north.

In one such mountain range named the Rain Drop Mountains he now stood. But not on the rocky and wet mountainside, no he was quite dry inside this carefully built house among the rocks that could be described as nothing short of a mansion.

He slowly turned his crimson eye from the dull outlook to the large living room that included the kitchen and dining table. Overlooking the large space was a second floor balcony carved of the cedar like the floorboards and furniture.

The place was very quiet with nothing but the sound of the rain beating against the large windows to be heard. There came a slight shuffle and thud from one of the rooms on the second floor, but he paid it little regard. Slowly he walked from the window, his black boots sounding noisily on the floor boards, muffled only briefly when he moved over a thick rug as he made his way to the kitchen.

The wooden floor then turned to grey slate as he walked between the kitchen island and the stove. Absently he ran two fingers across the bench top, collecting up the thick layer of dust that had accumulated and pushing it off the edge to send it falling slowly to the tiles.

Bringing his hand up before his face, his crimson eyes narrowed and an unpleasant look came to his face. Baring his teeth angrily Solordorr slapped the dust from his fingers and looked up to the balcony and to where Eclairé had disappeared into one of the rooms.

Crossing his arms across his chest Solordorr leaned back against the bench beside the door that led into the aircraft port. The door stood open and the sound of the rain splattering onto the rocks outside drummed dully. The roll of thunder sounded in the distance as he continued to stare towards the second floor, his eyes unblinking, and his expression of annoyance unchanging.

After many minutes he finally caught sight of Eclairé's blue hair and the elf quickly skipped down the stairs before walking towards him. There seemed lightness to her gait which had not been there when they had arrived.

Solordorr narrowed his eyes further, his jaw clenching.

"Find what you were looking for?" Solordorr asked flatly as the elf stopped a few paces from him.

"Sorry?" Eclairé asked back curiously.

He did not reply, his expression showing clearly his anger.

"Something the matter?" Eclairé asked hesitantly.

"You should know," Solordorr was quick to reply, his crimson eyes flaring dangerously.

Eclairé suddenly winced in pain and dropped to one knee clutching her chest.

"I thought I made myself very clear," Solordorr continued slowly and seriously as he took a few paces towards the elf and calmly dropped to one knee in front of her. "You were to take me to the place you sent Princess Nimrodell and your lover, Reith. I thought I made it very clear what would happen if you were to lie."

"I didn't lie," Eclairé shouted back, her teeth clenched.



“There has been no one in this place for months,” Solordorr snapped angrily, causing Eclairé to groan in pain as an angry light started to shine forth from the diamond embedded at the centre of her chest.

“I made a mistake,” Eclairé strained to say, “I thought this was where I teleported them. I swear to you Solordorr. Why would I lie? I need to see Reith again.”

Solordorr stood up abruptly and turned his back on the elf.

“I’m inclined to believe you,” he replied slowly, “But I do not believe you would make such a mistake.”

“Visteen interfered with my spell casting,” Eclairé was quick to reply, “You were there when it happened, you saw it. Solordorr, why would I lie?”

Solordorr let out a deep breath and the light that shone from the crystal in Eclairé’s chest diminished, allowing her to breathe easier and bring a look of relief to her features.

“In that case I ask again,” Solordorr said seriously, turning back to the elf, “Where did you teleport them? And try to get it correct this time.”

Taking several deep breaths Eclairé stood up, fixing him with a stern look.

“There are two other bases I may have teleported them,” Eclairé explained.

“Two?” Solordorr exclaimed and shook his head, “You need to be more accurate than that.”

Eclairé ran a hand across her brow, “One of them is in Narglefar, but I doubt I sent them that far. I was trying to send them here, but that clearly failed.”

“Something you could have stated the minute we arrived,” Solordorr replied flatly, drawing a frown from the elf.

“I must’ve sent them to the Strand Mountains then,” she said and nodded her head in confirmation of her thoughts. “Should we fly to my base there, or perhaps I could teleport us?”

“No.” Solordorr looked towards the dreary view.

“Are we to simply sit around here then?”

He looked back to the elf's blue eyes, his expression blank.

"No," Solordorr replied evenly, "We'll head for City State instead."

"City State?" Eclairé asked curiously as he walked from the house into the Airship hanger.

"Why there?"

Solordorr glanced over his shoulder at the elf and scoffed slightly.

"Really Eclairé," he remarked, "I thought you used to be an intelligence officer. Have your wits dulled that much?"

A few seconds passed and he led the way up the stairs into the Aircraft.

"You think Nimroldell is going after the remnants of the Kingsguard," Eclairé stated more then asked.

Solordorr did not bother replying.

\* \* \*

"Wait. Damn it. I'm such a fool."

He skidded to a stop, kicking up the dirt of the main road through Solegrad. The wind blew mournfully across the plains, whistling through the many jagged ravines and swirling over the flat grasslands.

A pair of travellers jumped in surprise as he seemingly appeared out of nowhere, but he ignored them both and they continued on their way sending peculiar glances over their shoulders at him.

With his amazing speed Tama had already run most of the way to Arch Eden, and in fact he could see the road dip in the distance as it started its descent into the largest of Solegrad's chasms. He could be at the capitol's gates by nightfall and likely in Lakelinds by the end of tomorrow.

"Idiot." Tama slapped a hand on his forehead, "Damn I'm stupid. Eclairé probably teleported the Princess somewhere in Lakelinds, which is why she and that red-eyed demon are going that way, but the Princess would be quick to leave and go in the direction Lancer and I told

her to. Which means I'm going in the wrong direction. Idiot, I should be heading for City State."

Shaking his bald head Tama jumped about and sped off southwards at all haste, sending clouds of dirt into the air as he raced through the grasslands.

The two travellers watched him go with blank looks on their faces and in mere seconds he was well out of sight.

\* \* \*

The night was dark and cold. Steam drifted up from the sewer grates, illuminated by the building lights as it dissipated into the cloudy night sky. They glisten of moisture flickered in the few lights about the area, and the sound of water dribbling into a puddle echoed about the harsh and empty streets.

"This is not a nice neighbourhood," Melodin remarked quietly, and glanced down at Dog.

Together they peered out around a corner and down the dirty street to a large building complex. Many lights shone up over the walls, highlighting the industrial smoke stacks and large buildings. The metallic sheen of the buildings glowed in the night lights, making the compound seem foreboding. The sounds of music drifted out from within along with the rowdy cheers of drunken partiers.

"Well, that's the place. Hareliquinn's hideout. Not much of a hideout really, but I guess he doesn't care for secrecy when the Heroes of the Association don't even dare to come around here unless they're in force." Melodin firmed his jaw as his eye drifted to the side of the compound to where it joined to the other buildings. "And there's the way Night Blade spoke about. Looks a bit tight. Think you can fit Dog?"

He looked to his furry companion, who did not seem happy with the tease and growled low.

Melodin chuckled uneasily and looked back to the compound, "Well, let's do it. Nim's already been in there for a day, it's time to rescue her."

Cautiously Melodin crept out from the side street, and sticking to the shadows, he moved cautiously towards the imposing compound.

“Finally I can use my hidden ability,” Melodin chuckled to himself, “Sneaking is my forte.”

Dog growled at that.

“Sorry,” Melodin was quick to reply, “Our forte.”

Dog seemed happy with that correction and was quick to dart ahead, becoming one with the shadows even though her coat was white.

“There’s something magical about Dog,” Melodin mumbled to himself as he watched his companion slink ahead.

A smile came to his face as he thought about it further, and an excited gleam sparkled in his eyes as he darted across the street and into the shadows of the compound wall. Just as Night Blade had said there was a narrow gap between the wall and the adjacent compound, large enough for him to squeeze through. But in no way was it easy and Melodin had to suck his stomach in as he edged through. Turning his face to the side he could feel the stone scrape against his chest, tearing his white shirt slightly and scratching his skin. Finally he tumbled through and dropped to the shadows beneath some kind of walkway.

The sounds of the music suddenly became louder and he peered out from his hiding spot at the festivities that were happening. Many people danced around the compound grounds, taking long swings from their mugs, singing badly, or playing cards at one of the many tables about the place. Even as he watched several fights broke out around the place, one over a girl, and another about someone cheating in the game. Sparks and talents lit up the night but were quickly subdued by the onlookers and just like that everyone went back to consuming as much alcohol as they could.

“Man, drunk people are weird,” Melodin remarked to Dog, who seemed to nod her head in agreement. “Come on.”

Slowly he crept out from the grated walkway and headed through the large compound, quickly darting from one shadow to the next. The place was filled with piles of crates, old metal drums and overshadowing walkways that lined the walls. So for the most part he had

little trouble avoiding being seen, and coupled with the obvious fact that most of the thugs were drunk or pre-occupied with gambling and flirting Melodin felt his confidence grow.

That feeling suddenly vanished as he slipped out from behind some boxes right into the path to two of Harilquinn's lackeys. Melodin's heart jumped into his throat and his feet froze in place. Gathering his wits quickly he darted back into the shadows, scrambling over his own feet to get to safety.

Despite Melodin's error, the two men did not even notice him as they took long drinks from their flasks and staggered along the path.

"Why we's patrollin' anyways?" one of the men slurred as they wobbled closer to Melodin's hiding spot. "Not like no one's comin' after us."

"Boss's orders, ol' boy." the other man shrugged and took a long drink from his bottle before burping loudly.

"You see that girl Trast an' the others brought back?" the first asked slowly.

"Did I?" exclaimed the second, "Pretty little thing she was. Ain't gunna miss that, ol' boy."

"Damn she was fine," the first agreed whole heartedly. "Man I would wreck that."

"No straight guy wouldn't," laughed the second. "We got no chance of it though. The Boss spied her out himself."

"That why we patrollin'?" asked the first curiously.

Melodin rolled his eyes at the two drunks and their annoyingly slow walk.

"How'd I know, ol' boy?" the second man asked back.

"Hey. Hey," the first suddenly whispered low and chuckled before hiccupping, "I gots a great idea. They're keeping that girl up in one of them offices in the main building. Let's sneak in and give her a right ol' ploughin' afore the boss gets here."

"You got a death wish, ol' boy?" the second man exclaimed. "To hell with that idea, I'd rather stay living."

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” the first conceded with a sigh, “I think I’ve had too much to drinks.”

“Yeah,” agreed the second man, “Come on let’s finish our shift and get some more booze.”

The first man chuckled at that, “I likes the way you think.”

The two men continued to chuckle as they stumbled on their way passed Melodin’s hiding spot and slowly he crept out from the shadows.

“Well,” Melodin remarked quietly to Dog at his heel. “Drunks might be weird, but it seems they’re good for something. One of highest offices in the main building was it?”

He rubbed his hands together eagerly and turned his eyes towards the large building that towered over the compound. The structure had many windows but only a few of them were alight with an orange glow, and only one of them was glowing near the top.

With a grin on his face Melodin picked up his pace through the maze like courtyard, slipping under the walkways and around the empty crates. Passing by a few amorous lovers, he crept along on his haunches, edging closer to the main building.

“Almost there, Dog,” Melodin chuckled, looking back over his shoulder as they snuck underneath one of the walkways. “We’ll rescue Nim before the others make their assault and she’ll be so happy. Maybe even give me a kiss.”

Dog growled low at him.

“We’re going to be the heroes Dog,” Melodin continued excitedly, still looking over his shoulder at his companion. “No way Reith doesn’t respect me after this. I’ll be a leg-”

His words were cut short as the ground suddenly gave way beneath him and he tumbled into the darkness. Melodin felt the air rush by his cheeks, and it was all he could do not to cry out and alert the whole compound. Something suddenly hit him in the head and he knew no more.

\* \* \*

He stood silently on the roof of an old building, looking down upon the western fork of the Gotiem River that divided the area of Outskirts from Long Isle. The water drifted swiftly by, sparkling in the late night lights and rushing by the feet of the stone titans that held up the many bridges in the city.

It was a quiet night, the low lying clouds crowded him from above, promising rain and filling the air with a sense of unease.

It had been many hours since he had come to this particular rooftop, but still he waited patiently, his eyes lingering on the compound across the river. The sounds of music drifted up from the illuminated compound, drifting across the silent city and telling everyone in ear-shot that Harliquinn owned this part of the city.

“Eclairé,” Reith mumbled quietly, “You would’ve enjoyed this. Always did you have a strong dislike towards Harliquinn.”

He sighed heavily, his thoughts drifting back to the moment his lover had teleported him away from the tavern and into the mountains.

“Why didn’t you just send the kids and dog?” he muttered through clenched teeth. “Together we could have dealt with Visteen. Why?”

He shook his head, his eyes drifting from the compound on the opposite bank to the river below, and the murky waters reflecting the streets lights.

A slight ripple in the atmosphere and the sound of something crackling came from above him, but he did not turn to see Night Blade dart through the air before slowly descending onto the roof beside him.

“Not long now,” the hero stated confidently. “If Melodin is as skilled as he says he is, he will be inside the compound by now and well on his way to finding the princess.”

“Melodin is naught but a fool,” Reith replied simply, “And I find it amazing that someone can be as lucky as he is, at the same time seeming incredibly unlucky.”

“An interesting compliment,” Night Blade laughed slightly.

“It wasn’t a compliment.”

“Really?” the woman asked in reply, “It sounded like one.”

“Wasn’t meant to.”

“Right. Well, anyway, we should set about making our attack,” Night Blade turned her eyes towards the compound across the river. “During my last flight over head I spotted Harliquinn entering the building.”

Reith nodded slightly and drew his bow, a stern look coming to his face.

“Take me to the roof of the smaller building to the left,” he instructed the hero, who regarded him curiously.

“Can you handle-” Night Blade began, but he cut her off.

“Just do it.”

“You’ll be very exposed up there,” the hero insisted seriously.

Reith turned towards the woman, the gleam of fire in his eyes and his jaw firm.

“Alright,” Night Blade sighed.

Reith turned his gaze back to the complex as Night Blade took flight once again. Drifting around behind him she hooked him under the arms and together they moved swiftly across the expanse of the river. Without being spotted the hero dropped him off onto the desired building before taking to the air and disappearing into the low clouds.

“Alright Melodin,” Reith said seriously as he took an arrow from his belted quiver, “Let’s see how lucky you are this time.”



## Chapter Sixteen

The smoke stung his eyes and grated at his lungs, making him cough. Everything was dark, the noise of war had drifted into the distance towards the city center, and all was ruin around him. The glow of the burning fires were red and angry, lashing out at his bare arms and cheeks as he staggered through the broken streets.

He sniffed and wiped the tears from his cheeks. Through bleary eyes he looked about vacantly at the mess the Reparian army had created.

“Where am I?” he stammered and rubbed his runny nose with a ragged sleeve.

Nothing looked familiar. He had been walking for hours, and yet there was nothing he recognised.

The air grew darker the longer he walked, the fires brighter. His legs felt like jelly beneath him and yet he continued to stumble over the rocks, tripping on dead bodies and stepping in pools of blood.

He did not see any of it though. The only sight that showed itself in front of his eyes was the motionless body of his mother. Her pale blood streaked face staring up at the smoke filled sky, the dark red stain across her clothes, and her twisted limbs were all he could see.

His foot suddenly snagged on something and he crashed to his knees, ripping his pants and scratching his skin. He did not even feel the pain though and he collapsed to the ground, and curled up into a ball. Sobs wracked his body as the tears streamed from his stinging eyes.

He did not understand why he was crying so much, but he felt keenly the throbbing emptiness in his heart. Somehow he knew that he would never talk to his parents again. He was utterly alone.

Darkness closed in around him as the feeling of weariness took over.

A groan escaped Melodin's lips as he pushed himself into a sitting position. His head throbbed painfully as did his shoulder and hip.

"That hurt," he grumbled, bringing a hand up to his head where the pain came from.

The side of his face was wet and sticky, lifting his hand before his eyes he could not tell if it was blood or not. The light was too dim, and although a dim glow drifted down from far above him it afforded little clarity.

"Dog." Melodin called out, his voice echoing through the stone corridors.

The came no answer, he was alone.

He looked up again, trying to discern where he had fallen from, but there was nothing. Only empty darkness with a dim orange glow.

With a sigh he turned his attention to his current predicament and the grotty water he was sitting in up to his waist. Suddenly the putrid smell made itself known and Melodin was quick to cover his mouth and nose.

"Gross," he exclaimed, jumping to his feet.

But instantly a wave of dizziness came over him and he staggered to the side, falling against the slim covered wall where he leaned heavily clutching his head.

Slowly the stars in front of his eyes disappeared and taking a deep breath he pushed himself back to his feet and glanced along the dim passageways.

"Sewers. Great," he mumbled, "Just my luck."

There were only two ways to go, so with a shrug of his shoulders Melodin started off in one of the directions. As he sloshed through the putrid water he tried not to think about what was drifting by his legs and forced himself to focus on searching for a way back to the compound.

Suddenly he stopped walking and his ears picked up the sound of distant fighting.

"Damn," he exclaimed and slapped his forehead, which almost knocked the sense from him.

"It's that time already? Reith and Knight Blade must be executing the attack and here I am, stuck in some sewers, unable to do my part."

He groaned loudly as a feeling of depression crashed down upon his shoulders.

“I’ve failed them,” he said disappointedly, “Why do I always fail? Damn it! I’m so useless.”

His knees suddenly felt weak beneath him and it was all he could do to stop himself slumping into the sewer water and crying. He had failed his friends after they had put so much faith in him to sneak in and save Nim at the right moment. But now the whole plan had failed because he had not been careful.

“They’ll probably all die now,” he moaned and looked up towards the darkness.

Just then something caught his eye as he noticed a shadow growing larger quite rapidly. His eyes suddenly widened and he jumped to the side just in time to avoid being squished.

Grimy water splashed through the air, throwing muck onto his face and across the walls and the dark shape crashed into the sewer water. The water quickly stilled and continued its gentle course through the channels, and Melodin peered closer at what had fallen from above.

“Hey buddy,” Melodin said slowly as he looked at the body of a man, likely one of Harliquinn’s henchmen. “Are you ...? You’re not okay, are you?”

The man did not move, and with several arrows protruding from his face and twisted torso, it was clear he was dead. As the man’s blood joined the murky stream a feeling of renewed hope sprung up inside Melodin.

“I was a fool to doubt Reith and Night Blade,” Melodin laughed slightly, “The two of them could take on an army and win without hardly trying. They’ll be fine.”

With a smile he nodded to himself and looked back down at the body of the thug just in time to see one of the man’s broken arms twitch. Blood drained from Melodin’s face as his heart jumped up into his throat.

He was quick to compose himself though and with a slight laugh he shook his head.

“Silly me,” Melodin chuckled, “He’s clearly dead. Not like there are any ghouls down here to turn him into a zombie.”

Melodin laughed and shook his head again. But he quickly stopped as a mournful groan echoed down the corridor, turning his blood to ice.

Slowly he turned towards the direction of the sound his eyes wide and a shiver running along his spine. As he peered into the darkness another groan drifted towards him, forcing Melodin to stagger back a step and nearly trip over the dead body.

“No.” he barely whispered, “No, surely my luck isn’t this bad. A ghoul down here? Really? Don’t the dwarves who run this city have people who take care of these types of monsters?”

He took another step back, his hands visibly shaking and sweat trickling down his brow. His breathing came rapidly, his heart pounding in his chest, as he expected the creature to lunge out at him from the shadows at any moment. But as the seconds drifted by at a snail’s pace, his fear slowly subsided until he was almost disappointed a ghoul had not attacked him.

A frown came to Melodin’s face and he placed his hands on his hips as he stared into the dark passageway, straining to see and hear anything.

To his surprise his ears did pick up something other than the distant murmur of fighting above.

“Voices?” Melodin said quietly to himself.

A sense of relief flooded through him as he confirmed his thoughts, for he could indeed hear some voices echoing through the sewer.

“Voices mean people,” Melodin said excitedly to himself, “And people mean there is a way out and back to the compound to save Nim.”

With a grin on his face Melodin took off as quickly as he could through the shin high water and through the floating refuse.

\* \* \*

Blue light flashed each time his bow string hummed. The night lit up every time his arrows whistled down upon the unfortunate followers of Harliquinn. Not a single arrow missed its intended target. That was his skill: he never missed.

Reith's face was expressionless as the arrows flew from his bow. He did not like to kill, but if ever he needed to it did not worry him. Especially considering all the people whose life he had ended deserved it in one way or another. And these thugs were no exception.

Another arrow flew from his fingers, cracking another person between the eyes as she rushed from cover to cover. Lucky for her she had the talent of turning her skin as hard as rock and she escaped with nothing but a scratch.

Reith barely noticed the deflection, already firing at the next target, or simply raining as many arrows into the courtyard as possible. His quiver never ran dry, so he was almost bored firing upon the scrambling masses.

Quickly he jumped back from the edge as a ball of fire crashed into the lip to the roof, sending smoke and debris into the air. The fire ball was followed by a few bolts of lightning and some other projectiles as the people below had started to form some kind of organised counter attack to his rain of death.

"Got you now," a thug stupidly shouted as he suddenly appeared on the rooftop behind Reith.

But as soon as the man spoke Reith spun around, dropping to one knee and firing an arrow right into the man's throat.

The man's talent saved him and he disappeared into thin air right before the arrow pieced his neck. Barely a second later, the man reappeared next to Reith, his sword slashing down from a height.

Reith was ready and quickly slipped to the side, jumping back to his feet and firing an arrow barely inched from the man's face.

Again the thug vanished just in time and Reith dived into a roll as the man's sword slashed at his back. Back on his feet Reith levelled his bow at the man once again but did not release. Anticipating the shot the thug disappeared.

Quickly the Sky Pirate fell to his back just as a sword swung over his head and loosed the arrow. There came a blue flash as the arrows shot through the air narrowly missing the

thugs head as it launched high up into the night sky, disappearing into the low hanging clouds.

Half a second passed as the thug regained his composure and was quick to swat Reith bow from his hands, sending it skipping across the roof top.

“Got you now,” the man laughed as he brought the tip of his sword to Reith’s chin, making the Sky Pirate crawl back a few inches. “You almost got me a few time there. But you missed, and now I’m gonna stick you good.”

Reith stopped moving and gave the thug a confident smile, “I don’t miss.”

The man stopped and looked at him in confusion, before a grin crept across his face. He started to laugh, but was silenced suddenly as an arrow cracked down into the top of his skull, killing him instantly.

As the thug collapsed to the ground Reith jumped back to his feet and quickly retrieved his bow before returning to his position to continue firing his arrows to distract Harliquinn’s forces below.

Confusion filled the compound below as the criminals scrambled to get away from Reith’s arrows as well as the hand bombs Night Blade was dropping from above as she flew overhead. Small explosions and fires lit up the night, filling the air with smoke and dust, joining with the cries from Harlequinn’s goons.

“Hurry up Melodin,” Reith said quietly as he picked his next target below. “Send the signal; we can’t keep this up all night.”

\* \* \*

There came the sounds of voices again, drifting indistinctly through the dark passageway, bouncing off the stone walls and getting lost in the sound of trickling water.

Cautiously he crept through the sewer channel, around the bends as it slanted gradually downwards. Careful he was so as to not to slip on the greasy floor and tumble into the muck. He had done that once already and was not eager to taste the grotty water again.

Suddenly Melodin stopped as the voices stopped and a loud rattling of chains echoed up to him. The clink of metal was joined by a screech and a thud of moving gears. The noise soon stopped and the voice spoke once again as Melodin continued along the channel.

He knew he was drawing closer and as the voice grew louder he started to make sense out of the garble and picked up on a few words.

“Hurry ... out ... damn ... bring her ...”

Not much to go on, but whoever was talking did not sound overly happy.

Slipping around the next turn Melodin dropped back into the shadow as the path opened up into a dank grotto with dim lights sitting on the walls. Moving past his legs the sewer waters drifted into a wider pool in the room and out through a large metal grate that had been lifted. Beyond that he could just make out the flow of a river as it rushed past on its way through the city.

“Where’s that raft?” demanded a tall man with smudged makeup across his face.

Melodin sucked in a slight breath, that man was Harliquinn the infamous criminal leader, well known for his deranged mind and penchants of wearing women’s makeup.

“Coming boss,” called another man, Melodin recognised as the Trast who had been the one to capture Nim. “Some idiot wedged it in good here.”

Trast and the dwarf Trollgarr were in the process of manoeuvring a well-designed raft from a storage room at the base of a short flight of stairs.

“Careful Trollgarr, don’t break it now,” Trast exclaimed, drawing a grumble from the dwarf.

“Hurry up,” Harliquinn demanded irritably as he stood to the side, dusting off his richly designed clothes and adjusting a Reparian pistol in his belt that Melodin recognised as Nims’. “I must flee from here before that cursed Night Blade gets wind of our plans.”

“Here she is boss,” Belet said loudly as he entered the room, leading someone else by a rope that bound her hands.

“Nim,” Melodin gasped as he saw the young woman being pulled down the stairs and before Harliquinn.

“What of Night Blade?” Harliquinn demanded.

“She is preoccupied above with the rest of our men,” Belet reported.

“And who is that other one with her?”

“I don’t know,” Belet shook his head, “Not a hero I wouldn’t think. Someone else. Although it could be Deadeye, but the blue light that flashes with each arrow fired would indicate not.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Harliquinn waved a hand at the idea, “I’ll be out of here soon enough, with this lovely young princess in tow, and together we’ll make for Emperious.”

“My friends will come for me. They will stop you,” Nim replied defiantly, causing the criminal boss to giggle.

“None of them know you’re here my dear,” Harliquinn crooned, “You are all alone. Abandoned by your comrades and thrown to the wolves. And I hear the wolves in Reparian are quite hungry.”

Melodin gritted his teeth, and clenched his fist.

“I have to do something,” he told himself, “I can’t use the single flare to call Night Blade and Reith in here though. I have to save her myself. But there are four of them, and they beat me so easily last time. Damn it, why am I so useless.”

Melodin stood there in the darkness, chewing on his bottom lip, his heart yelling at him to charge in there and help Nim but his feet refused to move.

An explosion above suddenly vibrated the whole grotto, dislodging small rocks from the ceiling and making Melodin flinch instinctively.

“Damn it,” Harliquinn cursed loudly and turned to Trast and Trollgarr. “You two, hurry up with that raft already.”

“We’re tryin’,” grumbled the dwarf, “But the darn things stuck.”

“God dammit,” Harliquinn groaned, “Belet, give me the girl and help them out.”



“Sure.” Nodded the slight man and handed over the leash to the criminal boss.

“Come here my dear,” Harliquinn joked lewdly, pulling Nim close by the rope that bound her wrists. “Comfort me whilst we wait for these fools.”

“Don’t touch me, creep,” Nim yelled, kicking the tall man in the shin and pulling away.

Harliquinn laughed aloud in a high pitched tone, and tugged on the rope that bound Nim’s hands which did not let her pull away too far.

Before he realised Melodin was racing from his hiding spot up the sewer tunnel, it was as if he feet decided to move all on their own and he was simply watching the whole situation from afar.

Dirty water splashed through the air as he darted into the grotto and jumped up onto the platform by the stairs. His fingers grabbed something cold and hard and he did not let it go as he rushed for Harliquinn. Curiously the criminal boss turned around just in time to see Melodin swing the metal rod he had picked up right at his girlish face.

Melodin’s hands vibrated painfully as the cheek of Harliquinn cracked under the blow and sent the man staggering to the side. Not realising what he was doing Melodin grabbed the rope from Harliquinn’s hands along with Nim’s pistol from the man’s belt.

“Now why’d you have to go and spoil the party?” Harliquinn’s voice turned Melodin’s blood cold and he spun about to see the criminal boss glaring at him.

But the anger in the man’s eyes was no way near as frightening as his shattered cheek and jaw which was slowly resetting itself back in the correct position.

By now the three adjusting the raft had turned about in surprise and Melodin could see that his chance was quickly evaporating. The man Belet and his psychic powers was the most troublesome, so thinking as quick as he could Melodin threw his acquired metal rod at the slightly built man.

Without even pausing to see if it connected he spun about and grabbed Nim around the waist. Swinging her up onto his shoulder he raced for the exit that opened out on to the river.

“Stop them.” He heard Harliquinn scream.

“Melodin,” Nim cried out as well.

All of a sudden there came the sound of a raging inferno and something thundered into his back just as he jumped for the waters of the river. A searing hot pain erupted across his back causing him to cry out just before his face crashed into the surface of the river.

Seconds later he and Nim bobbed on the water’s surface, coughing and spluttering as the current took them swiftly southwards away from the sewer grotto.

“You’re insane,” Nim yelled at him as she unravelled the burnt rope from her wrists. “What are we supposed to do now? Ride the current into the Jagged Sea.”

“Here,” Melodin said, ignoring the comment, his mind working furiously.

As he struggled against the water and tried to ignore the pain across his back Melodin handed the young woman her Reperian pistol.

“Shoot this,” he instructed Nim as he pulled out a small flare bomb and threw it into the air with all his strength.

The flare did not go very high, but Nim was quick enough to shoot it, causing the bomb to explode in a brilliant white light that lit up the darkness and turned the grey clouds into a burning white flame. Sparks flew off in all directions before showering down into the water around them, their lights ending in an angry hiss.

Just as the light diminished he spotted a pair of black wings swooping down under the bridge towards them.

“Give me your hands,” Night Blade cried out as she flew a few feet above them.

Both Melodin and Nim were quick to respond and with surprising strength the Hero lifted them out of the water and quickly onto the next bridge in line.

As Melodin’s feet touched down he slumped to the ground, a large breath of relief escaping his lungs followed by a slight laugh.

“Good timing Night Blade,” he exclaimed with a wide smile.

“Yes,” Nim was quick to add, “Thank you. And thank you Melodin. I was starting to worry that you had died the night Harliquinn’s thugs abducted me.”

“I ain’t that easy to kill,” Melodin replied arrogantly.

“It was good timing,” Night Blade agreed, “Reith and I were starting to think something ill had befallen you.”

“Well, it did,” Melodin started to say before a sudden feeling of distress came over him and he jumped to his feet. “Dog.”

“What?” asked Night Blade with concern.

“She’s still back in the compound,” he quickly explained, “We have to go back.”

## Chapter Seventeen

“Quick Trollgarr. After them,” Trast shouted, sliding to a stop at the edge of the sewer platform.

“I ain’t swimin’,” Trollgarr replied simply, standing beside the tall man as they both watched the Princess and her rescuer disappearing along the fast moving river.

“Don’t look at me,” Belet was quick to say when the others turned around to him.

“Leave them,” Harliquinn spoke over the top of them, making them fall silent.

“But Boss, the Princess,” Trast exclaimed as he followed Harliquinn up the stairs that lead from the grotto and along a dank tunnel.

“Leave it my dear,” the mob boss replied over his shoulder. “The sweet little bird has flown the cage and fallen into the protective arms of a dark knight. You may pursue if you like, but I am retiring for the evening. I sorely need to catch on some beauty sleep.”

“But Night Blade-”

“That cursed hero has what she came for,” Harliquinn snapped over his shoulder at Trast.

“And the deal with the Empire?” Belet asked curiously. “They wanted the Princess, and likely they still want her. I don’t think they’ll be happy, especially since they paid us half the agreed sum already”

Harliquinn smirked, “Do not fret my dear. They will pay us, and they will be happy to do so, for I know of something else they dearly want to get their greedy little hands on.”

“What be that?” Trollgarr scratched his head as Harliquinn started up the spiralling staircase that would lead back into the main structure of the compound.

“A Spirit Ring.” Harliquinn replied confidently. “Didn’t you notice it?”

\* \* \*

“Quick. Let’s go,” Melodin said hurriedly and sprinted off across the bridge.

In the east, above the buildings, the sky was growing light, casting a veil across the stars and promising a bright day, such a stark contrast to the cloud that had fallen over his heart. If he was to lose Dog.

“No,” Melodin mumbled to himself as he raced through the street back towards Harliquinn’s compound. “Please be okay.”

“Melodin, wait,” the voice of Nim called out from behind him as she followed, quickly as she could.

But he did not wait, he could not.

There came a flutter of air as Night Blade flew over the top of him, soaring above the rooftops at the end of the street where she stopped and looked down the road towards the compound.

His heart was beating so loudly in his ears as he sprinted around the corner, and his mind so occupied with reaching Dog, that he did not see what was coming the other way. something cut across his path, ramming into his ankles and sending him sprawling across the hard cobblestones. He felt the fabric of his shirt and pants rip and the skin of his knees and elbows tear, but he did not care. Despite the pain he pushed himself back to his feet and started off again without even caring to look at what had tripped him.

He had barely gotten back to his feet when something crashed into the side of him, pushing him back to the ground on his back. He was so disorientated that he did not know what was happening until a wet tongue started smothering his face in drool.

“What the-” Melodin spluttered and pushed back his attacker to arm’s length.

Seeing the green eyes and white muzzle of his dearest friend before him relief flooded over Melodin.

“Dog,” He exclaimed happily and pulled the mongrel into a strong hug. “Don’t worry me like that.”

Dog barked happily and continued to lick his face, making him squirm away and laugh.

"It seems our mission was successful," Night Blade remarked as she floated down to the ground beside Nim.

"What about Reith?" Melodin asked, worry once again coming to his mind.

"I'm fine," the Sky Pirate said as he walked around the corner, looking tired but otherwise unhurt.

"You're not hurt?" Nim asked, a concerned look on her face.

Reith shook his head and Nim smiled.

"Thank you," Nim said seriously, "All of you. For coming to my aid. Even you, who I do not know."

Nim looked to Night Blade, who, for the first time, seemed uncomfortable.

"This is Night Blade," Melodin explained as he stood up, "She's the greatest hero in all of City State. Without her I don't think our rescue would have been as good."

"You're too kind," the hero looked away.

"You're a hero?" Nim asked curiously, "Then perhaps you could help me once more? I'm looking for someone who used to serve in the Kingsguard in Delaforr. Perhaps you might know of someone?"

Night Blade's jaw clenched slightly and she looked away, "I do know someone."

"Really?" Nim's eyes lit up with excitement. "Do you know where I can find them?"

The hero nodded her head, her expression covered by her mask.

"Their address is fifty River Terrace in Eastside," Replied Night Blade as she slowly floated into the air. "Now, I must be going. As should you each of you, Harlequinn's thugs will likely pursue. Farewell to you all."

"Thank you," Nim called after the hero.

"See ya," Melodin waved, a wide smile on his face as he watched the leather clad hero fly off into the coming dawn. "Damn, how good would it be to be able to fly?"

"Come on, let's go," Nim said eagerly as she quickly started off down the street.

“What? Now?” Melodin asked back as he joined her. “Don’t you want to rest first? Maybe get something to eat?”

“No.”

“Best of luck to you Nim,” Reith called to the Princess, making her and Melodin stop and turn to the Sky Pirate.

“You’re leaving,” she stated more than asked and Reith nodded.

“No, don’t go,” Melodin exclaimed. “We need your help.”

“Once Nim is with her Kingsguard she will have all the help she will need,” Reith stated.

“But she’s not with the Kingsguard yet,” Melodin was quick to say, “Remember what happened last time you left?”

The Sky Pirate clenched his jaw and sighed, “Fine. I will see you to this address, and then I will go my own way.”

“But-” Melodin started to say, but Nim interrupted him.

“Alright,” Nim said and smiled. “Thank you Reith.”

The Sky Pirate gave the young woman a curt nod before he took up the lead, walking briskly down the road that led through Long Isle towards Eastside.

Melodin tried to refute the agreement, but his words became stuck in his throat and with a despairing look to Dog he sighed heavily before moving to follow Nim and Reith.

The glow of the street lights lining the road grew fainter as the morning became brighter, throwing off the shadows of the night and once again casting the city in a golden hue. A chill wind picked up, racing through the deserted streets and rippling across the cold puddles, causing a shiver to run up Melodin’s spine.

As he followed along at a brisk pace he looked curiously up at the looming dwarven statues, which watched them pass in judging silence. It was quite bizarre seeing these kinds of sculptures throughout the city, holding up elevated walkways and every bridge that crossed

the river, there were even some of the titans similar to the ones from the main gates carved into the side of the tallest buildings.

“Why does such a small race build such big statues of themselves?” Melodin wondered aloud and looked to Dog who trotted happily beside him.

Dog gave a slight whine and seemed to shrug with her eyes at him.

A smile came to his face as he looked down at his furry companion. He had been so worried about Dog being by herself inside Harliquinn’s compound, surrounded by goons. But it seemed his concern was unwarranted.

The morning had very much arrived by the time Reith stopped in front of a large house marked fifty River Terrace. The innocuous looking town house was positioned at the top of the rise, seeming to back onto the river and offer grand views of the city.

“And this is where I bid you all farewell,” Reith said as he turned about to face Melodin and Nim.

“Thank you again, Reith,” Nim replied sincerely, “I could not have gotten this far without you. I wish you luck in finding Eclair, and I hope she still lives.”

“As do I,” Reith bowed slightly and gave the young woman a stiff smile.

“How can you be leaving when I still have this ring?” Melodin said loudly and held his hand up in front of the Sky Pirate.

Reith narrowed his eyes slightly, “The well-being of the woman I love is far more important than that cursed item. I gave you my warnings, many times, so it is up to you whether you heed them or not.”

“But if we don’t find a way to take the rings off we will die,” Melodin continued to argue.

“I’m well aware of that.” Reith snapped angrily.

“So stay, and together we’ll find a way,” Melodin smiled convincingly.



“If Eclairé is still alive, she has more chance of discovering the answer than both of us together,” Reith replied, his calm demeanour returned. “And if not I would rather spend my remaining years by her side.”

“So what am I supposed to do with this then?” Melodin held up his ringed hand again.

The Sky Pirate shrugged and looked away, “I don’t know,” he said quietly.

“Well that’s just great,” replied Melodin sarcastically and looked despondently to Dog who gave a slight whine.

“If all goes well and I find Eclairé alive, we will continue our search for a cure,” Reith said after taking a deep breath, “If we happen to be successful we will look for you, should you still be alive.”

“Your confidence in my survivability is overwhelming,” Melodin replied dryly and ran a hand over his face.

“That is all I can offer,” Reith said and turned away, “Farewell.”

“So long Reith,” Nim called as the dark haired man walked off down the road, offering a wave over his shoulder, but he did not look back.

“You know, Melodin,” Nim said hesitantly as they watched Reith leave, “You can leave also. I mean if you want. There are plenty of scholars in the realms that know about the Spirit Rings that might be able to help you.”

Melodin looked to her with a hurt expression, “Are you trying to get rid of me, Princess?”

“No,” Nim said very quickly, “I only, well, I thought you would wish to find a way to remove that ring from your finger. And seeing we’re about to speak with a member of my father’s Kingsguard, I’ll be in safe hands until I reach Delaforr. You have your own problems to consider, you see. My quest should not be a burden you have to carry too.”

Melodin grinned in reply and laughed slightly, “Hey, don’t worry about me princess. Delaforr was my home too, you know, of course I want to hang about and kick those imperial dogs out of my country.”

Dog growled unhappily at that.

“Sorry Dog,” Melodin was quick to say, “I didn’t mean to insult you, likening the imperials to dogs. Sorry.”

Dog looked away unhappily, drawing a light laugh from Nim.

“Come on then,” Melodin turned back to the princess and looked to the impressive house they were standing out the front of, “Let’s go talk to this Kingsguard. Which one is it? Do you know?”

“Tama and Lancer told me Lady Baywin came to City State after the escape from Delaforr,” Nim replied as Melodin led the way through a small gate and along a garden path lined with flowers. “She was known as the hurricane.”

Melodin nodded and knocked loudly on the front door, “Did I ever mention that my father was in the Kingsguard?”

“No,” Nim said with great curiosity, “What was his n-”

The opening of the door interrupted Nim and in the entrance stood a tall woman with black hair and sparkling grey eyes. Her features were sharp, with high eyebrows and thin lips, giving her a stern demeanor which was accentuated by the thin scar across a high cheekbone.

“Lady Baywin,” Nim bowed respectfully, “My name is Nimrodell. You served my father during his reign.”

“Indeed,” Baywin nodded and smiled sweetly, “You have the look of your mother, whom I knew well. I have waited for this day. Please come inside.”

Baywin stepped to the side and motioned for them to enter with a gentle sweep of her arm.

“You’re up early,” Melodin remarked cheerfully as he wiped his feet on the door mat and walked into the thin corridor.

To the side, after a doorway led onto a sitting room a long staircase reached up to the second floor where a small platform headed of in either direction.

“I’m not a great sleeper,” Baywin remarked offhandedly as she led the way past the stairs and down the continuation of the narrow hall which opened into a large kitchen and dining room with a balcony outside.

Looking around with wide eyes he trailed behind Nim as they followed the former Kingsguard out onto the veranda which overlooked a small garden that crept down a gentle slope to the edge of a short cliff that over looked the river. The sound of water rushed by and was joined with the pleasant calls of birds and sounds of many insects already working in the beautiful garden collecting pollen from the many and varied flowers.

“Please help yourselves,” Baywin remarked, motioning to the plentiful assortment of food and drink atop the small table on the veranda.

“Thank you,” Melodin said happily and was quick to grab an apple. “I’m starving. Don’t think I’ve eaten since yesterday lunch time, and I spent all night traipsing around a sewer.”

“So that is what the smell is,” Baywin remarked distastefully.

“I am very sorry Lady Baywin,” Nim was quick to say as she sat down at the table opposite the woman. “I was taken captive by the mob boss Harliquinn, and it was Melodin who saved me. We should have cleaned before coming here, but it has been such a long journey from Shirten where I was separated from Lord Tama and Lancer.”

Baywin nodded understandingly as Nim continued to tell her about the journey through the mountains and into City State. Although Melodin was stuffing his face with food and drink he noted that Baywin did not seem as interested by their run-in with Harilquinn.

As he dropped a piece of fruit to Dog Melodin peered closer at Baywin, her sparkling grey eyes and firm jaw suddenly seemed familiar to him. It was then that the woman noticed his curious look and she quickly looked away and shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

“Night Blade,” Melodin suddenly exclaimed, his mouth still full of food.

“What?” Nim asked indignantly, having been interrupted by his outburst.

Baywin again shifted uncomfortably.

“I knew I recognised you,” Melodin said to Baywin, “You must be the sister of Night Blade.”

Baywin seemed surprised by his statement before she laughed slightly as he and Nim looked at her questioningly.

“Is that true?” Nim asked curiously.

“Well,” Baywin replied hesitantly.

“I knew it,” Melodin said with a laugh, giving Dog a smug look.

“I did not know you had a sister.” Nim added with a perplexed expression. “But that explains why the hero Night Blade knows where you live.”

“Yes, well,” Baywin said, her eyes still looking towards the river, “I take it you did not come to talk about Night Blade.”

“No,” Nim agreed, a serious look coming to her eye, “I need your help to reach Delaforr. With Tama and Lancer nowhere to be seen, you have to help me.”

A dark cloud came to Baywin’s features then and Melodin watched in surprise as the tall woman stood up and walked to the edge of the wide veranda, her eyes gazing off across the city.

“I cannot,” Baywin finally said, her voice sombre.

“What? Why?” Nim exclaimed, her despair evident. “Tama and Lancer said you could help me.”

“Times have changed,” Baywin replied sadly, “Not so long ago I would have happily accompanied you. But now,” she sighed, “Now, I am no longer the warrior I once was.”

Nim slumped in her chair, her expression one of utter defeat.

“How can you say that?” Melodin asked angrily, drawing Baywin’s eyes to his. “You were one of the Kingsguard. My father said that you don’t ever stop being a knight in the Kingsguard. Even if you’re feeble or missing a limb, it’s the duty of the Kingsguard to protect and serve the royal family of Lakelinds.”

“And what would your father know of being a Kingsguard?” Baywin asked back, a frown coming to her face.

“Because my father was one,” Melodin replied proudly, “He died as one, fighting against the invasion from Reparian.”

His words brought a curious look to Baywin’s face and it was as if she was looking at him for the first time.

“Who was your father?”

“Arildin.”

A look of shock came to Baywin’s face before she frowned and looked away.

“You are the son of the Tower,” Baywin remarked and let out a slight laugh of surprise, shaking her head. “But it seems you know little of your father’s exploits.”

“No, I don’t remember much of him,” Melodin replied sadly, “But I do recall the words he said about the Kingsguard.”

A strange silence fell over Baywin, and he could see the muscles of the woman's jaw flinch as she clenched her teeth.

“Princess Nimrodell,” Baywin said, turning back to them. “If your companion truly is the son of Arildin, then you do not need my aid on this journey.”

“But,” Nim started to say as she turned a curious eye towards Melodin.

“Regardless,” Baywin spoke up again, “I cannot accompany you. But I can tell you of the others still alive in the Kingsguard. I know that the twins Rohere and Rohdor went to fight with Narglefar against Reparian to the east, and that Artharis is organising the rebel movement in Delaforr. As for Merrillyn I do not know where she went.”

“Are there no others still living?” Melodin asked seriously.

“No,” Baywin replied stiffly, “No other Kingsgaurd still live.”

“Than what do you suggest I do?” Nim asked, her concern obvious.

“Normally I would suggest you make straight for Delaforr,” Baywin replied sincerely, “But I have caught wind of something that concerns me greatly.”

“What?” Melodin and Nim asked in unison.

“There are whispers of something stirring within Reparian,” Baywin replied ominously, “It seems they know you seek to reclaim your throne and are doing everything within their power to stop you. Which is why Harliquinn was hired to capture you, I believe.”

“That explains a lot,” Melodin remarked with nod.

“Would that explain also why Harliquinn took a sample of my blood?” Nim asked curiously, drawing a perplexed look from Baywin.

“He did what?” A flash of anger came to the former Kingsguard’s eyes before it was replaced with confusion. “Strange. No, his motives for that elude me.”

“So what should I do then?” Nim asked, her anxiety rising. “Go search for the twins in Narglefar?”

“No, I would not recommend you head into a war zone,” Baywin shook her head. “No, make for Solegrad and Arch Eden. There you will find sanctuary from our enemies, and from there the rebels in Delaforr will hear of your wellbeing. From there you can look to make your next move.”

Nim sighed, her eyes dropping to the table top in blank expression.

“Take an air ship from Altor, in the north east of City State, tomorrow,” Baywin continued, “I will make sure you will find safe passage, and should trouble come I am certain the son of Arilidin can protect you.”

With a serious expression Baywin headed for the door that lead back into the house.

“Stay here whilst I am gone,” commanded the former Kingsgaurd, “Sleep, eat, and please do have a wash, the smell of the sewer is quiet overpowering.”

With that she left them on the veranda and quickly left the house.

## Chapter Eighteen

“There it is,” Eclairé remarked as she lounged back in one of the two pilot seats at the front of the airship. “Do you still think they would have come here?”

Solordorr turned a slight frown towards the elf, “Time away from political espionage has dulled your wits, Eclairé.”

His comment brought a glare to Eclairé’s beautiful face, “Or the lack of information has made what you consider obvious, obscure to me.”

A feint smile crept to the corners of his mouth as he looked back to the wide views of City State not far ahead of them and rapidly drawing closer. A heavy layer of grey clouds hovered in the skies bringing a gentle patter of rain against the windscreen.

“There is one of the remaining Kingsguard of Delaforr residing in City State,” Solordorr explained simply. “Baywin, the hurricane, I believe it is, though she goes by the name of Night Blade these days as she works for the Hero Association.”

“Thank you,” Eclairé said, “Now it makes sense.”

“I would be shocked if it did not,” he replied flatly as he straightened his posture and took control of the airship.

Flicking a few of the buttons and correcting the ship’s speed he guided it on a gentle decline over the high walls and towards the airship docks in the city of Altor.

“Pilot,” a gruff voice came through on the crystal radio, “This is the control tower. Proceed to dock twenty-five.”

“Understood,” Solordorr replied and adjusted his course to adhere to the control tower’s direction.

Bringing the airship into a hover he lowered the ship down through a wide circular opening and into the docking bay. Dust kicked up about the hanger as the landing legs touched down

and with a few more movements across the control panel the engines stopped. The roof of the hanger slowly closed above them, shutting out the rain and bringing deep shadows to the area. Solordorr was quick to hop up from the pilot seat and head for the exit of the craft, and with Eclair close behind him and together they headed down the short stairs into the hanger where a pale and gaunt individual greeted them.

“Welcome to Altor,” the attendant smiled at them, his canine teeth showing the tell-tale length of a vampire’s. “Also known as the city of the damned. Are you planning on staying long?”

“No,” Solordorr was quick to say, “I wouldn’t be here at all if it were not required.”

The vampire smiled again, the red colour around the outside of his iris flaring brightly.

“A shame you feel that way,” replied the attendant, “Altor is quite lovely this time of year. Would you like a brochure of local hotels and restaurants?”

“No,” Solordorr replied, hints of irritation creeping into his voice.

“Are you sure?” asked the vampire, “It clearly labels which are owned by Vampires, Werewolves or Demons.”

“I said no,” snapped Solordorr, “Just give me the ticket so we may be on our way to catch the ferry to Governce.”

“Of course sir,” the attendant smiled and handed over a small slip of paper. “You may purchase ferry tickets at our main reception. Enjoy your stay.”

Snatching the ticket from the man’s hand Solordorr briskly headed for the exit of the hanger with Eclair close behind.

\* \* \*

“The Banshee,” Reith mumbled in disbelief as he watched a familiar airship slowly drift across the grey sky to the north of Altor.

Shielding his eyes against the fall of rain he watched in surprise as the ship began to descend into the city where the airship docks were located.



A deep frown came to his face as his eyes dropped to the wet cobblestone road. The gentle fall of the rain fell steadily on his shoulders, drenching his dark hair and sending trickles under his cloak.

“How?” he wondered softly and looked back to the roofline where the Banshee had disappeared, “Eclairé?”

With his worries swirling through his mind Reith took off swiftly through the wet streets, heading towards the airship docks.

\* \* \*

“Sure was nice of Baywin to fly us both here in her personal airship,” Melodin remarked as he walked casually down the road.

“It would have been nice if she took us all the way to Solgrad though,” Nim replied, a slight edge of annoyance in her voice.

Dog barked in agreement.

“Come on, she’s probably really busy here,” Melodin said, drawing a disbelieving look from the princess.

“But as you stated earlier, she has a duty as a member of the Kingsguard,” Nim rebutted, her arms crossed across her chest. “I wonder if she would have said the same if it had been my father asking?”

“What do you mean?” He looked to the princess curiously.

“Even Tama and Lancer treated me like a child,” Nim said quietly, looking away, “It is as if I am merely an idol to front the rebellion. A useless figure head merely kept around to look pretty and spur the soldiers on to continue fighting.”

“I wouldn’t believe that for a second,” Melodin dismissed the notion. “You’re the reason they fight, sure. But I bet you those Kingsguard and rebels see you as their leader, fighting on the front lines against the wretched Empire. No way are you useless Nim.”

Nim looked to him with big eyes before she blushed slightly and looked away.

“I, thank you for your kind words,” Nim smiled, but it seemed to Melodin that she did not believe him.

A feeling of curiosity stirred within him as he watched Nim for a few seconds before turning his gaze to the city around them.

“It always rains here in Altor,” Melodin remarked, turning his face towards the heavens and letting the misty rain splatter over his face. “Probably because they call it the city of the damned.”

“I had heard that,” Nim said curiously, “The residents in this part of City State are all vampires, yes?”

“No, not all of them,” Melodin clarified, “Some are werewolves and demons, or just regular folk such as ourselves.”

Nim shivered slightly and looked around at the passing people with some concern.

“Don’t fret, the stories you hear aren’t all truth,” Melodin said with a grin, “Vampires don’t hunt virgins and stalk around dark alleyways for their next victim to suck dry. It’s all very civilised really. Werewolves don’t go all psycho and rip people to shreds and the demons don’t steal your soul.”

“But they can turn you into a vampire and such by biting you, correct?” Nim asked curiously, her eyes still filled with worry.

“Yeah,” he nodded, “But last I heard there hasn’t been a case of involuntary transmorphing in years. Plus the authorities quickly crack down on any such crimes. I hear the major families of each faction regulate the transmorphing pretty strictly.”

“Is it true that those who are changed lose their natural born talents?”

“That’s right,” confirmed Melodin, “But in exchange you get all the natural abilities that come with the changing, which is why a lot of people with no talents come to Altor. You know, I’m surprised you don’t know all this. You must have had a very sheltered upbringing.”

“My upbringing was perfectly adequate,” Nim snapped angrily.

“Calm down,” Melodin jested, drawing a scowl from the princess, “Where were you taken after Delaforr fell anyway? Narglefar?”

“Yes,” Nim replied, still with an indignant tone in her voice, “In the capitol Solaris. The king was close with my father and offered me sanctuary from the Empire, it was one of the reasons fighting restarted between Narglefar and Reparian.”

“What was it like growing up in the palace?”

“Perfectly fine,” Nim replied simply.

“I would think it would be lonely,” Melodin remarked thoughtfully.

“Why?” Nim asked in surprise, “I had handmaidens to talk with, as well as my teachers.”

“I guess that would be alright,” he shrugged, and bit down on his bottom lip as Nim looked away, her eyes distant.

Awkwardly he tried to think of something more to say as the silence between them grew to the point that it became stifling. Eventually he gave up and turned his thoughts to the surrounding streets. Here in Altor the buildings were smaller than the ones in Governce but they each held a sense of nobility that the capitol lacked. There were still large statues holding up the buildings and dominating the public squares scattered about the streets, but they were not as titanic and took on a more sombre mood. This feeling was not helped by the incessant drizzle that was common place in the region. But this mood was countered by the people of the city, all seeming cheery and pleasant enjoying the weather and their situation.

Although, Melodin had heard that there was anger building between the three factions within the city. It was well known that vampires and werewolves never liked each other and the demons kept mostly to themselves. But in recent times the demons had been wading into the disputes between the werewolves and vampires, which was less than appreciated.

“This way,” Melodin said as they came to a fork in the road and pointed towards the east.

“The airship docks are over there.”

Nim did not reply and together they walked through the rain towards the large airship docks.

A strange tingling sensation prickled up the back of his neck, causing him to look over his shoulder. The street was busy enough with people going about their daily chores, but an odd feeling swelled within him. A low growl from Dog at his side seemed to confirm his concerns, but still everything looked as normal as he thought it should be.

“Do you get the feeling we’re being follow?” Melodin asked Nim as he turned back to the path ahead.

“No,” Nim shrugged and shook her head.

\* \* \*

Dirty water splashed up onto his boots and trousers as he walked briskly through the streets. The rain was still falling from the grey skies, but he hardly noticed as he filtered through the crowds and across the plaza in front of the expansive airship hangers. Briefly he looked at the large statue of a dwarf standing at the centre of the square, holding an airship high into the air with one hand. Carved out of black marble it cast an imposing figure, partially lost in the dark sky above.

“Delayed due to bad weather,” a blonde haired man scoffed at the base of the statue as Reith rushed by towards the hanger entrance. “Such nonsense.”

“Maybe there is a storm further to the south,” replied a light voice which made Reith stop dead in his tracks.

He knew that voice. It was one he would never forget.

Slowly he turned about to see a blue haired elf sitting on the bench at the base of the statue, sheltered slightly from the rain by the large stone airship held above.

“Eclaire,” Reith breathed in disbelief as his eyes met with the elf’s stunning orbs.

“Reith?” Eclaire exclaimed at the same time and stood up in surprise.

“How?” Reith asked in wonder as he walked towards his love.

“Skip the happy reunions if you don’t mind,” the blonde haired man stepped in front of Eclaire, his crimson eyes shining brightly.

“Who are you?” Reith asked irritably.

“Where is the princess?” the threatening man asked in reply.

Curiously Reith looked to Eclairé, the elf looked away her unease obvious.

“I’m not sure I know what you are talking about,” Reith looked back to the crimson eyed man.

A wry smile spread across the man’s face, his eyes twinkling knowingly.

“Save yourself, and Eclairé, a lot of trouble and just answer my question,” the man said slowly. “Where is princess Nimrodell?”

The man’s eyes seemed to glow with an inner fire, causing a sense of hesitation bubble within Reith and again he looked to Eclairé for some kind of explanation.

He could see the concern marked clearly upon Eclairé’s face, her eyes seeming to plead with him for help.

A smirk came to Reith’s face, “Last I heard princess Nimrodell was dead, killed when Reparian invaded Lakelinds many years ago. Where have you been? Sleeping under a rock?”

The blonde haired man’s eyes flashed dangerously as a fierce look came to his face.

“This is no time for jo-”

“Found you.” someone yelled ferociously, “You son of a bitch.”

Before Reith could react there was a rush of wind from the side and a blur of movement as someone, or something, thundered into the side of the blonde haired man. A bright light flashed through the dreary day as the crimson eyed man and the blur suddenly went flying off to the other side of the plaza.

\* \* \*

“...and Dog ran off with the guy’s hat,” Melodin laughed aloud as he finished story and looked to Nim, but she did not seem to see the humour.

Awkwardly Melodin stopped his chuckling and looked away as they turned the corner into the large square in front of the airship docks.

Again that strange feeling nagged at the back of his head, causing him to look over his shoulder down the road they had just walked along. Still all seemed normal to his way of thinking, but he did think he spotted a shadow quickly dart into a side alley.

A sudden crash and explosion of dust made him instinctively duck for cover and pull Nim to the side as the building to the side erupted outwards. Half of the lower floor crumbled into nothing and large cracks snaked up through the stone work.

“What?” Melodin exclaimed as he skipped away from the blast and looked back in surprise.

With the falling rain the dust settling quickly, revealing a bald and caped man staring into the broken building with a fierce look upon his face.

“Tama?” Nim called out in surprise, drawing the bald man’s gaze.

“Princess?” the Kingsguard called back, similarly shocked.

“What happened?” Nim called and started towards the bald man.

The sudden cascade of golden lights pouring out of the broken building forced Nim to skid to a stop and look on in horror as the magical light thundered into Tama, ripping apart his flesh and crumbling bone. Fabric disintegrated and blood showered the cobblestones as Tama fell backwards to the ground.

“No,” Nim cried out in horror and tried to race to the bald man’s side but Melodin was quick to grab her by the arm and stop her. “Let me go. Tama!”

Her cries were silenced as a blonde haired man walked slowly from the broken building, a golden aura burning around him, his crimson eyes glowing fiercely.

“Tama the Invincible?” the blonde haired man scoffed, “More like Tama the Fool. I’m impressed you escaped your imperial shackles, but you are an idiot to try and kill me.”

To Melodin’s surprise Tama growled angrily and rolled back to his feet, the blast holes in his body rapidly healing as he squared off against the crimson eyed man.

“Princess Nim, I implore you to leave this place immediately,” Tama called out, not taking his eyes from the crimson eyes man. “I will deal with this man.”

“Princess?” the blonde haired man turned a curious look towards Melodin and Nim before a sly smile came to his face. “How nice it is to make your acquaintance. I will formally introduce myself in a moment, once I’ve destroyed your faithful Kingsguard.”

“You’ll find me harder to kill than you think, Solordorr,” Tama cried as he darted ahead, tackling Solordorr back into the broken building and right out the other side.

“Quick, let’s get out of here,” Melodin said hurriedly and pulled Nim by the arm into the plaza and towards the airship docks.

“But Tama,” Nim argued, but she did not struggle against his pull.

“I’m sure he’ll be fine,” Melodin called back as they sprinted along.

But Melodin skidded to a stop by the statue at the centre of the square and a familiar face caught his eye.

“Reith?” Melodin exclaimed as he ran over to the sky pirate. “What are you doing here? Who’s this? Wait, I recognise you.”

“Reith,” Nim called happily, “I thought you had left.”

“I have,” replied the sky pirate as he turned from the blue haired elf he was embracing.

“Ellie, right?” Melodin asked the elf, “No that wasn’t it. Claire?”

“Eclair,” corrected the elf, a slight smile coming to her face.

“That’s it,” exclaimed Melodin, “Looks like you found her all safe after all, hey Reith.”

“It seems so,” the sky pirate replied flatly.

The statue above their heads suddenly exploded as Solordorr and Tama smashed through it and continued towards the other side of the plaza. Rubble rained down and a loud groan sounded before the large airship toppled towards the ground forcing Melodin and the others to run to safety.

“Quick. To the airship hangers,” Eclairé called out and led the way across the square and into the large building. “The Banshee is docked at bay twenty-five. You all must leave.”

“You all?” Reith echoed and pulled Eclairé to a stop, “What do you mean?”

“I,” the elf stammered, “I can’t come with you.”

“What? Why?” Reith implored, his eyes filled with pain.

Eclairé pulled away from the man’s grasp, tears filling her eyes. Slowly she opened the front of her shirt to reveal a small pink diamond sparkling at the centre of her chest.

“Is that-?” Reith started to ask, his voice tense.

“Yes,” Eclairé cut him off.

“What is it?” Melodin asked curiously, as he and Nim watched the scene with confusion.

“It’s a controlling spell,” the elf explained, her expression pained, “If I don’t follow Solordorr’s instructions he can kill me with a single word.”

“That bastard,” Reith cursed quietly.

“That doesn’t seem fair,” Melodin replied, “Can you remove it?”

The elf shook her head, “If done incorrectly the spell will kill me.”

Melodin watched as Reith’s hand balled into a fist and a mask of anger covered his face.

“I will kill him,” Reith said seriously and took a step towards the exit where the sounds of battle raged.

“No,” Eclairé intercepted the sky pirate, “If you fight him, he will kill you. Please get the princess out of here, take her to Delaforr.”

“I can’t leave you, not like this,” Reith was quick to say.

“Once I unravel the spell I can remove the diamond and be free of Solordorr,” Eclairé said seriously. “Trust me Reith. I will find you once I’ve resolved this. Now go.”

Reith’s hesitation was obvious as he glanced towards Melodin and Nim.



The ceiling beyond Eclairé suddenly crashed inwards as Solordorr drove Tama into the ground, creating a small crater and sending cracks running through the floor. Kneeling on top of the member of the Kingsguard Solordorr raised his fist as a ball of golden energy enveloped his fist. As Tama tried to react Solordorr slammed his glowing fist into the man's face, the gathered energy was released at the moment of impact reducing Tama's head to a blackened stump of neck.

Nim gasped in horror as Solordorr slowly stood up from the corpse and turned towards them.

"So that's where you ran off to Eclairé," Solordorr remarked, an evil smile on his face. "I do hope you're not trying to bundle the princess away before I got a chance to speak with her. And we have so much to talk about."

"You'll have to get through me first buddy," Melodin said angrily, jumping in front of Nim, defiantly shaking his fist at Solordorr.

The crimson eyed man's smile dissipated as a look of curiosity came to his face.

"As well as me," Tama cried out, his bald head back on his shoulders.

Before Solordorr could react Tama tackled the man through the nearby wall and back out into the plaza.

"Go Reith," Eclairé spun back to the sky pirate, her eyes rimmed with tears, "While you still can."

Reith clenched his jaw before he pulled the elf into a crushing hug. She returned the embrace and their lips met in a passionate kiss.

"You know how to find me," Reith said softly to the elf. "I love you."

Eclairé's words seemed to get stuck in her throat as tears fell down her cheeks and Reith pulled away.

"Let's go," the sky pirate said seriously as he rushed past Melodin and Nim.

Slowly Melodin moved to follow Reith, looking back briefly at the elf as she turned away with a determined expression.

“Come on Dog,” Melodin said seriously as he ran behind Nim and Reith.

People huddled in fear in the side paths and entrances to the hangers as they sped by towards number twenty-five. Distant rumbles of explosions reverberated through the long corridor as it swept around on an arch with many doorways leading away into different airship docks.

The others skipped ahead and through the door to number twenty-five as Melodin looked back over his shoulder, a sense of concern filling him as he thought about Eclair and how Reith must feel. Knowing there was little he could do about it he turned back to the path ahead and the dock that was just around the corner, but for some reason he had stopped moving.

He was about to call out but a heavy blow thudded into the back of his head and darkness took him.

## Chapter Nineteen

Deep blue lights slowly drifted through the room, shining in his eyes and reflecting through the glass vials and off the metallic surfaces of the laboratory. There were several others in the room with him, but everyone remained quiet, focusing on their work. A slight hum reverberated around the room, coming from the machine that produced an intense beam of light which shone directly onto the blue gem that was embedded on a silver ring.

He took a deep breath and slowly turned the dial, increasing the intensity of the light. The blue reflections sped up slightly and the hum began to throb a bit louder.

“State unchanged,” reported one of the other scientists in the room.

He nodded slightly and turned the dial up higher, keeping an eye of the paper readout that drew ink lines across a page. The needle that drew the lines was still fairly stable, occasionally darting up and down short peaks and falls.

The humming machine dropped a few decibels, turning into a deep rumble that vibrated in his gut.

“Professor,” called one of the lab assistants. “I’m showing some slight fluctuations of energetic yield coming from the Spirit Ring.”

The Professor nodded to the young man and turned the dial up again. Sweat began to bead on his brow and he licked his dry lips. The rumble deepened, making him feel sick in his stomach and with one final turn the machine increased to its maximum intensity.

The lights from the beam of light hitting the blue gem began to spin rapidly about the room, flicking across his eyes as he watched the Spirit Ring glow with a white flame deep within its crystal depths.

He glanced to the read out, concern coming to his mind as he saw the needle dancing back and forth across the page in rapid and sharp movements.

The deep baritone rumblings suddenly changed to a high pitched tone, making him grimace in pain.

“Too much.” Someone cried out.

But he did not need to be warned and quickly turned the dial down, reducing the intensity of the crystal light beam. The shard of light rapidly vanished but the high pitched whistling persisted and the burning light within the Spirit Ring lingered, making him shield his eyes from the brightness.

The piercing sound suddenly stopped and the bright light burst forth in a wave of energy, throwing him backwards to the ground as the machines cracked and burst apart.

Just as quickly as it happened the energy dissipated, leaving the lights in the room flickering and a ringing in his ears.

“Professor? Are you alright?” one of the younger technicians was by his side helping him to his feet.

“Is anyone hurt?” he asked loudly, looking about the small laboratory to his assistants.

Fortunately he could see all of them, staggering back to their feet or helping their co-workers.

“What happened?” the young assistant next to the professor asked in confusion as they looked about to the ruined equipment.

“It would seem,” he replied slowly, his eyes falling upon the Spirit Ring, “That it did not appreciate the energy yield test.”

A seething white glow remained in the ring’s gemstone, lingering within the depths like an agitated lion.

“So the Spirit Rings really are sentient,” the young assistant remarked with wonderment.

\* \* \*

His senses returned to him rapidly and he woke with a start, jumping upright and looking about. But all was dark, as if a sack had been placed over his head, and the back of his skull ached painfully.

"I'm blind," Melodin exclaimed in horror, realising his eyes were open and yet he could not see a thing.

"Shut it squirt," the gruff voice said loudly in his ear and was followed by a heavy blow to the side of his head.

Again darkness took him into the realms of unconsciousness.

The next time he came back to reality Melodin let it slowly return to him. The first thing he realised was that there was indeed a dark hood over his head and curiously he felt as if he were floating. He also suddenly realised that he could not move.

"Where's the princess?" a voice demanded ahead of him.

"Gone," replied someone else, who he recognised as the pompous mob boss Harliquinn.

"The little dear managed to flee the coup."

"Damn," grumbled the first voice, "You were supposed to-"

"Supposed?" Harliquinn exclaimed in surprise, "You hired me and I gave no promises. But fortunately for you it just so happens I took a little sample from our dear princess before she managed to scarper."

"You mean?"

"Blood, my dear. Blood," Harliquinn tittered strangely.

"Very good. I suppose it will have to do," said the first voice. "But you'll only be paid a quarter of the agreed sum."

"What?" several other voices exclaimed from all around Melodin.

"Agreed." Harliquinn spoke above the murmur. "But how much will you give me for this?"

"Who the hell's that? Some kid?"

Melodin gritted his teeth angrily but suppressed his desire to snap back at whoever this man was.

“No idea who the little fellow is,” Harilquinn remarked, “But you may be interested in that ring on his finger.”

Silence followed and Melodin felt someone grab his hand arm roughly.

“Is this what I think it is?” the first voice asked in surprise.

“Depends on what you think it is?” Harliquinn tittered.

“Spirit Ring,” the first voice gasped.

“Then yes, it is what you think,” the mob boss laughed again. “So how much?”

Melodin felt the man tug at his finger, trying to get the ring off.

“Damn thing’s stuck,” grumbled the man.

“Yes, it seems the boy and ring are a package deal.”

“I don’t want the kid,” huffed the man, “Where’s my axe?”

“No,” Melodin cried out in horror. “Don’t cut my hand off. Please. I need that hand, I can’t use my left for anything.”

“So the kid talks,” the man chuckled.

“The trick is getting him to shut up,” the voice of Trollgarr said right behind him before another heavy blow crashed into the back of his head.

Once again the black abyss took him deep into the realms of nothing where images of an ugly man with an axe taunted him endlessly.

“No. Don’t,” he cried out, his eyes popping open as he suddenly came from the dreams.

“What? Where am I?”

Concern filled him as he looked about at the dark room, the smell of wet stone and mouldy straw hung heavily in the air. There was also something else he smelt, that burned his nose hairs, it’s was the stench of blood and flesh.

A cold sweat began to form on his brow as he looked about and to the chair he was sitting in, his wrists shackled to the arms and his feet similarly chained to the legs. A warm orange light shone from behind him, illuminating the tables covered in nasty looking tools as well the metal cage that hung from the ceiling beside a large iron door.

That door suddenly burst inwards and an ugly, fat, man waded in, his face covered with a hood with holes cut out so he could see. Wearing nothing but a pair of grimy pants and blood-stained leather apron he waddled over to stand in front of Melodin.

"I has gots some questions for you," the large man slurred, pointing a rusty axe in Melodin's face.

"No, this can't be happening," Melodin gasped in denial, "That was just a dream right? Ugly torturers with axes don't exist in reality, right?"

"Who you callin' ugly, squirt." The fat man growled angrily.

Melodin chuckled and shook his head, "Right down to the poor intellect. I must be dreaming."

"Dream this runt," snapped the torturer and slammed the butt of the axe into Melodin's face, crunching his nose.

Melodin went cross-eyed and he felt the warmth of his own blood trickle over his lips and off his chin to drip into his lap.

"Now how abouts you tells me how to get that ring off an' I won't hurts you no mores," the large man said slowly and seriously.

Melodin shook his head, forcing away the stars in front of his eyes and focused on the torturer.

"Have you tried simply slipping it off my finger?" Melodin asked dryly.

"Did you take me for an idiots?"

"Yes."

The fat man roared angrily and rasied his axe high, causing Melodin's eyes to widen.

“Wait,” he tried to say to stop the man, but it was too late.

Melodin cried out as the axe cut down for his wrist, its rusty edge promising pain. He closed his eyes and turned away as the axe slammed into his arm. A loud crack echoed about the chamber and Melodin clenched his jaw waiting for the pain to take over.

But it never did.

Curiously he opened one eye and peered at his arm, expecting to see a bloodied stump. But it all looked normal and his hand was still right where it should have been.

“What?” Melodin wondered looking closer at his hand and even moving his fingers to make sure he was not seeing things.

Completely stunned he looked to the fat man and to the broken axe he tossed to the side of the room.

A smile crept across his face as he looked triumphantly at the torturer.

“No hows abouts you tell us how to get that ring off,” the large man said again.

“How about you go to hell.” Melodin replied confidently, drawing a ferocious look from the man as he loomed over him. “You and your bad pronunciations.”

“Why you-”

“Enough.” a commanding voice from the doorway interrupted the man. “This isn’t going to work.”

The torturer immediately shrank away from Melodin and bowed his head as the tall woman entered the chamber.

As the light fell upon the features of the woman Melodin’s mouth fell open and his eyes became wide.

“You again,” he exclaimed, recognising the beautiful woman with luscious brown hair wearing a rather revealing dress. “Wait, what was your name again? Vixen?”

“Visteen,” the woman corrected him, one her shapely eyebrows rising. “So good to see you again Melodin.”



With a wave of her hand the shackles binding him clicked open allowing him to freely stand up from the chair.

“Perhaps you could teach me how to do that,” Melodin remarked causally as he rubbed his sore wrists.

“Follow me.” Visteen said, which sounded more of a command.

He hesitated, eyes darting about the room.

“Or you can stay here with mister illiterate,” Visteen remarked, heading back out the door.

Taking a deep breath he jumped to catch up with the woman, outside the chamber. He slid to stop in the hallway though, and with wide eyes he looked about in confusion. Unlike the torture chamber the halls were clean and white, with sharp lines and high ceilings where crystal lights glowed.

“What is this place?” he wondered aloud.

“This way, if you will,” Visteen said over her shoulder as she headed down the corridor.

Again he hesitated and looked the other way.

“You cannot escape,” Visteen said, as if reading his thoughts, “This is a secure facility, with the only way in and out heavily guarded. Even if you run from me now, you will not get far. So perhaps you could save us, and you, a lot of trouble and come with me.”

Melodin’s eyes narrowed as he looked to Visteen, feelings of trepidation building within him.

“I have no intention of killing you,” Visteen said, and smiled slightly, “Even if I wanted to I think that ring you wear would have other ideas.”

He looked to his hand and the shimmering diamond set upon the golden band.

“Do you wish to know more about it?” Visteen asked, grabbing his attention. “I can tell you, if you want.”

Melodin took a deep breath, his eyes narrowing slightly.

“What reason would I have to lie to you, my dear?”

Slowly his eyes drifted towards the ceiling as he tried to think of a reason, but in actuality nothing really came to mind.

“What about mister illiterate?” Melodin asked seriously, “You were trying to torture me, right?”

A disarming smile came to Visteen face, her brown eyes sparkling. “That was just a little test. I have no desire to harm you, I promise. And after we have a chat I will take you back to your friends, if I can find them.”

Still he did not feel too eager to follow Visteen, although she appeared kindly he did not trust her at all.

Visteen sighed heavily and placed her hands on her hips, “Come or run. It’s your choice Melodin, either way we will be having a little chat.”

She turned away and started down the hall again.

“If you behave perhaps I shall tell you a bit about your father,” Visteen called over her shoulder.

“What?” Melodin called as he quickly chased after the woman. “What do you mean? What do you know about my father?”

At a run he caught up to her quickly, and as he pulled alongside Visteen she gave him a sly look.

“To begin with I know your father would not have been afraid of the torturer,” Visteen replied, “Just like you were not afraid.”

“Really?” he exclaimed, a feeling of pride swelling inside him. “Wait. How did you know him?”

She shrugged, “Arildin and I were, friends.”

“But he was in the Kingsguard and you ...” Melodin said, trying to make sense of the information.

“I, what?” Visteen asked curiously.

“You’re a Reparien spy.”

Visteen’s laughter surprised him as it escaped from her belly in genuine amusement.

“Reparien spy?” she looked to him, her eyes sparkling, “Please don’t associate me with that lot. I, my boy, am a sorceress. A scholar. A soldier of truth. I do not throw my allegiances in with any country, not anymore. And not when I knew your father.”

“Then how’d you know him? Did you know my mother as well?” Melodin pressed.

A slight frown came to the woman’s face, “No, I did not know your mother Mythrin. We shall talk more about your father later, for now I wish to ask you a few questions.”

“About this ring?” he guessed.

Visteen stopped faced him fully, granting him a clear view of her cleavage which her dress did little to cover.

“Come with me,” she said, drawing his eyes to her and she held out her hand.

Warily Melodin took hold and instantly the white hallway around them vanished and was replaced with open vistas of a large city.

Melodin’s mouth fell open as he let go of Visteen’s hand and walked over to the ledge of the high building they had teleported onto.

“Emperious,” Melodin said quietly as he gazed at the views. “Now here’s a place I’ve never been before.”

He was standing atop one of the tallest building in all the city, nearly twenty floors above the ground. Many other tall structures were positioned close around the bottom of this one, as if they were trying to get close to the biggest building for protection. A sense of wonderment filled him as he saw the streets far below and the train lines that moved through, and around the buildings on specialised tracks, the steam of their engine drifting up into the afternoon skies.

“Emperious, the seat of the Empire,” Visteen remarked as she came to stand alongside him.

“Currently at war with Lakelinds, Solegrad, Narglefar, as well as Shirten and City State if

things continue to progress the way they are. But did you know that long ago there was only one nation in these lands?"

Melodin looked to the sorceress curiously and shook his head.

"Middenland it was called." She explained, "I'm sure you recognise the name as the title for our region, but in those days it was the name of this single kingdom. Stretching from the hot deserts of Zarkadia in the east all the way to the western wildlands beyond Solgrad, it was vast and beautiful."

"What happened?" Melodin wondered aloud, his eyes going back to the incredible view across the city.

"Take my hand," Visteen said again.

Like before, the moment he did the world around them vanished for a split second before rematerializing as some place different. They were standing on a balcony but this time his eyes fell upon a huge body of water, its gentle surface sparkling in the sunlight.

"Where's this?" Melodin wondered as he moved to the railing, his eyes running along the bank of the lake as they raced off in either direction.

"Lake Pie, north of Emperious," Visteen explained, "In my own house in fact."

"Lake Pie," Melodin repeated in surprise, "I have been here, but it was a different part."

"Then you have heard the lake was created by a meteor that fell to the earth many centuries ago." Visteen remarked and he nodded. "The meteor was found by a shepherd name Pie, during the days when a single royal family ruled over Middenland from the city of Delaforr."

"The ruler at the time had the meteor in the crater taken to the city for scholars to examine." Visteen continued, "From that crystal rock they cut seven gemstones that could harness immense amounts of energy."

"I think I see where this is going," Melodin remarked, his gaze drifting back to the view across the lake and to the large boat moored at the jetty that reached out into the deep blue waters.

“You are quite right in your guessing,” Visteen smiled, “These gemstones became the Spirit Rings that can harness the elements. But the ruler of Middenland soon came to realise that the power within those rings was too great for one person to wield. So to prevent fighting among the subjects the rings were separated and the nations you know today were formed, each with their own ring to guard.

“But, inevitably, over the years the greedy sort to have all the rings,” Visteen continued, “And, inevitably, the rings began to disappear and were forgotten.”

“Is it true the rings hold Spirits within them?” Melodin asked curiously as he looked at the diamond ring on his finger.

“Or demons,” Visteen shrugged, “Who can say for certain? The records claim they are elemental spirits that were imprisoned by an old ritual, long forgotten. But there is clear evidence of those who used the power in the rings being consumed by the very power they thought they controlled of. Quite ironic, no?”

“Why didn’t they think to release the spirits once they realised their mistake?” Melodin asked curiously, looking to Visteen.

A look of amusement came to the woman’s pretty face, “Release them? What a strange notion.”

“So you just want the power for yourself,” Melodin replied, accusingly.

“These rings are far more powerful than anyone can comprehend,” Visteen said slowly, “Their potential is limitless. Even I could not hope to control this power. I merely want to understand it.”

She seemed genuine to Melodin’s thinking, but there was still something about her that made him uneasy.

## Chapter Twenty

“We have to go back and find him,” Nim exclaimed, worry filling her voice, beside her Dog howled mournfully.

Reith clenched his jaw, trying to focus on the flying his airship. Below them out the window the rolling hedgerows and woodlands of Wolfrun Valley flew by and the northern stretches of the Strand Mountains were appearing on the horizon.

“Reith.” Nim cried again, “Turn around. We have to find Melodin. We have to help him. Reith.”

“I know,” he snapped unintentionally, causing Nim to shrink away.

He took a deep breath and steadied his thinking, “I know, Nim. But we cannot do anything right now. We have no idea where to start looking and with Solordorr back in Altor we had best not start there.”

“Then what do we do?”

“I’m taking you to Arch Eden,” Reith said seriously, “As Eclairé suggested. Once there I will go and search for Melodin.”

“You mean we both will,” Nim was quick to say.

“No,” He shook his head. “With the Empire after you, you cannot come with me. You’ll be safe in Solegrad.”

“But-”

“No buts, Nim. If you want to take back you country you cannot be accompanying me. You have a duty. That is, unless you’ve abandoned that desire.”

A stern expression came to the young woman’s face, “I will destroy the Empire.”

“Then you will stay in Arch Eden.” Reith stated and Nim’s lips went tight.

“But Melodin,” Nim said quietly and again Dog howled sadly.

“It will be a while until we reach the capitol,” Reith said with a sigh, “Go get some rest Nim.”

The young woman nodded before she stood up and slowly walked out of the cockpit and into the belly of the ship, Dog close behind her.

\* \* \*

Another wave of dust and wind gushed through the plaza in front of the airship docks as Solordorr and Tama crashed into battle yet again. Eclairé shielded her eyes as the wave of energy rushed over her, blowing back her blue hair and causing the light rain to sting her cheeks.

“This is never going to end,” she said quietly to herself as Solordorr landed a heavy punch in Tama’s gut causing a blast of red energy to rip a hole right through the bald man’s torso.

This was the tenth time Solordorr caused such extensive damage to his opponent, and if it was anyone else but the legendary Kingsguard, Tama, this fight would have been over ages ago. But within seconds the gaping, bloody, hole through Tama’s gut healed and he charge right back into the fight.

“This is never going to end,” she said again and sighed heavily, “I wonder if the city will survive this battle.”

Already she could see ruined buildings around the edge of the square, half crumbled or with huge cracks running through the stone work. The pavement, once decorative and beautiful, was now nothing but broken rubble showing more dirt and divots than actual pavers.

Remarkably the statue at the centre was still standing, albeit the titan no longer held his airship.

“This has to end,” Eclairé muttered with a shake of her head.

Taking a deep breath she steadied herself and summoned the energy inside her. The words of the spell came to her easily and narrowing her eyes she focused entirely on Tama.

Patience she waited for the right moment, making sure that she did not catch Solordorr in the same spell. Waiting she watched as Tama threw Solordorr into the air, she almost cast the spell then, but her experience told her to wait. Tama was quick to follow Solordorr into

the air, catching him quickly with a rough grab around the man's neck. Twisting in the air Tama catapulted Solordorr back to the ground where he landed with an almighty crash. Dust flew into the air to be quickly subdued by the rain as more cracks shot through the pavement, sending broken tiles into the air.

The dust settled and Eclairé saw her chance as Tama flew back towards the ground where Solordorr still lied.

Standing up slowly the crimson eyed man dusted himself off, seeming to not care that a famous member of the Kingsguard was plummeting towards him. But as Solordorr looked up Eclairé cast her spell and Tama simply vanished from sight.

An empty stillness suddenly fell over the plaza, and all was quiet apart from the steady patter of rain. For a few seconds Solordorr stood staring up at the spot where Tama had vanished before he slowly turned his eyes toward her.

She took a deep breath, letting the remaining energy that had built up inside her dissipate.

With a stern look on his face Solordorr walked out of the shallow crater he was in and across the broken pavers towards her. A shiver ran down her spine as a trickle of water found its way under her collar.

"You teleported him," Solordorr stated simply as he stopped in front of her. "And I was just starting to have some fun."

"That fun was destroying the city," she replied calmly, looking away from the man's intense stare.

"What of the princess?" Solordorr asked slowly, his crimson eyes bearing into her.

"Gone."

A flash of light flicked across Solordorr's eyes and she felt a sudden pain shoot out from the diamond embedded in her chest.

"You let her leave," he said seriously.



Another wave of pain emanated out from the stone between her breasts, making her grimace.

“It was never agreed that I would abduct her,” Eclairé said seriously, “Only that I would help you find her.”

Solordorr narrowed his crimson eyes dangerously.

“In that case, where did the princess go?” asked Solordorr, his voice dangerously calm.

“Solegrad,” she replied confidently, “To Arch Eden, and far out of your reach.”

Solorodorr’s sudden laugh surprised her and the pain throbbing from the diamond stopped.

“Eclairé,” smiled Solordorr, “That was exactly where I wanted to take little Nimrodell. You were worried about my intentions for no reason at all.”

“What do you mean?” she narrowed her eyes at the man. “What game are you playing?”

“Game?” Solordorr asked curiously, “This is no game.”

“You hate Solegrad, I’m no fool,” she was quick to reply, “So what would the purpose of capturing Princess Nimrodell only to pass her off to the royal family of Solegrad?”

“That is not your concern,” replied Solordorr, his serious tone returning again. “But now we can focus on other targets.”

“We?” Eclairé asked back, “I held up my end of the bargain. I brought you to Nimrodell. Now get this thing out of my chest.”

“But you left me without an airship,” Solordorr remarked flatly.

“So fly on a commercial one,” Eclairé was quick to say. “Our arrangement is finished.”

“It’s disappointing to hear you say that Eclairé,” Solordorr replied, though there was no emotion in his voice. “But seeing I already went to the trouble of placing that enchantment on you, I might as well get the most use out of it.”

“I knew I was a fool to trust you,” she snapped angrily.

“Just like I was,” he replied flatly, his crimson eyes burning with rage.

She took a step back and shook her head at the man, "If you plan on killing me, do it now. Get it over and done with."

Solordorr chuckled, though his eyes showed no amusement.

"I have no intention of killing you, Eclairé," said Solordorr evenly.

"Then release me," she implored the man, "End my torment."

"And be forced to fly on one of those dirty commercial airships, or walk?" Solordorr shook his head, "Why do that, when I have you, who can easily teleport me to my desired destinations?"

She clenched her jaw, shaking her head slightly at the man.

The sound of heavy marching feet suddenly filled the plaza in front of the airship docks as dozens of armoured guard raced into the area from the three roads that led into the city. At the head of each column a different flag flapped in the light breeze.

"Stay where you are vagabonds," demanded one of the leaders, her large canine teeth marking her as a vampire. "In the name of house Drake I'm arresting you."

"Stand down, Sylin," shouted a rugged looking man leading the second column, likely a member of the werewolf faction. "This is the jurisdiction of house Lumiss."

"Since when, Gregorr?" a beautiful red haired woman spoke up, her pupils like a cats'. "Last I checked, this third of the plaza belonged to house Gremory."

"They're clearly in the Drake third, Ria," the vampire cut in irritably.

"No, look," exclaimed the werewolf, "They've been fighting in our area, not yours."

"Clearly most of the fighting has taken place in the Gremory area," the demon at the head of the third guard column was quick to say.

"Let me make this easy on all of you," Solordorr spoke up, grabbing the attention of those arguing. "There will be no arrest necessary."

"What?" all three leaders blurted in unison before they all started sprouting their own demands and arguments.

“If you’d be so kind to get us out of here, Eclairé,” Solordorr said quietly to her and took a step closer.

“Where to?” She asked in reply.

“Emperious.”

Eclairé narrowed her eyes at the strange request, but began her casting regardless.

Distracted by their arguing the leaders of the guards did not notice the rapid build in energy before it was too late and she and Solordorr had simply vanished.

But the moment she cast the spell Eclairé noticed something was wrong, the usually simple teleportation had become a maelstrom of flashing lights and throbbing pressure on her mind. Unseen energy suddenly pulled at her limbs from all different directions, making her convulse in pain.

She tried to work out what had gone wrong and utter a counter spell, but her mind was too addled, and then it was simply blank as unconsciousness took hold of her.

\* \* \*

“What?” Tama asked aloud seconds before he crashed head first into the ground.

No longer was it raining, in fact, no longer was he in the plaza of Altor facing off against the villain who killed Lancer.

“That hurt,” he groaned as he pushed himself back to his feet and looked about. The skies was clear above his head and all around were ruins of old buildings and cracked roads. But to his eye, these buildings had been in ruins for some time.

“Wait,” he said quietly, “I know this place. Delaforr? But, how?”

Crossing his arms across his dirty and torn yellow shirt, he tapped his foot as he tried to make sense of the whole situation. Images of a blue haired elf flashed through his mind.

“I know that elf,” he mumbled to himself, before the realisation suddenly struck him. “It was Eclairé, so she must’ve teleported me here. But why would she be working with that crimson eyed monster?”

His mumblings were cut short as a wave of fire suddenly shot out from the rubble. He was on his guard in an instant, ready for any adversary. But the fire never reached him, instead it stopped in the air and encircled him threateningly.

“Wait, I know this attack,” he said to himself, eyeing the ring of fire cautiously. “Could it be The Dragon?”

“Wait a minute,” a familiar voice exclaimed from behind, “I recognise that shiny head.”

“Shiny?” Tama snapped angrily and spun about, “I ought to punch you for that.”

“Easy Tama,” the ring of fire disappeared to reveal a well-built man with short red spiked hair walking towards him.

“Artharis,” Tama greeted the man with a slight nod.

“Tama my old friend,” the red haired man smiled wide as they clasped hands briefly. “What are you doing here? Was that you who fell out of the sky?”

He nodded, looking away with a look of slight annoyance on his face.

“Well, how did that happen?” Artharis wondered, by now many others had slowly appeared from behind the rubble. “We thought you were some kind of attack by the Empire. Weren’t you charged with guiding the Princess back here once she was ready.”

Again Tama nodded.

“Damn man, how’ve you been?” Artharis exclaimed and slapped him on the shoulder, “It’s been years since I’ve seen that bald head of yours.”

He glared back at the overbearing man, causing Artharis to simply laugh in response.

“So why’re you here anyway?”

“It wasn’t intentional,” Tama explained, “I was teleported against my will, and was just about to go when you decided to throw some of your fire at me.”

“I see,” Artharis nodded, his short red hair ruffling in the dry breeze, “Well, now that you’re here, perhaps you could help us.”

“What with?” Tama asked with a sigh, looking around at the broken streets of Delaforr.

“He’s back.”

The statement grabbed Tama’s attention and he turned a frowned look towards Artharis.

“The Traitor?”

Artharis nodded his head, his expression grave.

Tama bared his teeth angrily and punched the palm of his hand.

“I owe him a punch or two,” Tama said seriously before taking a deep breath, “But I cannot stay. As you said, I was tasked with caring for the Princess. I task I must return to.”

Artharis nodded his head understandingly, “A pity. Perhaps the Traitor will still be around by the time you return with the Princess.”

Tama nodded slightly, again turning his gaze past the gathered rebel fighters, trying to work out the best route from the city.

“But if I get my hands on him, there won’t be nothing left but a pile of ashes,” Atharis continued with a confident tone.

“I look forward to seeing that,” Tama smiled genuinely, “Try not to get yourself killed in process. Farewell Artharis.”

“Later baldy,” the red haired man laugh, causing Tama to grumble under his breath as he started off down the road.

Quickly into top speed he raced along the ruined road, heading south out of Delaforr. Dust flew up behind him and the terrain was nothing but a blur as he raced by, his dark eyes ever on the horizon.

“The Traitor,” he muttered to himself as he ran along, “Perhaps I could give him a punch before I leave. No, I must relocate the Princess. She was there in Altor but I doubt she would have remained. And who was she with? Some kid and a dog? Likely she was headed to the airship docks, so she must’ve decided to seek aid somewhere else. But where? Arch Eden? Damn it, if that’s where she’s going I must stop it at any cost.”

\* \* \*

He stood with his mouth agape and eyes unblinking as he stood there staring at Visteen.

The woman wore nothing but her underwear, which was not much at all, as she lounged on a deck chair in the sun.

They were on the boat he had spied earlier out in the middle of Lake Pie. A gentle breeze flew off the sparkling waters blowing through his hair and drying his eyes out as he continued to stare at Visteen's bare skin.

"Melodin, there you are," Visteen said as she just noticed him, "What took you so long?"

"I ... well," he stammered.

"Come and sit down next to me," she instructed.

It seemed his feet moved on their own and before he realised he was sitting in the deck chair beside Visteen.

"Is that the drink for me?" she asked curiously, indicating to the two glasses he held in his hands.

"Yes," Melodin said suddenly and abruptly handed the glass to the woman.

She reached to grab it, but he was so flustered that his movement was too forceful. Their hands clashed together, knocking the glass of ice water out of his hand and sending it toppling into Visteen's bust and lap.

"Sorry," Melodin exclaimed as Visteen cried out in surprise.

"Cold," she gasped taking the empty glass from her lap and placing it on the small table alongside the chair.

"Sorry," Melodin said sheepishly again and bit down on his bottom lip as he noticed her white bra had become slightly transparent. "Here, have mine."

A look of anger flashed across Visteen's face as she looked to him, but it quickly disappeared and she smiled disarmingly.

"Thank you," Visteen said stiffly, and motioned to the table beside the chairs, "Place it there if you will. I do not wish to get all wet again."

He nodded hurriedly and put the glass on the table, before looking back to Visteen awkwardly. His eyes immediately going to the droplets of water across her skin that glistened in the sun as she lied back down on the deck chair. Again he bit his lip as his eyes slowly moved to the translucent fabric of her bra.

He quickly looked away, turning from Visteen and towards the great mansion that could be seen on the bank in the distance. That was Visteen's home, as beautifully constructed as the sorceress herself was. It had been rather strange for him being here, in this little pocket of paradise on the banks of the lake. At the edges of the turquoise waters there were white sandy beaches that lead into lush green forest filled with wildlife.

Melodin took a deep breath and gazed towards the bank, his eyes were shielded from the sun by a large umbrella, but the glare off the water made him squint, and coupled with the gentle rocking of the yacht he felt himself grow sleepy.

Melodin yawned and shook the weariness from his mind.

"So why am I here exactly?" Melodin wondered, turning back to Visteen as she reclined alluringly.

She opened one eye and looked at him curiously, "Exactly why you think you are."

With that she closed her eye again, leaving him confused and distracted by Visteen's nipples which the cold water had caused to become erect.

"I know why I'm here," Melodin stammered, looking away again, "But I don't get why I'm here, on a boat. With you. Sunbathing."

"You don't like to lounge in the sun?" Visteen asked curiously, this time her full attention was moved onto him and she rolled onto her side, propping herself up on an elbow.

"No, the sun is good and all that," Melodin said awkwardly, his eyes darted back and forth between the views across the lake and the view right next to him. "But you want this ring, right? So why aren't you trying to get it?"

Visteen laughed in amusement, "I've already tried pulling that ring off your finger. I've also tried chopping your hand off to get it. But it seems you and the ring are a package deal. Not that I'm complaining."

Melodin looked in surprise to the sorceress, and to the charming smile on her face. But inevitably his eyes drifted down to her chest and he quickly looked back towards the mansion in the distance.

"I'm not sure I understand," he replied, scratching his head.

Visteen laughed lightly, "My dear, foolish, boy. The reason why we are lounging on this yacht, not a boat, is because I'm trying to decide on the best course of seeing how well you can use the power within that ring."

He looked back to the sorceress, concern filling his thoughts.

"Use it?" he wondered, "But if I do that the spirit will eat my soul."

Again Visteen laughed, making him even more confused, and distracted.

"And who told you that?"

"Reith told me."

"Eclair's sky pirate?"

He nodded, causing Visteen to again laugh, but this time it sounded more like a mockery.

"Melodin," she said once she had finished laughing, "Are you aware of just how much is known about these Spirit Rings?"

He shook his head, again his eyes drifting across the sorceress's figure.

"Practically nothing." She said simply, bringing his eyes back to hers.

"In fact it is only recently that the rings have been rediscovered and tests have begun on them. You could say that the reason you are here is because you are a test subject."

A frown came to Melodin's brow and he looked away.



“So, there’s no telling what will happen to you,” Visteen said casually. “Maybe you’ll be consumed by that ring on your hand, or you will become an all-powerful god, carving out a new age for this world. Who can say?”

A sense of wonderment filled his mind and a slight smile came to his lips.

“Now, my little demi-god,” Visteen said with a cute voice, grabbing his attention. “Care to help me apply some tanning oil?”

Melodin’s smiled widened into a grin and he happily helped the beautiful sorceress.

## Chapter Twenty-one

Her consciousness came back to her suddenly as she smacked face first into some cool water. Her eyes popped open and she shut her mouth quickly as the body of water welcomed her with open arms and joyfully pulled her deeper into its turquoise embrace. Instinct took over and she hurriedly swam for the surface.

Fortunately it was not far and as her head burst out of the water she gasped in a deep breath and blinked the water from her eyes. She spotted Solordorr's blonde head bobbing in the water not far away, the light of the sun shimmering off the surface around him as he began for the beach of white sand.

She was quick to follow and wearily she crawled up the bank and collapsed on the sand. Her mind ached and every joint in her body felt stiff and sluggish.

"What the hell was that?" Solordorr growled angrily. "Is this another of your poor attempts to divert me?"

"Do you really think I intended to go for a swim?" Eclair snapped back and sat up, turning a glare towards Solordorr.

The man narrowed his crimson eyes dangerously at her.

"Emperious must have a magical shield around it," she said, turning her attention to the surroundings, "You felt the distortion in the teleportation. Likely it threw us out to who knows where. We're lucky to still be alive."

"Lucky?" Solordorr scoffed.

"Well," she said, standing up and looking around at the huge body of water in front of them.

"It's hard to say where we are exactly."

White beaches lined the shore, stretching far in both directions and leading into lush forests. Behind them the terrain quickly headed up into some high mountains that looked as tables with flat plateaus that looked far across the lands.

“We could be in the tablelands,” she remarked thoughtfully, “That might even be Celrin Steep. What do you think Solor ...?”

Her voice trailed away as she looked to the man who stood motionless, his eyes closed as winds of golden energy rushed about him, blowing about his hair and sending the sand circling about his feet.

The display of energy did not last long, quickly dissipating and leaving Solordorr looking rather dry.

“That’s handy,” Eclairé remarked despondently, looking to her still wet clothes. “I actually don’t have a spell to dry myself.”

She laughed awkwardly and sighed before looking again to the high plateaus to the east.

“Let’s go,” Solordorr said simply as he started along the beach southwards.

“Where?” she asked as she followed.

“Emperious,” he replied as if it were obvious.

“Why there?”

“To retrieve something you lost.”

“You think the Spirit Ring Visteen took will be in the laboratories of Emperious,” she stated more then asked. “I though you weren’t interested in the cursed rings.”

“I’m not,” Solordorr stated.

She narrowed her eyes slightly at the man walking a few paces ahead of her.

“I wouldn’t think you’d ever work for Solegrad again,” she remarked, making Solordorr stop suddenly.

“For them?” he asked slowly, his voice deep and menacing. “How could you even contemplate that I would work for Solegrad again.”

“But you wanted the Princess to go there,” Eclairé reasoned curiously, “And now you want the Spirit Ring despite having no interest in the item. It makes no sense.”

Solordorr laughed slightly, “Makes no sense, to you. I have my reasons, no of which I feel compelled to share.”

With that Solordorr continued along the beach, causing her to narrow her eyes as she followed. She could not fathom Solordorr’s motives, but whatever it was she somehow knew it could not bode well for anyone.

\* \* \*

“Wake up.”

A firm hand shook his shoulder, jolting him from his sleep and making him jump upright in his comfortable bed.

“What? Who? Where?” Melodin mumbled as he forced his eyes open and focus on whoever was assaulting him.

“Hurry up,” Visteen said sternly as he managed to focus his eyes on her as she walked towards the door of his room. “There is little time.”

“What?” Melodin said again, his mind thick and his movements slow as he tumbled out of his bed.

Gathering his clothes he stumbled after Visteen as she moved swiftly through the hallways.

“What’s going on?” he asked sleepily, pulling on his sandals and nearly tripping over his own feet. “Is it even morning yet?”

Through bleary eyes he looked out the window at the dark sky and dew covered gardens.

“The sun will soon be rising,” Visteen said over her shoulder before heading up a steep staircase into one of the mansion’s towers.

“Then what’s going on?” he asked irritably and pulled his shirt over his head, “I was having really good dream too. You were in it in fact.”

“Really?” Visteen stopped as they reached the landing and turned a suspicious look towards him. “What happened in the dream?”

“I,” he stammered awkwardly, feeling his cheeks grow warm, realising he had spoken out loud. “Well, I don’t really remember. I think we were on the boat again ...”

“Yacht,” Visteen said, her eyes still suspicious, “It’s a yacht, not a boat.”

“Right,” Melodin nodded as Visteen once again took off at a swift pace.

He had to jump to catch up with her but fortunately they did not go much further and pushing open a large wooden door Visteen lead the way into a small circular room. Standing at the doo Visteen motioned for him to enter, closing the door behind them as he walked into the middle of the room.

“You have used the power within that ring before, right Melodin?” Visteen asked, a look of concern seeming to come to her voice.

“Yeah,” he replied, distracted by the unusual runes and symbols that had been etched into the stone about the room as well as the across the wooden boards beneath his feet. “A couple of times actually. The first time I was fighting a bunch of orcs in the mountains passes of ...”

His voice trailed away as he turned back to Visteen to see her amid a spell casting.

“Wait, what are we doing here?” Melodin asked, concern suddenly filling his still sleepy mind. “Is this-?”

The room around him suddenly vanished and was replaced with tall white trees with red roots that snaked across the black rocks under his feet.

“-a teleportation ...?” his voice trailed away as the answer to his question became apparent.

His mouth fell open as he looked around at the forest he had materialised into, its leafless canopy revealing the twisted branches above his head looking like a cage against the early morning skies. A still wind drifted through the white trunks, feeling hot and dry, bringing a cold sweat to his brow.

“Well,” Melodin said to himself as he continued to gaze about at the strange trees, “This can’t be good.”

\* \* \*

She watched silently from her room as the sky pirate walked through the castle courtyard, heading out through the gates and down into the city. Heavy cloud hung over the city of Arch Eden, bringing a steady fall of rain down onto the buildings that were carved into the ravine walls. The stone that the buildings were carved in gave a pleasant amber glow that emanated from the ore veins, lighting up the tiered streets and giving off gentle warmth. The city needed that lingering warmth too, for the realm of Solegrad was really nothing more than wet and windy plains as far as the eye could see with deep ravines in the western reaches where the city and towns were built into the side of the cliffs.

Nim sighed and turning from the window she walked over to where Dog lied in front of the fire and sat down. A slight whine from her fury companion brought a feeling of sadness over her.

“I know Dog,” she said quietly, stroking Dog’s white fur.

After arriving at the royal airship docks, and a tense meeting with the royal consult, she and her companions had been escorted to this waiting room. For a few hours they had waited before Reith had grown annoyed and left, promising he would return by the evening. So, now it was just her and Dog, waiting for an audience with the King.

“I can still remember the last time I was here,” Nim mumbled quietly to Dog, “My father was still alive then, he and the King of Solegrad were friends.”

Dog let out a soft sigh.

“I can’t recall much,” she continued quietly, “Just a feeling of warm indifference. But it’s different now. I do not feel the warmth of the stone anymore. This fire is burning and yet it has no warmth. It is all harsh and uncaring. It almost feels as if this place is against me and I don’t know why.”

A tear ran down her cheek and Dog looked up at her sadly.

“I know I must form some kind of alliance with Solegrad if I am to take back my homeland,” she continued, “But I don’t know how to do that. And if I cannot form an agreement with them what am I to do then? How can I possibly fight Reparien by myself? I have no army, no allies. I do not even have any powers.”

Her tears were falling freely now.

“I’m so useless.”

Dog whined sadly again and rested her head on Nim’s lap.

“What am I going to do Dog?” she asked, wiping away the tears that continued to fall, “I cannot rely on Reith, he has his own path to walk. My father’s Kingsgaurd have all but left the cause. Narglefar fight the Empire, but they are not my allies. Solegrad have refused time and again to enter the dispute. Melodin was the only one to share my drive to reclaim Delaforr and Lakelinds, but he’s gone ...”

She could not hold back her despair any longer and she dropped her head into her hands and wept. For what seemed like hours she cried until there were no more tears to shed.

Blankly she stared into the low burning fire, absently stroking Dog’s coat, her eyes sore and her heart weary.

The abrupt opening of the door to the room pulled her from the dancing fire.

“Princess Nimrodell,” a stern man said as he stood at the door, “His Majesty will see you now. Follow me.”

With no regard to her the man turned about and walked from the room. Slowly she got to her feet and followed, blinking away the dryness from her eyes. Dog was quick to follow her from the room, the stern man headed off down the hall without a word.

“You will address King Vamier as your worship,” the stern man said over his shoulder. “You will speak only when asked a question. Upon being introduced you will curtsy and bow your head, but say nothing.”

A flicker of annoyance sparked within her, piecing through her despair and bringing a frown to her face.

“When before his worship, you will stand at the foot of the dais, at attention,” the man instructed. “Do not move about, and most certainly do not ascend the to the throne. Furthermore-”

“I am Princess Nimrodell of Lakelinds,” she cut in angrily, “Rightful heir to the throne. I know the proper decorum. Perhaps you should show some.”

The stern man stopped at a large door and turned to face her.

“You, my lady,” a slight smile flicked across his pompous face. “Are an outcast with no home, no title worth mentioning anymore, and no wealth of importance, come begging at my master’s doorstep. Between you and me, I am shocked you, and your mongrel, were not surrendered to Reparien the moment you arrived. Now, follow me and keep your mouth shut.”

Dog growled angrily and Nim narrowed her eyes at the man.

With an arrogant look on his face the man pushed through the doors and led the way into a private throne room where King Vamier sat waiting for them on his high-backed throne.

“Your worship,” the stern man said as he bowed before the King, “May I present-”

“King Vamier,” Nim interrupted and stepped in front of the man, “I am Princess Nimrodell, daughter of King Larrendell.”

She curtsied politely, noticing the slight smile on King Vamier’s face.

“My worship please forgive this insolence,” the stern man apologised profusely, clearly flustered.

“Enough,” the King held up his hand at the man, “You may leave. I know the Princess well, and knew her father even better.”

The stern man shot Nim a hateful look before he bowed low and quickly departed the room.

“It was a sad day indeed when I heard that your father had died and that Delafor had fallen,” the King continued, his dark eyes watching her closely. “It came as a great relief to catch word that Larrendell’s daughter had survived the attack, and it is a pleasure to see you a



grown woman. I can guess as to why you have now come, but please, tell me your desires.”

Nim took a deep breath and nodded, feeling strangely apprehensive.

“I will see my homeland restored,” she said firmly, “And I have come to request the aid of Solgrad.”

The King’s expression did not change.

“What kind of aid did you have in mind?” the lordly looking man asked seriously.

“Military.”

“Military.” The King repeated, his expression unchanging, “In other words you are asking that Solegrad declare war on Reparien.”

Nim firmed her jaw and nodded, “That is indeed what I ask.”

“And what do you offer in return?”

“What would you ask?” Nim was quick to inquire.

A look of victory flashed across the King’s face.

“An open request,” stated King Vamier said slowly, stroking his silver beard, “Military aid for anything I desire. You are bold, Princess. It reminds me of your father.”

A feeling of pride swelled within her, bringing a slight smile to her face.

“But,” the King said seriously, taking away her smile, “You are not in a strong position, you must realise that. You have very little to immediately offer in return for Solegrad’s aid. All you really can offer is future promises, for which I hold little regard.”

A heavy weight suddenly fell down onto her shoulders.

“Are you saying you will not offer help?” Nim asked, trying to keep the distress out of her voice.

“I cannot,” the King replied simply.

Nim felt the tears swell within her again and prayed that the floor would eat her whole.

“Not in the manner you want,” King Vamier continued. “You are the daughter of a great King, a man I once named as a friend. What friend would I be if I let Larrendell’s daughter leave without helping?”

Nim looked up in surprise as a warm smile spread across King Vamier’s wrinkled face.

“Although I cannot offer strength of arms to your cause, I may offer advice,” the King continued, drawing her in. “If you are to attack Reparien you either need a great force, or a great power.”

Her brow furrowed thoughtfully as she considered the King’s words.

“There are a few ways to acquire a force if you do not have one,” said the King, “Either form a political alliance, or hire an army of mercenaries.”

“I have no money,” Nim shook her head. “And you refused an alliance.”

“Not so,” King Vamier was quick to say, “What you offered was not an alliance, it was a deal. The political alliance I refer to requires an agreement sealed with marriage.”

“You mean ...?”

“You remember my youngest son, yes?” King Vamier asked curiously, his tone changed, “He is the right age to begin searching for a wife. And you are not married yourself. Such a union would obligate me to reclaim Delaforr.”

“I,” she stammered in surprise, “Marriage? I had not even considered that.”

“It is an option,” the King replied calmly. “But let me continue. Mercenaries are your other option to acquire a force, but as you say, you do not have money to hire them. Solegrad has the funds to loan you, but the repayment would be great.”

“How great?”

“Something that would have yet to be calculated by my financiers,” the King shrugged off the question, “But be certain that it would be a lot to repay.”

“And those are the only options I have?” Nim asked with concern, “Perhaps I am doomed never to return to my kingdom.”

She looked down to Dog, her despair taking a greater hold of her. Dog growled low, her green eyes watching King Vamire closely.

“You have one final option,” the King spoke again, bringing her attention back to him, “Attain a greater power than Reparien.”

“A greater power?” Nim raised an eyebrow curiously, “I don’t understand what you mean.”

A smile came to the King’s face and his eyes sparkled, “Let me show you.”

## Chapter Twenty-two

“These white twisted trees that bleed red sap. These black rocks and dry wind. This has to be the Forest of the Dead.” Melodin said to himself, fear creeping into his heart.

With wide eyes he stepped over the red tree roots, looking about the trees with a mixture of fear and awe.

“Why would she send me here?” he wondered, picking a path through the black boulders and between the white pillars of horned bark.

With no better options before him Melodin started through the trees, his fearful eyes darting about, expecting some beast to jump out at him and devour him whole. Stepping over another blood red root his foot snagged on something and he stumbled to the side.

Reaching out he managed to steady himself against the closest tree trunk. To his surprise the white bark of the tree crumbled away and red sap poured forth over his hand and releasing a terrible smell into the air.

“Gross,” Melodin exclaimed, recoiling from the tree, looking in disgust at his red hand.

“Smells like the tree is rotting and this sap just had to look like blood. That’s disgusting.”

He watched in revulsion as the red sap continued to bleed from the tree as a scab formed over the wound he had inflicted on the trunk.

“Man I wish there was somewhere I could wash this off,” he groaned, looking about the disturbing forest.

With a sigh he started off in another direction, climbing over the red roots and around the large ebony rocks. He had heard terrifying stories of this place, how the children of the Fae and been slaughtered by the hundreds by some mercenaries, and as the bodies piled up the ground turned black and these white trees grew up through the corpses of the dead. But it was not some macabre monument to the Fae, it was their revenge. The white trees turned on the mercenaries, ripping them apart and turning them into the rabid beasts they were.

The curse was such that a great hunger drove the turned mercenaries, but never would that hunger be satisfied.

Melodin shuddered at the thought that those mercenaries could still be wandering around this forest as beasts, looking for their next kill. Taking a deep breath to steady himself Melodin pushed onwards.

“If only Dog were here,” he lamented sadly.

As the minutes wore on his unease lessened and thoughts of cursed mercenary-beasts drifted from his mind for there was nothing. No birds or small animals, no other plants aside from the white trees, there was simply nothing here.

“Maybe that’s why it’s called the Forest of the Dead?” Melodin said thoughtfully to the silence that seemed to saturate everything.

Even the wind made no sound as it drifted through the twisted branches. Even his voice seemed to be muffled the moment it left his mouth. The place was utterly dead.

Melodin stopped and let out a deep breath. Looking around at the unfamiliar surroundings he scratched his chin thoughtfully. But feeling the stickiness of the trees blood still covering his hand he recoiled instantly and cringed.

“Great, just what ...?” his voice trailed away as he suddenly noticed his voice was not the only sound he could hear.

From the rocks around him he picked up the sound of something breathing, its low hiss sending a shiver along his spine.

Eyes wide he quickly looked about the rocks and trees, his breathing shallow. Then he spotted it, its yellow eyes staring at him with hunger as it crawled over the rock. Sharp claws cracked the stone as its black and red scales shimmered in the harsh sunlight. A long forked tongue flicked out from his wide mouth as it slowly crawled towards him. The white stripes across its back lit up the strange spikes running down its spine which stood on end and started to shake as the giant lizard prepared to lunge at him.

The creature’s tongue flicked again and Melodin fled in the opposite direction.

“No, no no no no,” he cried out as he raced through the trees. “Why me? Why does this always happen to me?”

He could hear the sound of the rocks scatter as the lizard took up chase. He dared not look over his shoulder but for some reason he did. The lizard was right on his tail, racing over the rocks like it was running on flat ground, its deadly black claws digging into the stone and making sure it did not lose its footing.

Crying out again he looked back to where he was going just in time to find himself falling face first onto the loose stones, one of the trees tripping him up again. Knowing the lizard would be right on top of him, Melodin grabbed a large rock and twisting around he launched it towards the predator. Luck was with him and the rock connected solidly with the lizard’s head, making it recoil, and giving Melodin a chance to scramble back to his feet and continue fleeing.

Ducking under a branch Melodin did not have to look back again to know the lizard was still in hot pursuit. Catching the sight of open air out of the corner of his eye Melodin abruptly changed direction and cut to his right through the white trunks. Not even wondering why he decided to go this way he vaulted over another large boulder and into the open. Putrid smelling water splashed into the air as he raced across the shallow swamp flat. The sounds of splashing water followed him closely as the lizard did not slow its chase.

Suddenly the water to the side erupted as something lunged at him. His reflexes saved him and he dove away just in time. Rolling back to his feet he looked around in shock as the large creature from the water grabbed a hold of the lizard with its large tentacles. The black lizard screeched and tried to fight back, but its attempts abruptly ended as the giant, and fang filled mouth, of the tentacle beast bit it in two.

Not caring to see any more of the gruesome spectacle Melodin raced off in the other direction before the tentacle monster spotted him with its many eyes.

Staying by the water’s edge he dared not venture into the white forest again, nor move too far out into the smelly waters of the swamp like bay that was surrounded by trees.

It felt like hours that he ran, his lungs hurt and his legs felt like jelly when he finally slowed down and dropped to his haunches.

“What’s your deal Visteen?” Melodin grumbled between deep breaths.

“My deal?” Visteen’s voice replied, making him jump and look about.

He was standing on white sandy beaches that stretched for miles lined with white trees and ebony rocks. Gentle waves of green water rolled against the sands as a cool breeze blew in from the Emerald Ocean. All across the bay red flames danced on top of the water’s surface, giving off no smoke as they rode the waves.

But the sorceress was nowhere to be seen.

“Visteen?” Melodin wondered, as he continued to look about. “Wait, don’t tell me. I’ve gone mad, and have started to hear voices.”

“You’re hearing my voice, but you are still sane,” Visteen replied, “Well, as sane as you can be I guess.”

“Hey,” he snapped back, drawing a light laugh from the disembodied voice. “Are you going to teleport me back? Why’d you even send me here? What’s the big idea?”

Suddenly he was no longer standing on the beach of the Bay of Fire and he was back in Visteen’s mansion. In front of him stood the sorceress, a frustrated look on her face.

“Well?” Melodin demanded, just as annoyed. “You nearly got me killed.”

“That’s the idea,” Visteen replied simply, drawing a stunned look to his face.

“What?” he exclaimed.

“I want to see how powerful that Spirit Ring is,” explained the sorceress calmly. “And seeing you refuse to use its power I’m trying to make you use it.”

“What?” he blurted again. “I don’t even know how to use it.”

“It matters little. Onto the next experiment,” Visteen said and a slight smile shot across her face.

“What?” he exclaimed for a third time.

The next thing he realised, he was in the middle of another forest.

“Hey,” Melodin shouted, “That’s not fair.”

There came no reply from the sorceress and with a loud groan he sat down in the lush grass that covered the floor of the forest. The lush green trees above him rustled in the wind and through the branches he could see the tops of the high plateaus that looked like they surrounded the forest. Birds chattered in the trees and bees rushed about collecting nectar from the many wild flowers around the feet of the trees. Small animals darted about the grass, hiding in the leafy bushes as Melodin got back to his feet.

“At least this forest isn’t creepy,” he mumbled to himself, “But she could have let me wash before sending me to die again.”

With a disgusted look he held his sap covered hand before his eyes, the red syrup was still sticky and still smelt awful. Not to mention his clothes had been drenched by that putrid swam.

With a sigh he again looked about the forest, wondering what he should do now.

“I swear I have the worst luck,” he mumbled to himself as he started off through the beautiful trees.

\* \* \*

“Get out of my way. Don’t touch me. Do you know who I am?”

The large doors of the private throne room burst inwards, grabbing her attention as a bald man strode in, pushing aside the flustered doorman.

“Sir Tama?” Nim exclaimed in surprise, her eyes going instantly to the man’s tattered clothing and dirt smudged appearance.

“Yes, it is I, Princess,” Tama announced loudly, “I would’ve been here sooner if this fool did not delay me.”



“Please forgive me, your worship,” the doorman rushed up to the base of the dais and bowed low. “As soon as he heard that you were entertaining an audience with Princess Nomrodell he pushed through. I could not stop him.”

“That’s quite alright,” King Vamier replied, his expression tight. “What would the Princess be without her loyal Kingsguard.”

“Do not listen to this man,” Tama said loudly, turning to Nim. “He would force a marriage between you and his youngest son.”

“Sir Tama,” Nim replied, glancing awkwardly to the King.

“Once the marriage has taken place only then will he offer military aid,” the bald man continued, “And once you take back your throne King Vamier will practically rule over Lakelinds as well. You’re being played, don’t listen to him.”

“Sir Tama,” Nim said again, “We have already discussed this.”

“You ...” Tama frowned, before an enlightened look came to his face, “You did not accept the proposal I trust. Doing so would be practically selling Lakelinds to Solegrad.”

“I have not accepted any proposal,” Nim replied seriously, “We were in the middle of discussions when you burst in and interrupted us.”

“Really?” Tama smiled, “Well, good. Don’t worry princess, now that I am here I will do the negotiations.”

“You?” Nim exclaimed, “No. I don’t need you to do it.”

“But Princess,” Tama frowned.

“No,” she cut in, “You are my Kingsguard, not my diplomat. Now do as I say and remain quiet so that King Vamier and I can continue our conversation.”

Tama fell silent and bowed his head, but she could see the frustrated look on the bald man’s face.

“I apologise for my subject, King Vamier,” Nim said authoritatively, turning back to the King.

“You were saying you wished to show me something.”

“Indeed.” replied King Vamier, a bemused expression edging onto his face. “As I said, you will need a greater power if you wish to defeat Reparien.”

“Greater power?” Tama balked, “The Kingsguard is all she needs. We are the greatest, and most talented, warriors in all the lands. Our loyalty second to none, our-”

“Enough Tama,” Nim snapped, drawing a surprised look from the bald man.

“Correct me if I am wrong, Sir Tama,” King Vamier spoke up, “But was it not one of your own that led to the downfall of Delaforr?”

Tama’s lips went thin as he gave the King an angry look.

“Even with the Kingsguard reduced,” Tama said darkly, “We are still far more powerful than anything Solegrad can produce.”

“I said enough, Sir Tama,” Nim flustered. “Clearly just the Kingsguard is not enough, and if I am to take back my throne I will need something more powerful.”

Tama fell silent again and bowed his head apologetically, his jaw tight.

“King Vamier, please,” Nim took a deep breath and turned back to older man. “You said you wished to show me something.”

“Of course,” the King smiled as he stood up. “Please follow me.”

“Tama, stay here,” Nim snapped over her shoulder as she moved to follow King Vamier through the door behind the throne.

“But-” Tama tried to say.

“No. Stay.” Nim interrupted him angrily.

Tama choked on a few more words before he fell silent and Nim turned her back on the Kingsguard before following King Vamier through the doors.

Glowing lines of crystal ore streamed chaotically through the grey stone of the walls and ceiling, lighting up the beautiful architecture of the passageways and making the deep blue rugs seem even richer. Wonderful paintings were mounted on the walls, marble statues in the recesses and beautiful furniture had been placed tactfully through the rooms.

“This place reminds me of Delaforr castle,” Nim remarked in wonder as the King led the way into an open garden filled with ferns and other deep green plants. “It’s beautiful.”

“Well, the same architect designed Delaforr castle as well as here,” King Vamier smiled over his shoulder, as they walked the covered veranda that encircled the open garden.

Nim watched in delight as the rain lightly fell through the void and onto the plants, beading on the broad leaves before trickling off and into the soil. A single fountain bubbled loudly at the centre of the garden, bringing light music to the otherwise empty courtyard.

A sudden feeling of loneliness filled her as she followed King Vamier from the garden and down another hallway. With a sigh she looked down to Dog who trotted quietly beside her. The faithful animal looked up to her curiously, bringing a sad smile to her face as she thought of Melodin.

“Where are we going?” Nim asked curiously, looking back to the King.

“Into the castle archives,” Vamier said over his shoulder, “There is something there I believe you would be interested to see.”

“Which is?”

“You shall have to wait,” replied the King and smiled back to her, “Otherwise you will spoil the surprise.”

She did not reply, looking uneasily down at Dog.

“It is something your father gave to me,” King Vamier continued, “A sign of our friendship, and the friendship between Solegrad and Lakelinds.”

Her concern vanished in a heartbeat and was replaced with eager curiosity as she wondered what it could be that her father gave to King Vamier.

Turning from the ornately decorated halls the King moved through a guarded doorway and down a long spiralling staircase. The orange ore continued to glow all around them, creating hundreds of rivers carving through the stones and allowing her to follow downwards without stumbling. But as they descended lower the glow grew dimmer.

Soon they were moving through more corridors, but curiously they passed by more people. Even more curiously was the fact that those passing gave very little regard for King Vamier, only offering a passing nod of respect.

The sight concerned her for some reason, these people rushing about all seemed to be carrying documents and files, reading their notes instead of looking where they were going.

“Who are these people?” Nim asked as they passed by a room with a heavy metal door.

“Scholars,” replied King Vamier, his tone dismissive.

“I see,” she said slowly, wondering what they would be researching.

“It will all make sense soon enough,” the King smiled over his shoulder at her as he headed down yet another flight of spiralling stairs.

It grew darker still as they continued to descend. Beside her Dog growled low, voicing the uneasiness she too was beginning to feel.

The stairs ended quickly and the narrow passage way opened up into a large cavern. All her concern disappeared as her mouth fell open in wonderment of the underground cavern. The orange ore veins in the rock, along with glowing moss, illuminated the large cavern, their light reflecting off the river that ran through the middle of it and the beautiful waterfall that cascaded down the rock opposite the entrance.

With wide eyes she followed the King along the walkway as it ran along the edge of the river, right up to the base of that waterfall. To her amazement the ore veins through the stones seemed to all head towards a single boulder at the foot of the waterfall where their glow grew brighter and warmer.

Moving right up to the large rock the King stepped to the side and motioned for her to come closer. Cautiously she approached, her eyes locking onto the flat top of the rock where all the veins pooled. There, sitting on the stone was a silver banded ring with a gemstone of rich topaz mounted upon it.

“Do you know what this is?” King Vamier asked her seriously.

Nim swallowed hard and shook her head, though deep down she had already guessed at what it was.

“It is the Spirit Ring of earth,” King Vamier stated, his eyes watching her closely, “This is the power you need to defeat the Reparien Empire.”

## Chapter Twenty-three

The water around his hand turned red as the swift moving stream washed off the sticky red sap from his skin. Like blood, the sap dissolved into the crystal clear waters as the current took it away over the rocks and through the trees.

Hands now clean Melodin cupped the water and brought it up to his face, its chilled touch clearing his mind and making him shiver as it splashed down his bare chest soaking his underpants.

“Damn, that’s cold,” Melodin exclaimed, shaking the water from his hair and wiping his face.

As his hand moved past his nose Melodin recoiled as a pungent stench burned his nose hairs.

“Still stinks,” he groaned, pinching his nose before violently sloshing his hand back in the stream. “Stupid Forest of the Dead. Stupid Visteen.”

Continuing to grumble under his breath he sloshed his hands some more before whipping them on his briefs and turning back to the stone bank where his clothes were drying.

Melodin froze and held his breath as his eye fell upon a dog-like monster the size of a horse, sniffing his clothes hungrily. The behemoths leathery skin glistened in the warm sun, its coarse mane rustling in the wind, and its pink tongue licked its chops as it continued to sniff Melodin’s clothes.

He cringed as he saw a large globule of drool fall from its fang-filled mouth and onto his freshly cleaned shirt.

Tearing his eyes from the distracted behemoth Melodin looked about for the quickest way to flee. The stream was too shallow to hide in and with little undergrowth in the forest on either side of the river, his options were not great.

Perhaps the monster would completely ignore him and go on its way.

A rumbling growl sounded across the water, making his stomach vibrate, and sending a cold sweat across his brow. Slowly Melodin looked back to the behemoth to see its pale yellow eyes staring at him, its teeth bared.

The creature's huge claws slowly dug into the loose stones as its muscles went taut, ready to spring.

This was it. He was as good as dead. There was no way he could outrun a behemoth.

Perhaps if he just stayed still the creature would look past him and walk away.

Suddenly the behemoth's muscles twitched and stones erupted into the air as it lunged for him. Melodin cried out and sprinted in the other direction.

"Not again," he wailed, his mind racing for some kind of solution that did not result in him being viciously torn apart.

Not thinking he sprinted for the closest tree and before he realised he was high up in the branches as the behemoth clawed at the trunk trying to reach him.

A laugh of relief escaped his lungs as he looked down at the hungry monster.

"Too fat to climb up and get me aren't you," he taunted the behemoth.

His mirth quickly vanished as the monster stopped clawing at the trunk and began circling the tree.

"Except, now I'm stuck up here ... just perfect," he grumbled.

"Hey Visteen," he called out into the empty air, "What am I supposed to do now? You could at least give me a weapon."

A few seconds past by with the wind rustling in the tree and a low growl reverberating up from below. Melodin let out a groan and dropped his head to his hand as he perched firmly on a thick branch over the top of the pacing monster.

"Catch," the voice of Visteen spoke from the air above him.

Melodin looked up in surprise to see the flash of metal as a curved sword fell through the branches towards him. Bouncing off a higher branch it drifted away from his waiting hands,

forcing him to reach out precariously. But a smile came to his face as the handle looked as if it would land perfectly in his waiting hand.

His smile was replaced by a cry of surprise as his wet feet slipped on the branch and the sword dropped past his hand. Desperately he tried to grab hold to stop his fall, but it was no use and he followed the sword towards the behemoth.

Unable to see where he was falling, Melodin closed his eyes, imagining a great toothy maul opening wide to swallow him whole. He cried out again as something small crashed into his back, right between the shoulder blades, sending him squirming in pain as he tumbled to the soft grass.

Rolling up against the trunk of the tree he looked back around, expecting to see the behemoth's claw about to tear his face off. He raised his arms in a merge defence, but stopped almost immediately.

"What?" he wondered aloud, lowering his arms, his eyes widening as he looked at the behemoth lying motionless on the ground.

Mouth hanging open he stood up and hesitantly walked over to the carcass.

"How?" he began to wonder when he noticed the hilt of a sword protruding from the monster's back. "I guess that's what I landed on and drove the blade into its heart."

Melodin stood back, a dumbfounded look on his face as he scratched the back of his head. Slowly a smile crept across his face and a great laugh burst forth.

"Yeah," he exclaimed, "That right. Even a behemoth is no match for me. Melodin the Beast Slayer. The Impossible to Kill."

Still laughing he climbed atop the carcass and wrapping his hands about the sword handle he pulled the blade forth.

"A katana," he remarked, looking at the curved blade as he hopped back down and started back towards the stream. "I wonder how Visteen knew?"

Shrugging to himself Melodin looked to the stream, instantly freezing in his tracks as his eye met with two people looking at him in surprise.



“Hey, I know you,” Melodin remarked, pointing at the blue haired woman, “Your that Ekkil person right? The one Reith likes.”

“It’s Eclairé,” the blue haired elf corrected him, her expression unchanged.

“That’s right,” he smiled, looking to the other person, “And who are you?”

“Solordorr,” the man replied, his crimson eyes sparkling unsettlingly.

“Wait a minute,” Melodin said thoughtfully, “Aren’t you a bad guy?”

A sly smile spread across the man’s face. “Where is Visteen?”

“Visteen?” Melodin asked in reply, “Well, she’s-”

Suddenly the world around him changed and in a flash he was standing back in Visteen’s teleportation room with Solordorr and Eclairé right beside him.

“I, am right here,” Visteen said with a wide smile, “So good to see you all again. I do so love reunions.”

\* \* \*

“A Spirit Ring,” she breathed, her heart filling with trepidation as a frown fell across her face.

“One of seven rings,” King Vamier stated seriously. “Each with untold power.”

“And all of them cursed,” Nim was quick to say, turning a confused look to the King.

“Cursed?” a slight chuckle escaped the man’s lips.

“Yes, the spirit inside the ring will consume your soul, your life force,” Nim replied, her concern growing.

“Is that what you believe?”

“Is it not true?”

The King smiled slightly and looked away, “Truth is hard to come by in any instance. What is believed is based upon vague and rare documents that are half ruined. No one can say whether it is truth or not, for there is no evidence to support either story.”

Nim looked back to the ring, seeming incredibly innocent as it sat on the large rock. But the deep glow throbbing within the topaz filled her with worry. She could feel the power from the ring pressing on her chest and temples. So foreboding, and yet promising unlimited strength.

“All that power just sitting there,” Nim remarked, turning back to the King, “For how long has it been here? And yet you never thought to use it for yourself. Why is that?”

King Vamier smiled disarmingly, “I have never been so desperate as to do so, for, as you know, once you put the ring on it is impossible to take off again.”

“So why offer it to me freely?” she was quick to ask.

Again the older man smiled, “Do you know of your family’s history, princess Nimrodell?”

She frowned and shook her head slightly. “What do you mean?”

“It was the first King of Midenland who had the Spirit Rings created,” King Vamier explained, “Your direct ancestor in fact. This was before the realm was divided. During this time it is said that King Olcost wore all seven rings at the one time.

“He ruled for many years and upon his death his children removed the rings from their father’s corpse. Now, King Olcost, in his wisdom, foresaw that the Spirit Rings would be sought after by those desiring to abuse their power, so it was his dying command that the rings be separated.

“Like their father, King Olcost’s children were honourable and carried out their late father’s wishes, separating the rings from each other and subsequently creating the seven realms we know today. Although today, it is only known where a few of the rings are, the rest have been lost, or stolen, or thrown away with little regard. Except the one entrusted to Solegrad, and here it is, lying right in front of you and within reach.”

Nim narrowed her eyes, “But why are you offering it to me freely?”

“You are a direct descendant of King Olcost,” the man explained as if it were obvious. “If anyone can wield the ring’s power to its full extent, it is you, Nimrodell.”

She shook her head slightly, “You still did not answer my question.”

“Indeed,” the King chuckled softly, “There is currently a truce between Solegrad and Reparian, so we cannot overtly fight the Empire. But make no mistake, I loathe what that once great realm has become, which is why I want to help you take back your homeland and bring ruin to those imperial dogs.”

She narrowed her eyes again, looking back to the ring as it sat quietly on the stone, seething from within.

“Your father was a good friend of mine,” continued King Vamier, “He was killed by Reparian. Of course I wish to do all I can to aid his daughter. Plus, the Spirit Rings belong to the Olcost bloodline, and should have them back.”

Nim took a deep breath, her confusion clouding her mind and filling her with indecision.

“Princess,” King Vamier said sincerely, drawing her eyes back to his, “How long can you rely on Sir Tama and the rest of the Kingsguard to fight your battles for you?”

The question struck a chord within her and a flicker of indignation flashed through her mind. Taking another deep breath she clenched her jaw, her hand slowly reaching for the ring atop the grey stone. The fire inside the gem swelled eagerly as she picked it up and held it before her eyes.

She was about to slip it onto her finger, when a feeling of dread took hold of her heart. She hesitated, her lips going thin and her frown deepening.

With a heavy sigh she closed her eyes and clutched the Spirit Ring tightly in her palm.

“Thank you for this gift, King Vamier,” Nim said seriously as she slipped the ring onto the chain about her neck. “If the time comes, when I am truly desperate and out of options, I will use this great power and hope it does not destroy me.”

A peculiar look lingered on King Vamier’s face as he watched her closely before nodding stiffly.

“I hope you are never that desperate,” said the King awkwardly and looked away.

“Tell me,” Nim spoke up, drawing the man’s gaze, “Which ring was kept in Lakelinds?”

“Originally?” King Vamier asked in reply, making her shrug and nod. “It was the Spirit Ring of water. But who can say where any of the others are now.”

Nim nodded and started back along the path leading from the grotto, the unease she had felt coming to this place continuing to linger.

\* \* \*

“Good to see you again Eclairé,” Visteen smiled nastily, “You left without saying farewell. That was terribly rude of you.”

Melodin glanced to the blue haired elf, seeing clearly the mixture of anger and fear stamped upon her face.

“And Solordorr,” Visteen continued, “What an unexpected surprise. I thought I had killed you.”

The crimson eyed man smirked, “You should know, I am not that easily killed.”

“Regardless,” Visteen replied, “Welcome, both of you. I will try and make your stay as, comfortable as possible.”

Melodin continued to look between the three of them, feeling very much out of place as he stood there in his underwear. The tension in the air was so thick he believed he could have probably cut it with the bloody katana still in his hands.

“No use trying to escape,” Visteen said with a confident expression, “I have already placed binding spells around both of you.”

Eclairé continued to look fearful, but the smile on Solordorr’s face remained.

“Who ever said we wanted to escape?” Solordorr asked in reply, causing a slight look of concern to flash across Visteen’s features.

“I did not think it were coincidence that I happened to see the two of you walking through Celrin Steep,” Visteen said thoughtfully. “So perhaps you could enlighten me.”

“That may take a while,” Solordorr baited, “But we were there because of a teleportation that went awry.”

“You were trying to teleport into Emperious,” Visteen stated more than asked. “And why were you going there?”

“Why should we tell you?” Eclairé finally spoke up, her voice shaky.

“Don’t be a fool Eclairé,” Visteen smirked, “You know well what happens when you don’t do as I say. In fact, leave us.”

Visteen simply waved her hand and Eclairé vanished from sight.

“I need her,” Solordorr said simply, his eyes hard.

“So it was you who put the binding crystal in her chest,” Visteen smiled nastily, “And I’m assuming it was also you who took her from me in Becklind.”

“Perhaps,” Solordorr shrugged, his eyes looking about the room. “I trust you have not harmed Eclairé.”

“Not yet,” Visteen replied coldly. “I’m surprised you care though. After all she did betray you.”

“We have an agreement, that is all,” Solordorr said simply, “So I would like her back in one piece.”

“That depends,” replied Visteen, her eyes twinkling in the crystal light.

“On?”

“On how cooperative you will be,” Said the sorceress, “I’m not sure what I am going to do with either of you yet. I may just kill you both, save me some hassle.”

“You tried to kill me once before,” Solordorr said, appearing bored. “Remember? You didn’t do so well.”

“This time I won’t make that mistake,” she was quick to counter.

Melodin felt awkward watching the exchange of words between the two of them, both seeming in control and yet there was some underlying unease that was making the tension unbearable.

Visteen’s light laugh, broke the silence.

“Come now,” she smiled, “In the past we may have been at odds with each other, but times have changed. Perhaps we could come to some understanding, exchange some information. You were coming to Emperious for a reason, yes?”

“Yes we were,” Solordorr smiled back, but his eyes remained cold.

“And that reason would be?” Visteen prompted curiously, causing Solordorr to smile wider.

Without replying the crimson eyed man looked to Melodin before wandering about the small room.

“I see,” Visteen nodded, “You will not say. Perhaps some time in my specialised dungeons will make you feel more agreeable.”

“There’s no need for that, Visteen,” Solordorr was quick to say, “In fact you are the reason why we ventured this far.”

“Me?” the sorceress narrowed her eyes. “Revenge, perhaps?”

Solordorr shrugged, “In any case I have no intention to leave your lovely mansion, so restraint is unnecessary.”

“You think I would let you walk about my abode freely?” Visteen scoffed, but Solordorr’s smile did not disappear.

“Yes I do,” the man stated, “You will for one very simple reason: you’re curious.”

Visteen scoffed again and looked away, but she was quick to look back, a flicker of hesitance appearing upon her face.

“I’m about to have some tea,” Visteen said cautiously, “Perhaps you would like to join me so we may discuss this curious development further?”

The sly smile remained on Solodorr’s face as he motioned for the sorceress to lead the way.

“Hey,” Melodin spoke up hesitantly, drawing curious looks from the other two as if they just realised he was there. “Could I get some clothes, maybe?”

Visteen turned a dismissive expression towards him, “Please do,” she waved her hand at him.

In a flash he was no longer standing in the small room and instead a large bedroom surrounded him with a large bed and ensuite.

“My room,” Melodin said quietly, dropping the blade onto the rug he headed over to the wardrobe and opened the doors wide to look through the hanging clothes.

“I don’t get it,” he mumbled to himself as he pulled out a blue vest, “It’s like Visteen doesn’t even care about me and this ring anymore. Which I suppose could only be a good thing.”

Melodin smiled to himself and chuckled, “Looks like it’s time for me to take my leave.”

## Chapter Twenty-four

With a wide yawn he rubbed his eyes and pushed himself up in the bed. Dreamily he worked the dryness out of his mouth, licking his lips and using his tongue to rid the furry feeling from his teeth.

Gazing out the window he could see that the sun had set and the night had come on in full. With no lights in his room he could see the soft moon beams sprawling across the floor and shimmering on the edge of the katana he had left lying there. The behemoth blood had now dried, leaving behind a matte of black against the silver steel.

“Alrighty,” Melodin said eagerly, jumping out of the bed and slipping on his ankle high shoes. “Time to go Do-.”

He paused and sighed heavily.

“That’s right, no Dog,” he mumbled to himself as he pulled on a dark blue vest. “Not yet anyway. Once I get out of here I know I’ll meet up with her again.”

Again he stopped, a thought coming to his head as he spotted his reflection in the full length mirror. The moon granted enough light for him to see himself wearing no shirt, baggy pants that were drawn up just below the knee leaving his shins bare.

“What else do I need?” he asked quietly, scratching his hairless chin.

Slowly his eyes drifted over to the sword lying on the rug. Thoughtfully he walked over and picked it up, a slight frown coming to his face as he headed for the door. Stopping before the exit he placed the katana down gently on the side table and with a slight nod he slipped out of the room into the hallways of Visteen’s mansion.

His soft leather shoes made no sound as he snuck along the thick carpeted passages, carefully creeping around the armoured statues and side tables with expensive vases on them.



The house was still and deathly silent, the only light coming through the windows from the moon and stars. It was the perfect night to be sneaking about, and yet he felt unease and continuously found himself glancing over his shoulder. The paintings on the walls seemed to watch his pass by and every time he passed a statue he felt as if it were about to suddenly lunge at him and rip him apart.

“Easy Melodin,” he said to himself quietly. “You’re a sneaking expert remember, and will be far away before Visteen wakes in the morning.”

He stopped at the base of the large stairs, another thought coming to his head. Looking to the main door down the hall, his escape so near at hand, he firmed his jaw and nodded to himself before heading in the opposite direction.

Through the house he moved quickly and quietly, slipping through the doors and heading down another flight of stairs that he knew would take him to the specifically designed dungeons.

His surroundings changed dramatically, the plush rugs turning into hard stone covered in a layer of grime. No more paintings hung on the wall to watch him pass by, nor any more statues to silently threaten him, and yet he still felt as if someone were watching him, waiting to attack.

As the light of the moon vanished it was replaced by feint crystal lights that were embedded into the stone near the ceiling, casting deep shadows through the narrow hallways. Slipping through these shadows his ears picked up the sound of heavy footsteps echoing off the stone, and peering around one corner he spotted a large stone golem patrolling the dungeon.

“Figures,” Melodin mumbled to himself, before glancing back the way he had come. “No, I can’t just leave her here.”

Firming his jaw Melodin darted to the next shadow, holding his breath as the stone golem paused and looked in his direction. The sound of his heart thumped loudly in his ears and time seemed to stop as the golem’s hollow eyes stared along the corridor.

After what seemed like hours the magically animated creature turned back around and continued on its way.

Melodin let out a deep breath before creeping out from his hiding spot and edging down the hall. Cold bars of cell rooms lined the passage, all empty and dark. All except one, where a bright light shone through the bars.

Curiously Melodin stopped at the edge of the light and peered into the cell to see the blue haired elf staring vacantly at the wall, her eyes bloodshot from lack of sleep. Aside from the obvious sleep deprivation Eclairé seemed unharmed, albeit looking rather depressed.

Melodin smiled at the sight and with a quick look in the direction where the golem disappeared he slid over to the door and pulled a lock pick from his pocket. Sticking his tongue out Melodin quickly began trying to open the cell door.

His movement caught the elf's attention and a look of surprise came to her features.

"What are you doing?" Eclairé asked him, her voice but a whisper.

"What does it look like?" he asked back, not looking up from his lockpicking.

"The golem will catch you," Eclairé hissed back, crawling over to the door, "Leave now, while you still can."

Melodin did not reply, feeling the first of the lock tumblers click into place.

"If the golem doesn't catch you, Visteen will," Eclairé continued, "Don't be a fool and go."

Melodin smiled, "I can't do that. I'd never forgive myself, nor would Reith forgive me."

Eclairé sighed heavily and shook her head at him, but she gave no more objections.

"It's probably magically locked, you know," the elf remarked, her voice despondent.

Even as Eclairé spoke Melodin got the last tumbler in place and the cell door swung open with a creak.

"You were saying?" he smirked triumphantly. "Come on, before the golem comes back."

Eclairé was quick to slip out from the cell, but the second they headed down the corridor a loud screech made them freeze.

The sound turned his blood cold, and with wide eyes he looked down the hall to see the huge golem charge towards them.

“Run,” he shouted and took off at a sprint.

But he need not have said anything for Eclairé was right beside him, and together they darted through the dungeon, racing for the stairs back up into the mansion.

“Once we get out of the dungeon the golem will not pursue,” Eclairé said between breaths, “Its magic ties it to this place.”

He did not bother replying, all his thoughts focused on not being squashed by the enraged creature. But relief started to come as they reached the stairs and darted up them to safety.

He laughed in relief as they neared the top, but his delight was premature. Just before he ran out the dungeon door his feet slipped from under him as the stairs suddenly turned into a slide. Falling flat on his face, the air blasted from his lungs, and quicker than he had ascended the stairs he was plummeting for the base.

He cried out along with Eclairé and the screech from the golem filled him with fear as he imagined it waiting at the bottom, ready to eat him.

But he cried out again as he saw the base of the stairs open up and the black abyss of a trapdoor consumed them. The ride was bumpy and dark, causing him to become entangled with Eclairé as they rode the slide down. His head must have clashed against something, because his senses suddenly went reeling, sending him into a daze as their trip came to an abrupt halt.

A groan escaped his lips as his wits returned to him.

“I thought the ground would be harde-” his words got caught in his throat as he opened his eyes and pushed himself up.

He had landed face first into Eclairé’s chest.

Feeling his face go warm Melodin quickly rolled off the elf and awkwardly cleared his throat.

“Sorry about that,” he muttered, hopping to his feet and looking about the area they had fallen into.

“Sorry about what?” Eclairé asked back, holding the back of her head as she too stood up.

“About,” he stammered, “You know, not picking the lock faster.”

Eclairé looked at him in confusion, “That’s not your fault. I should be thanking you for simply trying to help me.”

Again he felt his cheek go warm and he quickly looked away from the elf.

“Any way,” he said, “Trust Visteen to have a labyrinth beneath her house. She’s weird.”

“Labyrinth?” Eclairé asked in reply, “This is just a network of caverns.”

“You say that now,” Melodin replied despondently. “Can’t you teleport us away?”

Eclairé shook her head, “No, there is a field over this place limiting my magic. Likely emanating down from the mansion.”

“Looks like we’ll have to go the old fashioned way then,” Melodin sighed again heading into the cavern.

Large stalagmites and stalactites framed the path, their large masses illuminated by the dimly glowing moss and fungi growing about the place and the creeping vines that spiralled around them with bright flowers. The ground was uneven and broken, cold puddles filled the dips and little trickles ran down from the dark ceiling.

Melodin shivered, rubbing the goosebumps on his arms, and breathing into his cold hands his breath wafted through the air in front of him.

“I should have brought that stupid jacket,” he grumbled to himself, and looked to Eclairé, “Aren’t you cold?”

The elf glanced down at her open shirt, the diamond at the centre of her chest flickering in the subterranean lights.

“I’m an elf,” she shrugged.

“And elves don’t ever get cold?”

“Not in the same way humans do.”

His brow furrowed in confusion, but with a shrug to himself he did not pursue his curiosities.

The diamond between Eclairé's breasts continued to capture his attention as they continued along. It reminded him of the ring he wore, how it seemed to glow with an inner energy.

“Something the matter?” Eclairé asked him curiously.

“What?”

“You're staring at my chest.”

“No, no,” he stammered awkwardly, again feeling himself blush as he looked away quickly,

“Sorry, it's just, that diamond. I wasn't checking out your ... Never mind.”

His voice trailed away and he bit down on his lip in embarrassment drawing a slight laugh from the elf.

“The diamond is used for a maintaining a powerful spell,” Eclairé explained, drawing his eyes back to her.

“Like the one Solordorr placed over you?” he asked slowly, studying the look upon the elf's face.

“Yes,” she replied stiffly.

“Can't you just counter the spell?” he wondered, “You're a sorceress, right?”

“I haven't called myself a sorceress in a long time,” sighed the elf, “And I haven't practiced any really complex spells in just as many counts of years. So theoretically, a counter spell could work. But I now no longer have the knowledge to cast such a spell.”

“That sucks,” replied Melodin without thinking.

“This is also the reason why I told you to leave me,” Eclairé continued, tapping the diamond with a finger. “Solordorr can track me anywhere, and kill me at any time.”

“But he said he needed you,” Melodin said with concern. “He wouldn't kill you.”

“Maybe,” nodded the elf, “I doubt he would lead Visteen to us, he hates her as much as he hates me, probably more. But so long as this spell is active I will never be free of him.”

“Then the first thing we’ll do once we’re out is find someone who can remove that diamond and free you,” Melodin said confidently, a smile on his face.

Eclaire directed a curious look towards him, a slight smile creeping to the edges of her lips. She looked as if she were about to say something when a flash of silver across their faces stole her words.

“What’s-?” the elf exclaimed looking in the direction the projectile came from. “Look out.”

Instinctively Eclaire raised her hand as half a dozen more missiles shot towards them, causing Melodin to cry out. Just before the objects thundered into them they crashed into a magical barrier. Sparks flew, lighting up the darkness, and the small star like missiles clattered to the stone.

“What the?” Melodin exclaimed looking towards whoever had attacked them.

“Goblins,” Eclaire said distastefully.

Along the pathway he spotted a lithe creature with big round eyes and gangly limbs. It was about his height, even though it was slouching, but was much thinner than he could ever become.

“Sneaky little gits,” Melodin said as he bent over and picked up the throwing stars that were on the ground.

“Look out,” Eclaire shouted, pushing him to the side as she darted away in the other direction.

Not a moment too soon either, for as soon as he stumbled to the side several more throwing stars cracked into the stone where he had been standing.

“I’ll get ‘em,” Melodin shouted confidently.

Sliding to his right he cocked his arm to return the throwing star at the goblin still standing at the other end of the path. But as he threw it his foot slipped on the stone, changing his aim

and forcing him to release it towards Eclairé. As he rolled across the ground he heard the elf cry out in pain.

“One of them got me,” Eclairé cried out as she dropped behind a rock.

“Is it bad?” Melodin called back hesitantly.

“Well, I’m still alive,” came Eclairé’s tense reply.

“Those bastards,” Melodin growled, trying to sound earnest, “I’ll teach them not mess with us.”

Even as he spoke the round yellow eyes of a goblin appeared beside him and the flash of a silver blade stabbed for his neck. Desperately Melodin jumped backwards, throwing another star at his attacker, not in any attempt to kill the fiend, merely a reaction. But miraculously the star thudded into the goblin’s neck, sending it to ground clutching at the wound.

Rolling back to his feet Melodin looked to the lone goblin along the corridor to see it was much closer now. As their eye met, the creature’s black clothed arms began a blur of motion as it launch several throwing stars at him in quick succession.

Acting purely on reflexes he twisted to the side, feeling a few of the stars scratch across his arms and leg, and turning back around he returned fire.

“Take this you piece of filth,” he shouted as he threw the stars.

But the goblin was far more accustomed to this type of warfare nimbly avoiding the stars, letting them fly by harmlessly into the darkness of the cavern.

“You’re a quick little bastard, aren’t you?” Melodin stated simply, as the goblin readied another volley of stars.

He gritted his teeth, he had no more weapons and the sword of the goblin he had killed was too far away to be of any use to him. Quickly he eyes darted to where the blade lay, his feet shuffling slightly towards it, but the goblin watched him with its big yellow eyes, knowing exactly what he was thinking. A wide smile crept across the creature’s pale face, its pointed teeth gleaming in the dim light. He heard the creature chuckle as it raised its arm. But before

it attacked it suddenly went ridged, its smile slowly disappearing as its throwing arm dropped. Then it just fell forwards onto its face.

“What?” Melodin wondered aloud before his eyes caught sight of a throwing star sticking into the back of the goblin’s head.

“Yeah,” he laughed triumphantly, “Didn’t see that one coming, did you? I put some special spin on that one.”

He laughed again, placing his hands on his hips, and a wide grin on his face.

“When you’re quite finished,” a call from Eclairé grabbed his attention, causing him to rush over to where the elf had slumped up against a stalagmite.

“You alright?” he asked with worry, sliding to his knees alongside Eclairé, his eyes going to the throwing star embedded in the diamond at in her chest.

“I could be better,” Eclairé replied stiffly.

“Just take the star out,” Melodin said in confusion. “What’s the big deal?”

“The deal,” the elf glared at him, “Is that trying to remove this stone forcefully would result in it destroying me, and right now there is a blade stabbing into it. Not to mention I can’t move.”

“Can’t move?”

“The magic has paralysed me.”

“That’s not good,” Melodin said slowly, scratching his head, “Maybe I could carry you out of here.”

Eclairé took a deep breath, and shook her head as much as she could, “No. You should go. Flee while you can.”

“What?” he exclaimed, “I can’t do that. Reith would hate me forever if I did. And the goblins will eat you alive.”

“Don’t be silly,” Eclairé scolded him, “Goblins are herbivores. They attacked us because we were invading their territory.”

“You’re joking right?”



“No, they eat the subterranean fungi and moss.”

“Serious?” his mouth fell open and he glanced back to the two goblins he had killed. “Now I just feel bad.”

“Melodin,” Eclairé said seriously, drawing his eyes to hers, “Leave me. I’ll be alright, once Solordorr discovers I have fled he will track me down and come and sort this problem out.”

“But he’ll take you right back to Visteen,” Melodin argued and shook his head. “No, I cannot do that. Look, I can take it out and you’ll be fine.”

“Don’t be absurd,” the elf was quick to say, “Anymore damage to the stone might release the killing magic.”

“You’d rather be imprisoned by Visteen?” Melodin asked back, making Eclairé look away. “It will be fine. Trust me, I’ve got quick hands.”

Eclairé took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

“Wait,” Melodin said suddenly, grabbing the elf’s attention, “You sure about this?”

“What?” Eclairé asked back incredulously. “Of course I’m not, you just-”

“Alright, alright,” he held up his hands to calm her, “I’ll just yank it out and it’ll be fine.

Alright?”

“Yank it out?” she exclaimed.

“Okay, your call,” Melodin shrugged and took hold of the throwing star.

“What? No, wait,” Eclairé yelled in terror, but cut herself short as he quickly pulled the embedded weapon out of the diamond and held it up between them, a wide grin on his face.

“What?” he asked innocently, “You said to do it.”

“No I didn’t, I said,” she argued before taking a deep breath to steady herself, “Whatever.”

“Hey, it’s alright,” Melodin smiled wider, “I told you it would be okay.”

“Except I still cannot move,” Eclairé replied flatly.

“I’ll just carry you then,” he smiled at the elf again, “Come ...”

His voice trailed away and his smile slowly vanished as he noticed several deep cracks splitting through the diamond in Eclairé's chest and causing a little bit to fall away. At the centre of the gem an angry light began to glow, building and growing as more shards fell away.

"Perhaps this wasn't such a good idea," Melodin said softly, looking to the elf with worry.

"Now you say that," Eclairé rolled her eyes, "Thanks, and now I'm dead."

Melodin bit down on his lip as his mind raced to think of a solution, but as the energy in the diamond grew to bursting he could think of nothing.

"No, no, no, no, no," Melodin brought his hands to his head as his mind worked overtime to try and think of something.

"Melodin," Eclairé said hurriedly, looking to him with teary eyes. "Tell Reith-"

The elf's words were cut short as a wave of energy suddenly burst out from the broken diamond, crashing into Melodin and throwing him backwards.

His flight ended abruptly and pain burst across his shoulder blades and at the back of his head, stealing his senses and sending him into oblivion.

## Chapter Twenty-five

“Good girl,” he muttered to himself as he watched Nim slip the Spirit Ring onto her necklace.

The others in the darkened observation room all groaned with disappointment before talking in hushed tones.

“Quiet.” Someone hissed, making the others to bite their tongues.

From the small room above the waterfall, he watched the young princess walk determinedly from the grotto with the sly King Vamier trailing behind, his head bowed in disappointment.

As Nim disappeared from the cavern the crystal lights in the observation room began to emit a gentle glow, lighting up the area and the many researchers in the small room. As soon as the lights came on a cascade of voices filled the room as the occupants excitedly chatted about what they had seen.

“Did you see the ring glow when she picked it up?” one scientist close by remarked to his friend. “I knew it. I knew it was true what they say.”

“Pure speculation,” a woman replied, “Without her actually putting it on, we cannot jump to any conclusions.”

“But such energy output can only mean one thing,” the man was quick to reply.

Ignoring the rest of the conversation he looked back down to the rock the Spirit Ring had been sitting on, its glowing lines seeming less vibrant.

“Hey, you there,” another man came right up to him, a suspicious expression on his face. “I don’t know you. Who are you?”

“Reith, sir,” he pretended to be awkward. “This is my first day.”

“What?” the suspicious researcher asked back, “I didn’t hear about this.”

“Yeah,” Reith continued to stammer.

“Who’s your supervisor, assistant Reith?” the man cut in, his voice insistent.

“Honestly, I don’t know,” Reith shrugged, “I was just told to come in today and that it would be sorted out then.”

“Typical,” the scientist grumbled loudly, “How does King Vamier expect us to work in these conditions.”

“There he goes again,” snickered a scientist to the side, “Give it a rest Gibbon.”

“Silence you,” the agitated researcher snapped back, “Or I will report you.”

“Whatever,” the man dismissed the threat and headed from the observation room, along with most of the others.

“As for you, rookie,” Gibbon snapped his eyes back on Reith, “Go help Doctor Tett in the archives. He needs some help researching his blood line theory. Got it? Good, now be gone.”

Reith nodded and hurriedly left the room, awkwardly moving through the other researchers and walking quickly through the stone hallways.

“Blood lines,” Reith mumbled to himself as he walked along, uncomfortably adjusting his acquired researcher’s coat that was too small. “Sounds interesting.”

Knowing the paths through the castle and its catacombs well, Reith walked quickly towards the archives. The stone corridors were a lot wider than he recalled, not to mention a lot busier with dozens of researchers and scientists rushing about with their minds locked away in whatever they were reading or studying. Although a few of the researchers gave him a polite nod as he rushed past, which he returned curtly.

The rock of the hallway suddenly disappeared as the path carved along the side of huge ravine where several waterfalls rushed down from above. Above the silver spray the open sky lingered, bringing natural light to the catacombs.

Turning off from the ledge side walkway Reith skipped up a flight of stairs that spiralled up into the foundations of the castle. Soon the natural rock became worked stone brick as the staircase led the way into one of the many spires of the castle.

“This bloody damp,” an irritated voice grumbled loudly as Reith pushed through a heavy door into a large library. “Doesn’t Vamier know how to properly store old tomes?”

Curiously Reith headed through the piles of papers and around a large bookcase to see an old dwarf up on a tall ladder, the light of the crystals reflecting off his balding head.

“And who the bloody hell are you?” snapped the dwarf when he noticed Reith enter.

“The name is Reith, sir,” he stammered in reply, “Gibbon sent me.”

“I told them I don’t need another bloody research assistant,” grumbled Doctor Tett, looking back to the books on the shelf. “But now that you’re here, help me find this damn book.”

“Certainly, Doctor,” Reith smiled slightly.

“And don’t you start bloody-well calling me doctor like the last one,” said Tett, “I have a name so use it.”

“Certainly Tett,” Reith replied, “What book are you looking for?”

“It’s called ‘The Meteor’s Family,’” said Tett gruffly, “Written by Lord Uberforce. I can’t find it anywhere. This bloody stupid King can’t properly catalogue his own damn collection.”

“A rather obscure work, Tett,” Reith remarked as he went about looking, “I would have thought that the works of Bilogry were comprehensive in regards to the royal family of Lakelinds.”

“Well now,” the dwarf exclaimed turning a curious look towards him, “So you’re not some dumb schmuck like the last bunch Gibbon sent me. About bloody time. Perhaps I can get some proper work done. And if you had a bit more wits about you, you’d realise that it’s because Lord Uberforce’s work is obscure is why I want to read it.”

“What do you think you’ll find?” Reith asked curiously.

“I how should I damn-well know,” snapped the white bearded dwarf, “I haven’t read it yet.”

Reith smirked to himself and shook his head.

“But,” continued Tett in a more serious tone, “I should think it goes into depth about the Lakelinds ancestry, going right back to the time the meteor fell.”

“You mean the meteor that was the source of creating the Spirit Rings?”

The dwarf chuckled, again turning a surprised look towards Reith, his brown eyes sparkling behind his half-moon spectacles.

“Not some dumb schmuck,” Tett chuckled, “Yes, you’re right. Uberforce’s work should look at the relation between the Spirit Rings and specifically the royal bloodline.”

“What’s so interesting about the bloodline?”

“Don’t disappoint me now, assistant Wraith,” Tett shook his head, “I thought you were smarter than most.”

“My name is Reith.”

“It don’t bloody matter what your name is,” Tett snapped, “If you can’t see why the Lakelinds royals are so interesting then you might as well go be an idiot with that idiot King and the rest of bloody stupid researchers.”

Reith rolled his eyes.

“What’s with that look?” growled Tett.

“Nothing,” he shrugged, “I am just surprised that everyone is so stupid, except for you.”

“Don’t give me that boy,” Tett scoffed, “I’ve lived ten times longer than you have, along with the rest of the people in this castle. You humans are mere infants struggling to find a bigger stick to hit each other with.”

“And you’re helping us find that stick,” Reith countered flatly.

The dwarf glared at him for a few seconds before a grin crept across his face.

“Well,” Tett said thoughtfully, “After you’ve lived as long as I have seldom anything is of interest anymore, so sometimes to have to prod the sleeping baby for some entertainment.”

Reith smiled and nodded slightly, “Careful you don’t end up waking a giant. Spirit Rings have more power than anyone can control.”

“Is that right, my young apprentice?” Tett was quick to ask, his chocolate coloured eyes sparkling. “Then how do you explain the King Olcost wore all seven rings at one time? They

say the spirits in the rings drain your life, and yet the good King lived to a ripe old age of one-hundred and forty-three before he carked it. How do you explain that one, Reef?"

"It's Reith," he replied seriously. "The logical answer would be that he possessed all seven rings, as it was originally intended."

"But if the spirits drain your life, the logical outcome would be an accelerated loss of life, would it not?" Tett asked in reply, a delighted smile hiding beneath his bushy moustache and beard.

Reith's brow furrowed as he looked down at the Spirit Ring on his finger.

"Reith?" Tett said, grabbing his attention, "An unusual name, and one I recall a certain infamous Sky Pirate possessed."

"An unfortunate coincidence," Reith replied, trying to dismiss the dwarf's sudden curiosity.

But Tett's interest would not so easily be pushed aside, and the dwarf's eyes locked onto the ring on Reith's finger.

"I also recall hearing that this Sky Pirate had in his possession a Spirit Ring," Tett, said slowly, his eyes unblinking as he stared at Reith's hand.

Reith clenched his jaw, but with a sigh and he smiled and removed the tight researchers coat that had been annoying him.

"So," Tett's eyes finally moved from the ring, "What is it you want here, sky pirate?"

"You're the genius," Reith shrugged, "I'm sure you can work it out."

"You want the Spirit Ring of earth."

Reith scoffed at the statement, "Not so smart after all."

"Don't take that bloody tone with me boy," snapped the dwarf, "It was a logical connection to make."

"Doesn't mean it was correct," Reith smiled in reply.

"I'm not so prideful as to not ask when I do not know," Tett said seriously as he hopped down the ladder and moved closer to Reith. "So why are you here?"

“I’m after knowledge,” Reith stated simply, “You can see what is on my finger, and you know the situation I find myself in. If I don’t find a way to get this ring off, I will die.”

“A shame you’re not a descendant of King Olcost,” Tett replied flatly.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Reith narrowed his eyes.

“Doctor! Doctor Tett!”

A trio of guards suddenly burst into the room loudly, readying their weapons the moment they laid eyes upon Reith.

“Who is this?” demanded the man leading the guards.

Tett looked from the guards to him, his eyes sparkling.

“A friend,” Tett replied, looking back to the guard, “Now why are you barging in here like a bloody idiot?”

“Sorry, Doctor,” the guard leader stammered as he and the others relaxed, “A researcher was found unconscious, his coat missing. The King believes someone has broken in and plans on stealing our research on the Spirit Rings.”

“Well isn’t that interesting,” Tett chuckled, “You three had best rush off and find the intruder then.”

“Yes,” nodded the guard, his eyes suspiciously lingering on Reith, “Sorry Doctor ..”

The man’s voice trailed away as he spotted something on the table beside Reith.

“Wait,” said the guard, his hand going to his sword again, “That jacket. Who exactly is this friend of yours Doctor?”

“Well,” Tett replied slowly, looking to Reith for some kind of assistance.

Clenching his jaw Reith exploded into action, pulling a dagger from his belt and roughly grabbing the dwarf.

“What the bloody-”

“Shut up,” Reith interrupted the dwarf as he placed the dagger tip against Tett’s throat.



“Bastard,” roared the guards, their weapons at the ready again. “Release the Doctor.”

“Stay back, if you value Tett’s life,” Reith growled.

The guard bared his teeth angrily, but motioned for his comrades to stay behind him.

“Do you really think you can escape this place?” sneered the guard, “You’re as good as dead.”

“The guards here may not be the brightest, or the most talented,” Tett remarked calmly, “But would say that his statement was fairly accurate, Reith.”

“Reith?” the guard leader echoed, a look of recognition and concern coming to his face.

“You know my name,” Reith smiled nastily, “So you know my deeds. But I assure you that you can never fathom what I’m actually capable of.”

Lifting his ringed hand quickly Reith unleashed the magic held within the gem. The guards cried out in horror as freezing winds rushed into them, caking ice upon their limbs as it crept rapidly across their bodies. Before they had time to realise their error all three of the guards were encased in ice from head to foot.

“Damn it to hell,” Reith cursed loudly, stepping away from the dwarf and sheathing his dagger.

“That was fantastic,” Tett exclaimed, turning an excited look towards him. “That was the power of the Spirit Ring of ice. Did you kill them?”

“Probably,” Reith replied stiffly, shaking away the tingling sensation he felt in his hand.

“Bloody shame,” Tett sighed before he moved closer to Reith and grabbed his ringed hand.

“Remarkable.”

Reith’s first instinct was to pull away, but he let the dwarf take a closer look at the Spirit Ring. The blue topaz that was held by the silver band throbbed with energy, sending pins and needles up his arm.

“Truly remarkable,” mumbled the dwarf, trying to pulled the ring off Reith’s finger.

“I prefer if you didn’t break my finger,” Reith said, pulling away from Tett.

The look on the dwarf's face suddenly became serious, "How long?"

"Before the Spirit consumes my life force?" Reith asked back, "About five years. Less now, most likely."

"Bloody shame," Tett said again, placing his hands on his hips. "Any way, you'd had best get out of here before some more bloody idiots show up."

"You're right," Reith sighed and nodded as he made a move towards the exit.

"No need to thank me for not handing you over to the guards," Tett called out, "It's bloody hard finding someone to talk to around here who's not a complete idiot."

Reith smirked and waved over his shoulder, but stopped and turned about as a thought came to his head.

"What were you saying about the Lakelinds royal family before the guards burst in?" Reith asked curiously.

"What?" Tett asked back, seeming distracted, "Yes, that. It's my belief that the descendants of the royal line can use the Spirit Rings with no ill effects. Uberforce's work will hopefully confirm my reasoning."

Reith's brow furrowed slightly and he nodded as he turned away.

"Did you also know," the dwarf laughed, "That most of the royal line were talentless as well? Makes you wonder how they ever maintained their reign. But I guess that's what the Spirit Rings and Kingsguard were for."

"What was that?" Reith asked suddenly, turning back around.

"What was what?" Tett asked in reply.

"Nothing," he shook his head, "Never mind. I have to go. Farewell."

Without waiting for a reply he raced from the room and back down the stairs, skilfully avoiding the increased guard patrols as he fled the castle into the ravines of Arch Eden.

\* \* \*

Her boots echoed off the hard floors of the research laboratory as she raced through the hallways.

“Hey, slow down,” shouted one of her associates as she skidded around a corner and nearly barrelled into him. “What’s the rush?”

“I have to find the Professor,” she called over her shoulder as she took off again.

The afternoon light streamed through the large windows along the corridor, its orange glow brightening the usually bleak hallways. She briefly thought about resting for a minute to catch her breath on one of the seats that looked out across Emperious, but the thought quickly left her mind.

“I have to tell the Professor,” she said determinedly to herself.

Barely looking where she was going she raced around another turn, again, nearly crashing into an associate. But she had no time to exchange pleasantries.

“Sorry,” she called over her shoulder, continuing along the hall.

“What’s the rush child?” a man’s voice called after her, one that she recognised and caused her to skid to a halt.

“Professor,” she exclaimed turning about to see the older man, regarding her curiously, “I have news.”

“Steady, girl,” the Professor smiled, “Catch your breath. There’s no need to be so hasty.”

“But,” she said between deep breaths, “It’s been found.”

“What has?” the man raised an eyebrow.

“The ring,” she explained, “The one we’ve been looking for. It’s in Delaforr like we thought.”

“You’re certain?” the Professor’s eyes lit up with excitement.

“Yes,” she nodded, “Our agent found documents confirming it.”

“Did he get into the vaults?”

She shook her head, “Still no luck with that.”

“No matter,” said the Professor before hurriedly walking off, “Come on, we must talk with the Emperor. Hurry girl.”

With a sigh she raced to catch up with the older man, who was moving with surprising speed despite his age, back through the hallways.

“This is fortunate news indeed,” the Professor said to her as she walked alongside him. “Our research was starting to run a bit thin, and even though we have the Spirit Ring of water if this find proves to be correct then this will truly be a day worth remembering.”

“Professor?” she asked, frowning slightly from the man’s peculiar tone.

“Once we get our hands on the ring in Delaforr nothing will be able to stop the Empire from ruling all of Midenland,” the Professor chuckled to himself and wrung his wrinkled hands eagerly.

\* \* \*

“Don’t you think that a bit odd?”

The bald man did not reply as he continued to gaze across the ravines of Arch Eden.

“Tama?” Nim asked curiously.

“What?” the bald man asked back in surprise, turning from the rain streaked window.

“Were you even listening to me?” she asked irritably.

“Sorry,” Tama bowed his head, “It’s just, I’m surprised King Vamier handed the ring over so easily.”

Nim looked away, fiddling with the Spirit Ring that hung on the chain around her neck.

“I know, I thought it odd too,” she agreed distantly.

“I think it was good you did not put it on,” Tama said, drawing her attention.

“Perhaps,” she nodded, a flicker of doubt creeping into her thoughts, “I know so little about the rings, even though my own ancestors created them. Why was I not told about them growing up?”

“Because there is so little known about them,” Tama shrugged, “Even the rulers of Lakelinds kept their secrets hidden.”

“Then we must learn all we can about it,” Nim said determinedly, “What was the ring left in Lakelinds?”

Tama looked away awkwardly.

“What is it? Tama?” Nim pressed seriously.

“I suppose it is time to tell you,” the bald man sighed.

“Tell me what?” she demanded, jumping up from her seat and rushing over to Tama.

“When the rings were divided Delaforr kept the most powerful of them all,” Tama explained, “It’s locked away in the family vaults. Magically sealed so that only a descendant with royal blood can access it.”

“Why are you telling me this now?” Nim exclaimed angrily, “You didn’t think this was important?”

“Look, princess,” Tama sighed, “We have always known the rings to be cursed. Even your father thought so. Naturally it was thought that no one should even wear the Spirit Rings, else risk unleashing a great terror upon the world.”

Nim sighed and rubbed her brow, “So, what about the ring in Delaforr? Is it some kind of master ring that controls them all?”

“No, nothing like that,” Tama shook his bald head, “Much worse. It is said that the wielder of this ring is able to master life and death.”

Nim’s mouth fell open in surprise.

“Such power,” she breathed in horror. “If Reparian were to learn of this ...”

Her voice trailed away as she began to understand the depth of her own statement.

“Maybe they already have,” Tama said seriously, “Why else would they have invaded? But they have no way of accessing the vaults to retrieve it.”

“Then we must return to Delaforr immediately,” she exclaimed with concern, “To make sure that they will never be able to get into the vaults.”

## Chapter Twenty-six

“So?”

“What?”

“What do you think?”

He shrugged, “The kid is a moron.”

“Quite a powerful one though,” she replied seriously.

“You mean lucky.”

“Luck?”

The sorceress scoffed, drawing his eyes away from the large crystal ball.

“Melodin out ran a behemoth and a kronis lizard,” explained the sorceress, “Do you think it luck that he threw that star so it would kill that goblin?”

He looked back to the images displayed in the crystal ball.

“He is using the power of the Spirit Ring without intent,” she continued.

“You seem very certain.”

“Of course,” Visteen smiled, “Melodin has no natural born talents, so the only explanation is that he is using the power of the ring.”

He did not reply, watching the two forms in the crystal ball closely as the dust cleared.

“They are both still alive,” Visteen remarked with surprise, “That blast should have killed them both, especially Eclair. You didn’t intervene, did you, Solordorr?”

“Why would I?”

“You and Eclair were close, once.”

“Once.”

“No longer?”

“She betrayed me.”

“And you still hold a grudge?”

He did not reply.

“I can’t imagine how you feel towards me then,” said the sorceress, feigning distress, “After all, I did torture you for many years. And then kill you. Tell me, how is it you’re alive?”

“I have my ways.”

“Indeed,” Visteen sighed, “You Fae are quite the enigma. But I am surprised you don’t bare me any ill will.”

“No. If Eclairé had not given me up you and I would not have such shared history.”

“So it’s all her fault then?”

“Yes.”

Visteen snorted in reply, seeming quite amused.

“I am still very interested in your people, Solordorr,” said the sorceress seriously.

“Planning on torturing me, and conducting experiments again?”

“No,” she said simply, “These Spirit Rings have all my attention at the moment. But once I am done...”

She left the comments hang in the air, likely trying to gage some response from him. But he ignored the remark.

“Do you plan on possessing all of the rings?”

Visteen laughed, “Do you really think I would tell you my plans?”

He left it at, turning his attention back to the scene through the crystal ball as one of the forms began to stir.

\* \* \*

“Wake up, you’re alright.”



“What?” he groaned, trying to force his eyes open.

“Come on, get up. You should probably get out of here before more goblin show up.”

“Eclaire?” he wondered groggily, the throb at the back of his head overwhelming his senses.

“Of course not, silly. I’m the one who saved you both.”

“What?” Melodin asked again, his eyes opening.

His vision was blurry as he looked about the cavern, his tongue heavy in his mouth. Slowly his eyes began to focus as they fell upon a blue haired elf slumped up against the rock opposite him.

“Eclaire,” Melodin exclaimed, quickly recalling the situation they were in.

Hurriedly he scrambled over to the elf on all fours, sliding beside her.

“What the ...?” he wondered aloud as he inspected Eclaire’s chest, “The diamond is gone.”

Gently he ran a finger down the centre of Eclaire chest where the gem had been imbedded.

“Easy there,” Eclaire said groggily, “I’m with Reith, remember.”

“But the blast,” Melodin replied in confusion, “There’s no evidence of it, no burn, no scorch marks.”

“Well, that’s a relief to hear,” replied the elf, wincing as she tried to get up.

“Here,” Melodin said, jumping to his feet and offering Eclaire a helping hand, “Like you said, we should get out of here before more goblins show up.”

“What?” Eclaire asked, giving him a curious look.

“Didn’t you say that?”

“No.”

Melodin paused and rubbed the back of his head, “Must have been a dream then. Any way let’s go. You good to walk?”

“I can manage,” Eclaire replied slowly, still regarding him curiously.

Not really knowing which way to go Melodin took the lead, moving past the dead goblins and heading deeper into the caverns and tunnels, picking up a few of the throwing stars as he went. His head still hurt, and it was clear by the way Eclairé was walking that she was not as well as she claimed. But they pushed on, desperate to find a way back to the surface.

\* \* \*

The first thing he noticed was the distant trickling of water and the clunk of wood hitting wood. He groaned, slowing bringing his hand up to his head as he worked the dryness from his mouth.

He gradually realised he was lying down on something hard and a light mist was falling onto his cheeks. He groaned again and grabbed his gut with his other hand as it churned uncomfortably.

Eyes still closed he forced himself into a sitting position, but he immediately regretted it as an intense ache throbbed through his head. It was a good thing he was on a bench for he slumped back and would have fallen to the ground if not for the back rest. His stomach continued to churn as he slowly opened his eyes.

The light of the overcast skies assaulted his eyes making him groan yet again and shield away the brightness with his hand.

Taking a deep breath he looked about at the wooden walkways following the path of the still river. High cliff sides crowded the skyline covered in houses and walkways that clung to the wet stone. The rain began to get heavier as he sat there staring across the water, watching the pattern of raindrops as they disturbed the still surface, sending hundreds of little rings across the water to collide with each other before vanishing into the depths.

The trickling water became louder as the water ran down the rocks, through natural divots in the stone before rushing into the waterways that lingered at the bottom of Arch Eden's ravines.

His mouth felt like the bottom of a bird's cage and again he tried working the dryness from his mouth, his tongue feeling thick and heavy. With another groan he forced himself to his feet and slowly headed along the wooden walkway as it headed into the rock.

The path continued to follow the still river with great windows in the stone offering views as through large frames that gave him the impression of being stuck in a spider's web.

Rubbing his eyes he turned away from the river, taking a path that lead deeper into the rocks and joined up with hundreds of other passages that paved through the earth like ant tunnels. Passing by many doorways he was still baffled by the fact that people lived in these catacombs. The high ravine walls that crowded you were bad enough, but to live in the ground was an unsettling thought and yet Arch Eden was one of the largest cities in all of Midenland. Not surprisingly it also had the second largest number of dwarves and halflings living here.

Coming into a large underground plaza he spotted the bright sign of the tavern he had been drinking at last night. Curiously the outside tables looked a mess as a few workers were cleaning up, each of them giving him a warily look as he passed through the entrance.

Inside the tavern was just as messy, with broken bottles and plates lying about the floor that were being swept up by the maids. Broken furniture sat by the fire ready to be used as kindling, and still all the people turned concerned expressions his way.

"Not you again," grumbled a large woman as he sat down at the bar. "You caused quite the mess last night."

He gave the tavern owner a perplexed look.

"You don't even remember, do you?" she scoffed, "Not surprisingly, you must have drank twice your weight in booze."

Running a hand across his face he did not reply.

"Don't feel so good this morning, do you?" the woman snickered, "Likely better than the lot you flattened in the fight though. Come now, I'll get you something to help with that hangover love."

“You’re being very polite to someone who wrecked your tavern,” he replied flatly, drawing a curious look from the round woman.

“Don’t even remember that,” she laughed, making him clench his jaw irritably. “After you knocked all the patrons you handed me a bag of coins before staggering off towards the river. More than enough to pay for the damage, so I’m figuring I’ll give you some breakfast for free. That’s if you want it of course?”

He laughed slightly to himself before nodding to the woman, “Please.”

“The name is Reith, right?” asked the landlady, pausing as she started for the kitchen.

He nodded, “I don’t think we have met before.”

“We haven’t,” she smiled annoyingly, “But as I recall you shouted it atop one of the tables, also claimed to be the greatest sky pirate in all the world.”

He groaned and rubbed his brow, “What else did I do last night?”

The woman continued to smile, “Ask Rosè over there, you seemed quite sweet on her.”

Reith clenched his jaw and awkwardly looked over his shoulder to a young woman. His mouth fell open slightly as he laid eyes upon the blue hair of the girl and her attractive features.

“Morning,” Rosè smiled at him as she walked over, broom in hand.

“You’re an elf,” he stated simply.

“That I am,” she nodded.

“If I said or did anything that upset you last night, I apologise,” Reith clenched his jaw again, turning away from the girl.

“Nothing I’m not used to,” she shrugged, “Although, you did keep calling me Eclair, or some such.”

He let out a stiff breath.

“I’m guessing I look like this Eclair lady,” Rosè continued, “She someone you care about?”

He did not reply.

“You miss her?”

Again he did not respond, staring towards the shelves of assorted liquors behind the bar.

“Well, there’s no use pining over her,” Rosè said simply, “If you love her, why are you sitting around here drinking yourself into oblivion?”

Her question caught his attention this time, and he turned a tight look towards the barmaid.

“It’s not that simple,” he said stiffly.

“Isn’t it?” she asked back in surprise. “Either you love her, or you don’t. Nothing more you need to think about.”

Again he clenched his jaw as he looked back to the bottles.

Rosè said no more and returned to her cleaning, leaving him feeling frustrated.

It was not long before the large landlady returned from the kitchen with a plate of roast meat and vegetables in one hand and a pint in the other.

“No need to thank me,” she said, placing the food down in front of him.

He looked at the pint curiously, before glancing to the woman questioningly.

“That’s my special hangover cure,” she smiled wide. “You can thank me for that one later.”

Not offering further explanation she headed off to continue cleaning up the mess.

Taking a sniff of the dark liquid in the pint he shrugged to himself before taking a long swallow. It tasted like dirt, but he did not care, and wiping his lips on the back of his hand he began on the roast.

The food was excellent, the meat perfectly cooked and covered in tasty gravy, and the vegetables crisp and juicy. Before he realised he had finished the plate, and could have eaten another serving but did not want to ask after the trouble he had caused. Taking the pint he slipped off the bar stool and walked out to the chairs and tables outside the tavern.

Taking up a seat in a chair that had not been broken he leaned back and took a deep breath as he stared off across the plaza that was gradually filling with people going about their daily

cores and merchants setting up shop in front of the large natural pillar that stood at the centre of the area, holing up the ceiling and covered in glowing vines and moss.

“It’s not that simple,” he mumbled to himself, echoing his earlier words.

Taking another gulp of the dirt tasting drink he scrunched up his face and swallowed hard, finishing what was left of the liquid as quickly as possible.

Roughly placing the mug back on the table top he ran a hand across his mouth and chin, feeling the developments of a beard across his face.

He was about to get up and head aimlessly through the city streets when he caught sight of a white dog running through the people, occasionally pausing to sniff the ground. The mongrel stopped again and looked up in his direction, its vivid green eyes spotting him immediately. Dog barked loudly and her tail began to wag as she darted through the crowd to his table where she jumped up on one of the seats and stared at him intelligently.

“What are you doing here?” Reith asked flatly after a few seconds, drawing a bark from Dog.

“She’s tracking you down,” a young woman said as she walked from the crowd with a bald man in toe.

“I thought we said our farewells,” Reith remarked, looking to Nim as she and Tama grabbed some chairs to join him at the table.

“That was before,” Nim started hesitantly, “I thought King Vamier could provide me with some soldiers, but that is not to happen.”

“It seems he gave you something far greater than man power,” Reith replied, resting back in his chair, his eyes going to the ring dangling just above Nim’s cleavage. “And something far more dangerous. You’d be wise not to have that ring in such easy view to the public.”

Nim looked down in surprise before quickly tucking it to the side under her top.

“Why are we here princess?” Tama grumbled quietly, “You don’t need the help of some drunken vagabond.”

“Quiet Tama,” Nim scolded the Kingsguard.

“But he is right,” Reith spoke up, “You don’t need my help.”

Nim took a deep breath and looked back to him, her blue eyes shimmering with determination.

“But I would like it, nonetheless,” the princess said seriously. “Will you help me?”

Reith narrowed his eyes slightly, slowly looking between her and the bald Kingsguard and then to Dog, who had not taken her piecing gaze off him.

“No.” He replied firmly.

A look of surprise and despair came to the young woman’s features and her shoulder slumped.

“I told you this was a waste of time,” Tama huffed, “Once we get to Delaforr the Resistance will be enough to aid you in taking back your throne. Come, let’s us depart at once.”

“Getting to the city is the problem,” Nim snapped at Tama, “We discussed this earlier. I need the help of someone like Reith to slip into Delaforr unnoticed.”

She turned a desperate look back to him, “Please, Reith, I need your help.”

“Someone like me,” he echoed the girl’s words, “Not necessarily me. There are plenty of pilots that would smuggle you into the city for the right price.”

“What’s your price?” Nim was quick to ask.

He frowned slightly, closely watching the young princess’s expression.

“Anything, name it,” Nim pressed, “And it will be yours.”

“Anything?” he raised an eyebrow.

“Anything within my power.”

A slight smile edged to the corner of his mouth as he looked down to the table top.

“I thought you wanted to save Melodin,” Reith changed the subject, causing Dog to cock her head to the side.

A look of pain came to Nim's face, "I do. I wouldn't know where to start though. But once I have my kingdom back I will have the resources to search for him."

"Your kingdom," Reith echoed softly, causing a look of confusion to flash across the young woman's face.

"And you would use that ring around your neck to get this kingdom back?" he asked seriously.

Nim hesitated, "Only if it were necessary and I had no other option."

"Even knowing the dangers?"

"Yes," Nim replied, her eyes hard.

Reith's eyes dropped back to the old wooden table top as he pondered Nim's words and her clear determination.

"This is a waste of time," Tama grumbled quietly.

"Fine." Reith decided

"What?" blurted the Kingsguard.

"Really?" Nim asked, a wide smile coming to her face. "You'll help?"

"Yes."

"But at what cost?" Tama wondered cynically.

"There will be plenty of time to work that out later," Reith replied as he stood up, causing the throbbing headache to return.

"Thank you," Nim exclaimed, and jumping to her feet she embraced him in a crushing hug.

"Yes, well," he said awkwardly, gently pushing Nim to arm's length, "We might as well leave before I decide this is a bad idea."

"Good. I'm ready to leave now," Nim smiled, her eyes sparkling.

Reith narrowed his eyes slightly at the young woman.



“Well anticipated princess,” Tama congratulated Nim, his demeanour suddenly changing and a smile spread across his features.

“Well played,” Reith smirked as he headed through the plaza and through the dim tunnels.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean,” Nim replied innocently as she and Tama followed with Dog alongside.

He did not bother replying and simply sighed as he led the way to the aerodrome where his ship was docked.

It was many minutes of walking through the expansive city, across its walkways and bridges of stone, through its catacombs, before they reached his ship.

“About bloody time,” a gruff voice called as Reith lead the way into the hanger. “Been sitting here for ages.”

“What do you want Tett?” Reith groaned as he saw the white haired dwarf hop off the crate he was reclining on.

“You an idiot?” the dwarf asked back, “You know damn well why I’m here.”

He groaned and rubbed his brow, “How’d you even find me?”

“How the bloody hell do you think I found you?” Tett snapped back, “You’re a sky pirate; sky pirate’s have air ships; air ships are found in the aerodrome. Don’t take a genius to work it out. Now come on, where we off to?”

“I’m sorry, who are you?” Nim asked curiously when Reith did not bother making introductions.

“Doctor Tett,” the dwarf bowed slightly, his gruff demeanour softening dramatically, “It’s a pleasure to meet you Princess Nim.”

“Not the same Doctor Tett who wrote the incredible works on the genealogy of talents?” Tama asked abruptly, his excitement obvious.

“The very same.” Tett smiled wide.

“It’s wonderful to meet you,” Tama exclaimed, “I love your work Doctor.”

"Enough with the compliments," Reith said with exasperation, his headache suddenly worsening. "Are we going or not?"

"The Doctor too?" Nim asked curiously.

"I doubt I could stop him," Reith replied in defeat as he headed for the stairs leading into his air ship: the Banshee. "Though I'm surprised Vamier let you leave."

"He couldn't stop me either," stated Tett, a wide grin hiding under his beard.

## Chapter Twenty-seven

The hour was getting late, the sun was already creeping towards the western horizon, its golden rays turning orange and throwing a rusty veil across the lands. The evening birds had started to begin their chatter and take to the clear skies. In the fields beside the road he could also see the small foraging animals head out from their homes to graze.

The dirt road crunched under his feet, kicking up dust and sending small pebbles skipping across the rough surface. Up ahead in the distance he could see the jagged skyline of Emperious, the tall buildings at its centre glowing brightly in the late sun.

“Not far now,” he remarked cheerfully turning to the elf walking beside him, “You alright Eclairé? You don’t look so good.”

“I’m fine,” Eclairé replied distantly as she stumbled on a rock.

He was quick to jump to the elf’s aid, grabbing her arm and swinging it over his shoulder to support her.

“Yeah, just fine,” he said sarcastically. “Don’t worry, I’ve got you.”

A slight smile came to Eclairé’s pale face as she accepted the helping hand.

“Damn, you’re pretty heavy,” Melodin remarked as they continued down the road.

“Thanks,” Eclairé gave him an angry look, “You really know how to make a girl feel good about herself. No wonder you don’t have a girlfriend.”

“What?” Melodin exclaimed, “What’s that supposed to mean? I have plenty of girls who are friends.”

“None that you are romantic with I’d wager,” said the elf, her tone more playful this time.

“Well,” Melodin grinned proudly, “It’s quite the opposite in fact. Every town I go to the girls never leave me alone.”

“Probably because you’re so rude,” Eclairé replied, “They’re all trying to hit you.”

“Kiss me, you mean,” he was quick to say, “They’re the reason I keep on having to move around.”

“Sure,” scoffed Eclairé and shook her head wearily, before stumbling on another rock.

“Careful,” Melodin said as he kept the elf from falling, “If you fall on me we’ll never get back up.”

“I am seriously going to hit you,” Eclairé glared at him.

“Try being able to walk first,” he grinned back.

She continued to glare dangerously at him as they made their slow way along the road towards the first of the hamlets that surrounded the city of Emperious. The buildings here were nowhere near as grand as the towers in the distance, barely climbing three stories high with not even a wall or gate house to stop invaders.

“Look, there’s a train station,” Melodin exclaimed, pointing to the track where a large locomotive was sitting on next to a small platform. “Those are the ones that use the Crystal Core engine like air ships. I hear they travel all around Emperious on rails. Come on, let’s ride this one into the city.”

“Or we could just stay at the closest tavern,” Eclairé was quick to say.

He looked to the elf, a slight frown coming to his face as he studied her vacant stare.

“Yeah, that’s probably a better idea.” He agreed before looking about for tavern sign. “That place looks good: The Good Hearth. I wonder if their food is any good?”

He turned a wide grin towards Eclairé, but she did not see the amusement, so with a slight sigh he guided the elf along the road towards the tavern. Pushing through the doors they stumbled into the main room where many patrons turned a curious eye towards them.

Fortunately a waiter was quick to come and help them, guiding Eclairé to a nearby table.

“What in the world happened?” the young man wondered, “You look dreadful, both of you. Were you attacked on the road or something? Do you need a room?”

“Food then sleep,” Eclairé said, letting out a deep breath as she slumped in her chair.

“The chef’s special than?” asked the waiter, his eyes still regarding them curiously.

“I don’t know,” replied Melodin thoughtfully, “Is it any good?”

“One of her best recipes yet,” the waiter nodded, seeming to miss Melodin’s joke. “I’ll have that for you right away. Any drinks?”

“Water is fine,” Melodin replied, despondently looking away to the large fire off in the corner.

“Okay then,” nodded the young man, “Won’t be long.”

With a smile to them both the waiter headed off through the crowded tables and into the kitchens, leaving Melodin to rest his elbows on the table as he regarded Eclair with concern.

“Not going to faint, are you Eclair?” he asked, bringing a slight smile to the elf’s face. “If you do, you’re going to have to sleep there, because I’m not carrying you to the room.”

Her eyes opened into thin slits as she glared back at him, causing a wide smile to spread across his face.

“But seriously though,” he said suddenly, “I have a proper question for you.”

“Can’t it wait?” Eclair grumbled, forcing herself to sit up straighter and lean forwards across the table, her head in her hands.

“Well, it is kind of important,” he replied seriously, “I should have asked it earlier, but I guess now will do.”

“Here you go guys,” the waiter said suddenly as he returned with two large plates of food.

“I’ll just grab your water.”

The meal smelt delicious and Melodin was quick to pick up the cutlery and stuff his mouth full. Eclair was just as swift, but lacked his gusto. The waiter was quick to return with two glasses and a bottle of water, which he placed on the table before leaving them to their meal.

“Service is pretty good here,” Melodin remarked, his mouth full.

“What?” Eclair looked at him in confusion after she swallowed a bite.

“These rings?” he asked between mouthfuls, “Are they really like Reith said they are?”

The elf looked at him questioningly as she munched on a large mouthful.

“You know, with the whole consume your soul thing?”

“I believe that to be the case,” Eclairé nodded seriously, the colour of her cheeks already returning.

“But Visteen said that that is not the case,” Melodin frowned. “She said, no one knows the truth of them.”

“That’s true,” Eclairé nodded, “There is very little information recorded on the rings.”

“So,” Melodin looked to the wooden beams of the ceiling thoughtfully, “There is little known about them, but all evidence would suggest I’m going to die.”

“Basically, yes.”

“No need to be so cavalier about it,” he stopped eating.

“That is why Reith and I have been searching for all the rings,” Eclairé said, bringing his attention back to her, “With all the rings together they can all be destroyed.”

“But I thought you said there is little information on them.”

“There is,” she nodded, “The documentation we found is part of the limited knowledge, and it explains how the rings were made and how they can be destroyed.”

“Made by the first king of Midenland, right?”

A sparkle came to the elf’s eyes as she leaned forwards, “No, they were made by the Fae.”

“What?”

“They were made as part of an alliance between King Olcost and the leaders of the Fae,” Eclairé explained in a hushed tone. “But seeing the power of the rings before him Olcost betrayed the agreement and took the rings for himself. Curiously the leader of the Fae did little in response to the deception, but on his death bed the king regretted his actions which thus led to him scattering the rings to the far corners of the lands.”

“The Fae are like elves right?” Melodin asked curiously.

“Not really,” she shook her head, “We elves are natives to this land where the Fae live beyond the veil, living in a mirrored reality to this one. There is, however, a gateway to the realm of the Fae on the borders of Reparian and Zarkadia, but it has been shut for many years.”

“So the Fae made these,” Melodin stated, looking to his hand the ring that shimmer in the light. “How?”

“Well, that’s where the speculations are correct,” Eclair explained, “They capture the Spirits of the elements and imprisoned them in stone cut from a meteor.”

“Then how was that to do with an alliance agreement between them and King Olcost?” Melodin scratched his head in confusion.

“Olcost had the meteor and the Fae needed it to seal the Spirits,” Eclair explained simply.

“The exchange was that Olcost would receive three of the rings and the Fae would keep the other four.”

“But why did the Fae want to imprison the Spirits anyway?”

“That, I don’t really know,” the elf shrugged, “But the world of the Fae is very different to this one and I know very little of it, although I believe that in their lands the spirits of the elements have physical manifestations and they want to control them instead of being subjected to their whim.”

“That sounds likely,” Melodin nodded slowly, placing his knife and fork on his clean plate.

Resting back in his chair he grabbed his glass of water and took a long swallow.

“You know,” he said thoughtfully, “That meal was pretty good.”

“Give that joke a rest, Melodin,” Eclair sighed, shaking her head at him.

He snickered to himself, taking another gulp of water before refilling his glass. The waiter then arrived at the table and collected the plates.

“How were your meals?” he asked politely.

“It was good,” replied Melodin without thinking, causing Eclairé to roll her eyes.

“Good,” laughed the waiter and headed back to the kitchen with the dirty plates.

“See, he thought it was funny,” Melodin turned back to the elf.

“I wonder how many times he’s laughed at a stupid joke like that?” she asked back, her expression blank.

“Do you think he was faking it?” Melodin asked in surprise, drawing a nod from the elf.

Grumbling under his breath he took another drink from his glass, movement from the door catching his attention as a group of soldiers walked in to the tavern.

“Everyone listen up,” yelled a tall man with broad shoulders and a square jaw line.

The tavern slowly hushed as all eyes turned towards the soldier and his comrades.

“I’m sure you’ve all heard the news by now,” the tall soldier began.

“No,” Melodin said quietly.

“We’re here to recruit men and woman to join the assault against the rebels who continue to plague the streets of Delaforr,” continued the soldier, causing Melodin to look to Eclairé in shock. “The Emperor has made it clear that we are to finally eradicate the insurgence in the city and restore the city to its former glory. The battalions have already started to move out, so, will you be joining them? Will you sign up for adventure and glory? All who do will be paid a weekly rate twice the amount of those earning minimum wage in their current jobs. So, what say you?”

Several cheers rose up in the crowd, grabbing the soldier’s attention.

“We’ll be here all night signing up recruits,” the man said sternly, and with a nod to his companions he headed to an empty table off to the side of the main room.

Many young men and woman were quick to follow the soldiers to the table, eager to sign on for the adventure and Emperor’s coin.

“They’re attacking Delaforr again?” Melodin looked to Eclairé with worry.

“To get rid of the rebels,” she nodded seriously, “Although, the timing is curious.”



“Nim will be heading to Delaforr,” he said, leaning over the table, “We have to warn her somehow.”

“How?” Eclairé asked in reply, seeming to share his concern.

“Teleport us.”

“That won’t work,” the elf shook her head, “If Reparian is already marching for the city, they would have placed magical restrictions that prevent teleportation around the region. The only way in will be on foot, or air ship, and no commercial air ships will be going to Lakelinds now.”

“But we could join up,” Melodin said, a sly grin coming to his face as he looked towards the soldier signing on recruits.

“Sign up to the Reparian army?” Eclairé exclaimed in surprise.

“Yeah, good idea,” Melodin turned back to her with a grin, “You always come up with good plans, Eclairé.”

Finishing his drink Melodin jumped to his feet.

“Wait,” Eclairé hissed, jumping up and grabbing him by the arm, “Have you even thought this through?”

“Of course,” he smiled back, “I have to help Nim, and this is the fastest way to do so. Unless you can think of something?”

She shrugged, releasing her hold on his arm, “We could teleport to Arch Eden and walk from there.”

“Too long. You know this is the simplest way into Delaforr.”

Eclairé let out a deep breath and clenched her jaw as she nodded.

“It’ll be fine,” Melodin said with a smile as he lead the way through the tables to the back of the line where many people waited to enlist.

“Famous last words,” he heard Eclairé mutter to herself behind him, but that only made his smile widen.

\* \* \*

White fluffy clouds drifted by her window, playing with the light of the sun as its rays twisted around the tall plums. The shadows cast across the clouds were dark and ominous, a deep purple-blue, which filled her with trepidation as she gaze out from the hull of the air ship The Banshee.

The cream coloured canvass of the ships wing flapped gently in the wind, pulling against the wooden frame that held them in place and provided stability to the craft.

“If only I had wings like that,” she said softly and sighed, “Perhaps then I might be able to guide my life in the direction I want. I might be able to fly on my own.”

Tearing her eyes away from the beautiful views across the plains of clouds she looked to Dog who lied on the bench by her feet. Feelings of concern filled Nim as she looked at Dog.

“Not sleeping are you Dog?” Nim asked quietly, drawing a groan from the canine. “You should be eating more too, you know. There’s no need to worry, we’ll find Melodin soon.”

Dog did not look at her, or utter a response as she continued to stare vacantly across the room to the wall opposite.

Nim sighed again and looked back out the window, her thoughts turning to the task ahead of her.

“I wonder what Delaforr looks like,” she mumbled as she absently played with the ring that dangled at the end of the chain around her neck. “The only thing I remember about it is the fire and smoke as it burned when Reparian invaded.”

She glanced to Dog again, before looking to the ring she was playing with. The topaz that sat upon the silver band sparkled in the light from the window with a faint glow lingering in the depths of the gemstone. She frowned slightly, unlike before the energy within the Spirit Ring seemed calm and content, as if it were happy it was no longer sitting within the catacombs of Arch Eden.

“I would have thought the Spirit of the earth would have liked being in the ground,” she muttered to herself.

The glow within the ring flared up, causing her to gasp slightly in surprise.

"It can't hear me right?" she looked to Dog for answers, but her companion did not respond.

"Right?"

She gasped again as she looked back to the ring for the energy held inside it had grown and was swirling quickly within the topaz. A curious thing indeed, but despite the tales she had heard about the Spirit Rings consuming their wielders, the energy made her feel comfortable, almost at peace.

A deep frown came to her face and she tucked the ring into her top before distracting her thoughts by looking to see what the others were doing. Just across from her Tett and Tama were sitting at a small table at the side of the main room of the air ship chatting together.

"You really have been around for a bloody long time," Tett was saying with a shake of his head, "Almost as long as me."

"I suppose you could say it is a perk of not being able to die," Tama shrugged, as he leaned back in his chair, his demeanour very different to when he ever spoke with Nim.

"Or a bloody curse," scoffed the dwarf, scratching his white beard, "I damn well don't want to live forever."

"I've gotten used to the thought," replied the bald man, and took a drink from the flask in his hand. "By the way, what's your talent, Tett?"

"Bloody hell," the dwarf exclaimed, "Don't you know it's damn rude to ask someone that?"

"Sorry," Tama looked down at the table, "I didn't think."

The dwarf sudden let out a deep laugh and smacked the table with a heavy hand.

"Don't be silly boy," chuckled Tett, "You may be an idiot, but I ain't no bloody princess, getting all offended. I'm a conjurer."

"What?" Nim asked aloud, drawing the gaze of both the men.

As they looked to her she suddenly felt her cheeks go warm, realising she had said that out loud.

Tett smiled wide at her, making her feel a little better, "Come over here girl, I'll show you."

Curiously she jumped up and skipped over to the table, leaving Dog to mope on the bench by herself.

As she sat at the table Tama sat upright in his chair, straitening his back and shoulders, as if at attention. For some reason the action annoyed her greatly.

"A conjurer talent is very rare," Tett said, drawing her attention to him, "And bloody useless, if you ask me. Simply put, I can create things out of nothing."

"Like what?" she asked curiously.

"Anything," the dwarf shrugged.

"But that sounds very useful," a look of confusion came to her face.

"The problem is I got no bloody imagination," huffed Tett, "So whenever I think of conjuring something, I think about all the damn parts that are needed to create it and nothing bloody well happens."

Nim rested back in her chair, still not really understanding what the dwarf was saying.

"Take this air ship for example," Tett continued, "You think it's simple to conjure one from your imagination, yeah? Well its bloody not. Think of all the moving parts in this damn thing; the engine, the sails, the rudder. Imagine how they all work together. It's bloody impossible to think of all that and create it."

"So what can you conjure?" Tama asked with an amused look on his face.

"How about a club to crack your shiny bald head?" Tett roared angrily.

"Bald?" Tama yelled back, a mask of anger also coming to his face.

Nim laughed aloud as the two glared at each other.

The air ship sudden shuddered, grabbing their attention and Nim stood up slowly, she curiously looked about and then to Tett and Tama.

"Engines stopped," Tett remarked.

The sound of hurried footsteps down the stairs that lead to the cockpit, caught their attention as Reith rushed into the room.

“We’ve got a problem,” Reith explained seriously, “Imperials have set up a blockade around the air space of Delforr.”

“What?” Nim wondered aloud, “Why would they do that?”

“Two reasons,” Reith explained quickly as he rushed over to the bench by the window. “They either know you’re coming this way, or they have decided to finally deal with the insurgence in the city.”

“Rebellion,” Tama was quick to clarify.

“Whatever,” Reith dismissed the response as he pushed Dog from the bench and with a little bit of fiddling around opened the top of it. “Tama, get in here and stay quiet.”

“What?” exclaimed the Kingsguard.

“The imperials will be looking for you and Nim,” replied the Sky Pirate, “So, unless you wish to be caught I suggest you hide. I for one would prefer not to be executed as a rebel.”

“Fine,” Tama grumbled, walking over to the hiding-hole and climbing in. “What about the Princess?”

Without replying Reith closed the lid of the bench and locked it before moving away and motioning for Nim to quickly follow him.

“This one is a bit larger,” Reith said pulling aside a large recliner and pulling up a large portion of the floor boards.

“Why do you have these?” Nim asked curiously as she climbed down.

“I do a bit of smuggling now and then,” Reith replied with a shrug and moved to close the hatch, but not before Dog jumped in next to her. “Stay silent.”

Before she could say anything else the Sky Pirate dropped the boards back in place, stealing the light and causing the silence to crash down around her. The loud sound of the

recliner being dragged back in place scratched noisily above her head as she sat down and hugged Dog close.

“Here now, what about me?” she heard Tett grumble.

“Conjure something,” Reith replied simply, causing the dwarf to sprout a number of curses in reply.

Taking a deep breath she tried to calm her racing heart, but a wave of tension suddenly raced through her as a loud sound reverberated around her and the air ship lurched to the side.

“Imperials are boarding,” she whispered in fear, looking towards Dog.

It was too dark to see much, but she could just make out the vivid green eyes of Dog shimmering through the veil of shadow and that gave Nim a feeling of comfort. Hugging her furry companion close again Nim closed her eyes and waited for the Imperial inspection to be over, and praying that her and Tama would not be discovered as the sounds of heavy boots sounded across the floor boards above her.

## Chapter Twenty-eight

The wind whipped across the top deck of the gigantic air ship, pushing against his chest and whipping his blonde hair about. Pillars of white clouds towered over head, sending shadows across the deck and making a chill run up his back.

Pausing from his work he gazed at the huge plumes, catching the sight of lightning slither through the white pillars in the distance.

“No slacking off, Melodin,” called another young man not far from him, “This deck isn’t going to scrub itself.”

“Yeah yeah,” he grumbled in reply, uncomfortably adjusting his military outfit before pushing the hard bristled broom across the boards.

“Don’t worry about Derth too much,” a young woman to the other side of him said quietly. “If you’re tired, have a rest, I’ll cover for you.”

She smiled wide at him, her large brown eyes sparkling.

“Thanks Zell,” he stammered a reply.

“Of course,” Zell beamed back, “Us lot with no talents need to stick together.”

“Still didn’t think they’d have the whole squad with no talents scrubbing the deck,” Melodin grumbled, turning his attention back to the wet planks. “Do they think we’re useless or something?”

“Well, we’re not as useful as the rest,” Zell replied simply, causing him to look at the girl curiously. “It’s our job to help and support the rest of the army, to the best of our abilities.”

“But they treat us like dirt,” Melodin replied, roughly dropping the broom back in the bucket.

“I mean, why the hell am I scrubbing the stupid decks? They don’t need it. They’re clean. It’s like they get us to do it, just to keep us occupied. But they hardly give us time to rest anyway. I don’t need to be kept occupied. What I want is to sit down and relax for a few minutes.”

“Keep your voice down Melodin,” snapped Derth, “You’re not here to question, you’re here to work. Now shut up and do it.”

“At least it’s better than doing the washing like your friend, Eclairé,” Zell remarked with a light laugh. “I never thought an elf would have no talent.”

“I guess she’s just unlucky,” Melodin replied hesitantly.

“And pretty,” Zell exclaimed, “So pretty. I love her hair, it’s such a lovely shade of blue.”

“Not to mention a great figure,” laughed an older man a bit further down, who was scrapping gunk off the railings.

“So crude,” Zell huffed, “There’s more to women than a nice body, Orish. You’re such a dirty old man.”

“Old?” Orish shouted back. “How dare you? when I was a youngster like you I had respect for my grandpa, never would I be so rude.”

“You’re not my grandpa,” Zell retorted and stuck her tongue out at the man.

“Enough chatter you lot,” a stern man commanded them, his back overly straight and his nose high in the air.

“Sorry Captain,” Derth was quick to reply, “We’ll stop talking and get back to work right away. Sorry.”

“See that you do,” the Captain replied, his voice very controlled. “This is the Imperial Army, not a café filled with idle gossip.”

With that the tall man turned to leave.

“Excuse me,” Melodin called out, making Derth gasp in horror. “Captain, do you know when we’ll arrive in Delaforr?”

The tall man stopped and turned about slowly, his expression serious.

“Shut it, Melodin,” Derth hissed angrily, “Don’t you know your place? Sorry Captain, I’ll-”

“Quiet,” the tall man interrupted Derth without looking at the young man, his eyes studying Melodin closely. “What’s your name boy?”



“Melodin,” he replied, holding back the urge to snap at the Captain. “And I’d thank you not to call me boy, Captain.”

A slight smirk came to the man’s face, seeming so out of place.

“Eager to see battle are you Melodin?” asked the Captain, his hard eyes watching him closely.

“Of course,” Melodin was quick to say.

“That’s good,” nodded the Captain. “We shall be joining up with the first infantry tomorrow morning in the eastern outskirts of Delaforr.”

“Finally,” Melodin exclaimed without thinking, causing Derth to continue to grumble under his breath.

“Your squad will not be seeing any combat though,” replied the Captain simply.

“What?” Melodin’s mouth fell open.

“Those with no abilities are to work in support of the army,” stated the tall man, “If we were to be sending you into battle we would be signing your death sentence.”

“But-”

“This is not up for debate,” the Captain cut in, “This is how it will be. Now return to your duties.”

With that the Captain turned about abruptly and headed across the deck.

“Know your place Melodin,” Derth snapped at him, “Now get back to work.”

He looked to Zell, but she turned away, an odd expression on her face as she went back to work. With a sigh Melodin pulled his broom from the bucket and sloshed it onto the planks, the wind catching the water droplets and sending them spraying over the railings.

It was a long a tiring day of scrubbing the decks, but eventually the dinner bell sounded making him sigh in relief. Slapping his grumbling belly Melodin was quick to put the tools away and hurry to the mess hall to line up for the meal.

“Is that all?” Melodin exclaimed after the cook placed a small pile of beans and peas on his tray.

“On rations boy,” shrugged the cook.

“Don’t call me-” Melodin started but was interrupted as someone shoved him in the back.

“Move it talentless,” growled scarred veteran warrior, “Others want their food.”

Narrowing his eyes at the man he grumbled under his breath, thinking of half a dozen ways he could show that brutish man some manners.

“Rip him apart.”

Melodin turned around to look at the person who spoke, but there was no one there and with a frown he continued along the line to collect a drink and find a seat.

“Must be hearing things,” he mumbled to himself, and with a shrug he scanned the large food hall.

Catching the glimpse of blue hair he slipped through the crowds and joined Eclairé at a bench at the back of the hall.

As he sat down the elf regarded him tiredly as she ate her small meal.

“Who’s brilliant idea was this again?” she asked as he began to stuff his mouth.

“It’ll work out,” he said between mouthfuls. “Just like removing that diamond worked out.”

Eclairé sighed and looked away, absently touching her chest where the controlling gem of Solordorr’s used to be embedded.

“How did that work anyway?” he asked curiously.

“Now you wonder,” Eclairé smirked and shook her head, “I honestly don’t know.”

“What?”

The elf met his eyes with her gaze, “By rights the shattering of the diamond should have killed me, and you. But here we still are, and I have no clue as to why or how.”

“Well,” he shrugged as he scrapped the last bits of food off his tray, “No use worrying about it I guess. It worked and we’re still alive, that’s all that matters.”

Eclaire regarded him closely, her eyes narrowing slightly, “Is that your plan for getting out of this predicament? See what happens and hope for the best? Our talentless squad will not be going into Delaforr, you know.”

“Yeah I found that out this morning whilst scrubbing the deck,” Melodin nodded, “Can you believe we had to scrub the damn planks? Why did we even need to do that? It was pointless.”

“Stay on topic please,” Eclaire rubbed her brow and sighed.

“I know,” he said suddenly and leaned forwards across the bench, dropping his tone, “Why don’t you tell them you’re a sorceress and I’m your assistant? That’ll get us out of this squad.”

“Don’t be silly,” Eclaire shook her head, “If I do that then they will know who I really am, and Visteen will soon come back into the picture.”

“Yeah, we don’t want that,” Melodin nodded thoughtfully, “We just got away from her too.”

Silence filled the space between them and Melodin pondered the situation, his eyes staring at the empty tray on the bench top in front of him. The noise of the crowd seemed to encase him in a dome, the voices becoming nothing but an incomprehensible babble. His stomach grumbled hungrily, turning his thoughts back to food, and his eyes drifted to Eclaire’s plate which still had a few mouthfuls left on it.

“Hey Eclaire,” Melodin spoke up, pulling the elf from her thoughts, “Are you going to finish that?”

With a shake of her head she pushed her tray over to him and stood up.

“I’m going to sleep,” she said despondently.

“Don’t fret so much, Eclaire,” Melodin said as he eagerly grabbed the tray, “It’ll work itself out. Trust me.”

The elf did not say anything as she turned away and headed from the mess hall into the hundreds of corridors that twisted and turned through the belly of the air ship. As he scrapped Eclair's tray clean he watched the elf leave, a slight crease coming to his brow.

He was just thinking of going to sleep as well when someone else sat down opposite him.

"Why do you want to fight?" Zell asked as she sat down, a worried look on her face.

"What?" he asked back.

"You said you were eager to fight," Zell continued in the same tone, "Why do you want to fight on the front lines?"

"Well ..."

"Don't be silly," she cut him off, "You'll die if you do. You know that, right?"

He shrugged and began to reply, but again Zell interrupted him.

"Promise you won't try and fight," Zell implored adamantly, "Promise me, Melodin."

He looked at the young woman in confusion and scratched the back of his head.

"I don't like fighting," he replied slowly, "But I don't like sitting about doing nothing even more."

"We're here to support the army not to go into battle with it," Zell replied seriously, "You knew that when you signed up. Tell me you don't want to go and fight on the front lines."

"Of course I don't want to do that," Melodin replied quickly, still looking at the young woman in confusion.

A wide smile came across Zell's face, "That's a relief to hear. I'll sleep easier knowing you won't race off to the front lines the moment we land."

He looked away from Zell and down to the trays as he absently stacked them neatly, placing the cutlery on top in a pile.

"Melodin," Orish said cheerfully as he sat down next to him, "I hear congratulations are in order."

“What?” he looked to the older man curiously.

“I hear you’ve been recommended to lead the talentless squad,” Orish explained, “Hasn’t anyone told you?”

He shook his head in surprise.

“Yeah,” said Orish, “Apparently the Captain from this morning was the one who made the recommendation. Must’ve been impressed with your eagerness to fight attitude.”

“But Melodin is not going to fight,” Zell was quick to say, “Isn’t that right Melodin?”

Again he started to reply, but was cut off as Derth sat down next to Zell.

“This is a war, Zell,” the young man replied, seeming more unhappy than usual. “If it doesn’t go well, we’ll all have to fight.”

“Don’t say that,” the young woman exclaimed, a look of worry coming to her face. “We’re here to support, not to fight. I can’t fight anyway.”

“Well I’m pretty handy with a sword and shield if I have to,” Derth remarked proudly, shooting a glare at Melodin, “I should have been the one to lead our squad, not some useless idiot.”

“That’s not nice Derth,” Zell snapped, “Why are you so mean? You were never this mean when we were growing up.”

“Times change Zell,” Derth was quick to reply, “We’re not kids anymore, and it’s time to get serious, no more playing at skipping rocks.”

Zell pouted, “I know you’re right. I know its serious. But that doesn’t mean that you have to be so rude.”

Derth grumbled under his breath and looked away across the hall, leaving the mood to become awkward between them.

“Well,” Melodin said hesitantly as he stood up, “I think I’m going to get some sleep.”

“Hey Melodin,” Orish said suddenly, “Tell me truthfully: did you and Eclairé bunk up together before you joined up?”

“What?” he stammered in reply. “No, she’s got a partner.”

“That’s a shame,” the man sighed, “It’s a pity the men and women have separate quarters, I’d love to cuddle up next to her on these cool nights.”

“You’re the reason the quarters are separate,” Zell snapped.

Awkwardly Melodin slipped from the table, leaving the group to continue to talk amongst themselves as he dropped the food trays off at the kitchens and headed from the hall.

As he wandered the dark corridors back to his room he tried to think of a way to leave the army once they arrived at Delaforr, but his mind kept on drifting to thoughts of sleeping in the same bed as Eclair, her warm naked body against his.

“That’ll never happen,” he mumbled to himself, shaking the thoughts from his mind.

Despite that the fantasies continued to pursue him as he headed off to bed and quickly fell asleep despite the uncomfortable bedding.

A loud a piercing whistle shattered his dreams and forced him to wake up early the next morning.

“Get up you lazy bastards,” shouted the officer of the watch, “You bunch have weapons and armour to clean. Come on get to it.”

Forcing himself out of his bed he pulled on his army fatigues as he yawned incessantly.

“Get in line you dogs,” shouted the officer, “You there, stand up straight. You call yourselves soldiers. Now march.”

Still half asleep he followed the man in front of him from the rooms and at a jog they headed along the corridors with the officer at the front.

“Keep up you wretches,” shouted the officer.

“I swear he goes the long route every morning,” grumbled Orish who was jogging alongside him.

Without realising it he somehow mumbled a response, fighting back yawns as he tried to keep pace. By the time they stopped at the entrance to the mess hall he was finally awake, and gasping for breath.

“You sacks of useless refuse,” the officer shouted at them, “You lot are nothing but scum with no special abilities, you shouldn’t even be called soldiers. If you volunteers don’t do a good job helping the real soldiers I’ll see to it personally that you’re tried for desertion.”

“Great way to treat people who joined willingly to help,” Melodin mumbled, but his words caught the officer’s attention.

“What did you say cur?” the man came right up to Melodin’s face, spittle flying with each word. “Speak up?”

“It’s just,” he replied against his better judgement. “We all volunteered, as you said, we wanted to help the army. And yet you treat us like scum. I mean, that’s not exactly a great way to encourage loyalty in the ranks.”

“What’s your name Private?” roared the officer.

“Melodin.”

“So you’re Melodin,” the man huffed, “Gerbath is a fool to have you promoted.”

“What?”

“That’s right,” the officer replied, his voice still quite louder than Melodin thought was a good volume for being inside. “You’re a Corporal now. So I suggest you start showing your superiors some respect else get demoted, or worse.”

“Corporel?” Melodin replied in surprise.

“You’re now the leader of this squad of useless ingrates,” the officer continued to shout, “You better get the most out of them. Dismissed.”

With that the aggressive man turned about and stormed off along the corridors leaving the group to casually filter into the mess hall.

“Hey Orish,” Melodin said catching up to the older man, “What’s a Corporal?”

Orish laughed aloud at the question and slapped him on the back in reply, but offered no explanation other than that. Still confused Melodin followed the rest of the squad into the hall and got some food before they headed off to their individual duties for the day.

“I suppose a Corporal is better than a Private,” he mumbled to himself as he polished the metal of a simple chest plate.

Not that it mattered though, it was not like he was intending to stay long in this army. The first chance he got he had decided that he would grab Eclair and sneak into Delaforr, deserting the army and finding their own way to Nim.

Before lunch came around a loud horn rang through the ship and the word quickly came around that they were to assemble in their squads.

Dropping his work Melodin raced through the ship and up the stairs onto the deck. The spray of water met him in the face as he filtered through the hundreds of other scrambling about the place and headed to the side where the rest of the talentless had started to line up.

As he fell into place his eyes drifted to the thick clouds around them as the air ship descended through the sky and burst out from underneath the cover. The dim light was pushed aside and his eyes widened as he saw the city of Delaforr below, fires raging through the buildings, throwing dark smoke into the sky to join the light fall of the rain.

“It s just like before,” he whispered in horror, the light of the fires shining in his eyes and a cold sweat forming on his forehead.



## Chapter Twenty-nine

“I wonder what’s going on Dog?” Nim whispered quietly as she sat nervously in the smuggling hole, “The soldiers have left I think. And we are moving again.”

Dog whined softly in reply, causing her to look down into the bright green eyes of Dog.

“It’s alright,” she said, her voice shaking slightly, “We’ll be alright. Reith knows what he is doing.”

A slight frown came to her face as she looked up to the trap door and the streams of light peeking through the floor boards. The sound of heavy footsteps caught her attention as they stopped above her and caused the light to shift as the heavy couch was slid aside. Nim flinched as something banged right above her head.

“Bloody thing,” the voice of Tett grumbled loudly, “Bastards stuck. Oi Tama, get out of there and give me a hand.”

There came some more banging further away and the clutter of wood.

“Finally,” Tama’s voice groaned, “My legs were starting to cramp.”

“Quit you bloody whining and give me a hand already,” Tett called back.

After some more loud banging right above her head the trap door finally squeaked free, letting the light cascade down into the dark hold and making her scrunch up her eyes.

“Princess,” Tama said dutifully, offering her his hand.

Ignoring the help she climbed out and dusted herself off as Dog nimbly jumped from the deep hold and shook herself.

Suddenly the airship lurched to the side, causing her to lose her balance and stumble backwards, her foot slipping over the edge of the smugglers hole. She cried out in fear of tumbling back into the hole, but the strong hand of Tama’s stopped her from falling and helped her catch her balance.

“Are you alright Princess?” Tama asked with concern.

Gently pulling out of the bald man’s hold she nodded briefly.

“What the bloody hell?” Tett shouted angrily as he hopped up from the ground and raced towards the cockpit.

Quickly dropping the trapdoor back into place she and Tama were quick to follow the dwarf up the stairs. Just as she reached the stairs the whole ship jumped again, causing her to stumble and whack her shin on the stair. Grimacing away the pain she staggered up the short staircase and into the large cockpit.

“What’s going on?” she asked with concern, stopping behind Reith’s seat as he flew the air ship.

“The insurgents are attacking us and our Reparian escort,” he explained rather calmly.

“They have air power?” Nim asked with surprise.

“A little,” Tama replied, “But if they were to face the Imperials directly they would stand little chance.”

Again the ship lurched to the side as Reith twisted away from a blast that ripped past the ship’s wing.

“But why are they attacking?” Nim wondered aloud, “We’re not a Reparian ship.”

“They don’t bloody care,” Tett snorted as Nim watched several Imperial fighter ships shoot by the window. “We’re with the Imperials and enough for them idiots.”

“Then let’s get out of here,” Tama said seriously, “We don’t want to go where Reparian is escorting us anyway.”

Another blast rocked the ship as a Reparian air craft exploded in a ball of fire right next to them.

“Come on, let’s go,” Nim cried as she desperately held onto the seat to stop from falling.

“Patience,” Reith replied, still far too calm for her liking.

“What are you waiting for?” Tama exclaimed. “We’ll be killed if we linger here.”

“Why’re you scared?” Tett asked curiously, “Not like you can die.”

“It still hurts,” the bald man snapped back. “Now go already.”

“Just wait a little while longer,” replied the sky pirate.

“For what?” Tama cried.

“For that right there,” Reith replied simply, pointing out through the large windscreen.

Still holding onto the back of Reith’s seat firmly Nim squinted out the window to the smoky skies as a squadron of battle ready air ships flew out from the clouds, charging for the rebel crafts and forcing them to turn tail and flee the battlefield.

“Hold on,” Reith said flatly.

Before she could respond the sky pirate flicked a few switches on his control panel and the air ship suddenly dropped. She felt herself become air born as they drove towards the ground, twisting and turning out of control. She felt sick, as if her stomach had been left back up in the air with the rest of the air ships, and she felt faint.

Through her delirium she could see the ground shoot closer, and her eyes widened in horror. But just before they crashed into the earth Reith easily pulled his ship out of the dive and levelled it out, flying at top speed barely meters above the ground.

As Nim gathered her feet again she took a deep breath and looked to Tama and Dog. The bald man was lying on the ground with his eyes closed, groaning slightly as he held his stomach, where Dog on the other hand seemed perfectly fine and composed.

“Bloody nice flying lad,” Tett laughed, slapping Reith on the shoulder as he sat in the only other seat in the cockpit. “Slipping the stupid Imperials in the confusion of the fight. Bloody well done. And look here, there’s the city walls just up ahead.”

Still feeling nauseous Nim looked to the horizon as the tall stone walls of Delaforr drew closer. Her sickness left her immediately as she saw the black smoke clouds drift up from behind the walls, and the angry glow of fire dance across the top of the wall.

As they flew closer, Reith slowed the craft down and arched up into the air to offer them all a wide view of the city streets.

“Bastards are fighting hard,” Tett remarked seriously.

Nim’s mouth fell open as she looked down at the hundreds of fires that burned in the streets and the ruins of buildings that had crumbled to the ground.

A flash of light stole her sight for a few seconds as something scorched across the front of the ship.

“Bloody hell,” Tett cried in surprise. “That was damn close.”

“A warning shot,” Reith replied, his tone still causal. “From the insurgents not doubt.”

As Nim’s sight returned to her she saw two rebel air crafts pull up alongside the ship, their pilots motioning for them to follow.

“Here we go,” Reith said quietly, adjusting the course of the air ship to follow the rebel’s instructions.

Down towards the city he flew the air ship, through the clouds of smoke and towards the large air ship docks near the western wall. The roof opened up as they descended allowing Reith to gently land his air ship in a large hanger where many uneasy looking soldiers waited for them.

“Time for you to shine, Kingsguard,” Reith remarked as he switched off the engines and hopped up from his seat.

With a groan Tama pulled himself to his feet, his face looking rather pale.

“I hate flying,” the bald man muttered as he followed Reith from the cockpit and back through the ship.

Taking a deep breath Nim fell in behind Tett with Dog alongside her and headed towards the exit. Chewing on her bottom lip she cautiously looked out the door before moving down the steps to stand beside Reith and Tama.

Encircling them the rugged faces of rebel soldiers watched them with nervous expressions, their hands clutching their weapons tightly, each looking to the person beside them to initiate the interaction.

“Tama?” someone called out from the back, “Tama, is that you?”

“Tama the Immortal.” Several soldiers whispered in awe.

“It is you,” a large man laughed aloud as he pushed through the line of soldiers, his face marked with scars and half covered by a thick beard. “Bloody hell. Never thought I’d see your bald head again.”

“Nalch,” Tama smiled wide and moved to greet the huge, muscled, man, “It’s good to see you, but if you call me bald again I’ll give you a good punching.”

Nalch laughed all the louder and Nim could see the rebel soldier’s relax, their hands leaving their weapons, but still their eyes watched her and the others suspiciously.

“Where’s Artharis?” Tama asked curiously.

“On the front, of course,” Nalch replied, “Leaves me to organise everything back here. But who are your friends?”

The large man turned his crystal blue eyes towards her, a spark of recognition flicking within them.

“Reith, Tett, and Princess Nimrodell,” Tama replied simply, causing Dog to growl slightly and the gathered soldiers to burst into hushed whispers.

Awkwardly Nim glanced about at the stunned faces and back to Nalch proud face.

“Little Nimrodell,” the large man smiled, “Finally you return to your homeland.”

Slowly the man walked over to her, his huge frame towering over the top of her.

“Don’t remember me, do you?” he smiled, making her feel awkward as she shook her head.

“I’m Nalch, Captain of the city guard.”

All of a sudden the man dropped to one knee before her, his head bowed. Following suit the rest of the rebel’s dropped to their knees as well, making her feel all the more uncomfortable.

“Welcome home,” Nalch said seriously before he stood up, “With you leading us victory is certain. Now come, you must be tired, let me show you to your quarters. I’ll send word to Artharis as well, he will be eager to see you again. Shall we?”

Nalch motioned for her to follow him and the crowd of soldiers parted before them.

“Is it really her?” Nim heard several rebel soldiers whisper as she followed Nalch.

“I can’t believe it.”

“We’re sure to win now.”

“Princess,” one woman suddenly stepped forwards and took her by the hand as she fell to her knees, tears streaming from her eyes. “Never did I think I would live to see you return. My sword is yours. Just say the word and I will charge head first into the enemy lines.”

Nim did not know what to say, awkwardly looking to Reith and Tama.

“On your feet soldier,” Nalch said warmly, “There will be no pointless waste of lives.”

Wiping her tears away the rebel soldier stood up, smiling wide at Nim as she stepped back. Nim strained a smile in response before quickly moving on, following Nalch from the hanger and through the halls.

“The airship docks have been our main base of attack,” Nalch said as they walked, “From here we control the farmlands outside the western gate, the Yarra Flats to the south, the guard barracks, and Southside. The damn imperial scum have the rest of the city in their grasp.”

“Where’s the fighting taking place?” Tama asked seriously.

“Most of it along Main Street and around the clock tower,” Nalch replied, “There’s a bunch of smaller skirmishes to the north around Market Street, Gold Hills, and in the south towards Riverside. Our main objective at the moment is to take the Court House in Riverside and the clock tower. Does this sound adequate Princess?”

Nalch looked over her shoulder to her, catching her by surprise as she stammered and nodded.

“Sure,” she managed to say before looking away and biting on her bottom lip.

She could feel Nalch’s eyes linger on her, making her feel all the more uncomfortable and out of place.

“This way,” the huge guard captain said, leading the way up a flight of stairs that moved up through the eastern wall of the airship docks and into the former control tower. “We’ve been using this place as a strategy room. As you can see, it gives great views of the city.”

As they moved into the room her eyes were drawn to the large windows that faced east, looking across the city to the castle in the distance.

“That door leads into some modest rooms that you can all share,” Nalch continued, “I do apologise Princess, for we do not have the space for separate rooms.”

“That’s fine,” she stammered, “Thank you Captain.”

“Easy there,” the large man laughed, “Save the formalities for when you’re sitting on your throne. Tama, with me, we’ll go find Artharis together and you can fill me in on what’s been happening and why you were delayed.”

With that the guard captain and the Kingsguard departed the room leaving her standing there not knowing what to do.

“Bloody mess this is,” Tett remarked as he and Reith moved over to the large windows.

“They got no chance with that idiot Nalch leading the front. No use going after the Court House if they don’t got the bloody clock tower.”

“I’m surprised you know much about Delaforr, let alone its building layout,” Reith replied.

“I ain’t no fool,” Tett snapped, “Of course I know the city layout. What do you take me for?”

Reith laughed slightly as Nim turned away from the pair and walked through the door into the modest rooms, which were nothing other than half a dozen bunk beds a bathroom and small kitchen space. Quietly she moved over to the small round window that also looked east across the city and sat down in the window chair.

Dog joined her, whining slightly as she made herself comfortable, resting her head on the windowsill as her green eyes scanned the ruined city. In the distance Nim could hear explosions and see small bursts of fire erupt up through the buildings in the distance.

“I feel so lost,” Nim mumbled, drawing Dog’s gaze to her, “All my life I’ve been preparing to return here, and now that I’m here, in my home, it feels so foreign to me. What do I do Dog?”

She turned from the view and looked to Dog, tears starting to well in her eyes. But her furry companion could not offer any answers and just regarded her sadly with her big green eyes.

Despondently Nin looked back out the window to the plumes of smoke that drifted on the slight wind and glowed in the late afternoon light. In the distance, atop a hill, the white stone of the castle sparkled majestically, untouched by the fighting and shining like the grand prize to be won. But looking at it now Nim did not want to win it, a feeling that confused her greatly.

\* \* \*

The light of the afternoon sun sparkled off the river at the base of the hill, seeming as golden diamonds floating on the current as it flowed from the city walls to the north, following it towards the south west before heading off further southwards.

The sunlight, too, shone across his face, warming his skin as he stared to the north and the walls of Delaforr in the distance. Beyond the sparkling river the land was flat, filled with small farms and outlying villages, and further north stood the tall walls of the city, their once white stone now marked with burns. Smoke clouds filled the skies above the walls, snuffing out the light of the sun and throwing dark shadows across the streets.

Footsteps caught his attention, approaching from behind, coming up the path that led down to the Imperial encampment behind him. He did not need to turn about to know it was Visteen.

“A beautiful sight,” the sorceress remarked as she stopped alongside him.

As usual the woman wore as little as possible, her skin glowing in the sunlight as she gazed towards Delaforr.



“Don’t you think so Solordorr?” Visteen looked to him.

He shrugged in reply.

“The proof of life and death right in front of your eyes and yet you are unmoved,” remarked Visteen. “What does move you, I wonder?”

“It’s proof of greed, nothing more,” he replied simply.

“That too,” she agreed.

A stale wind drifted across the hill, carrying with it the smell of smoke and rotting bodies. The shadows grew longer now, and the night animals began their evenings, sending out shrill cries across the river and chirping in the grass beside his feet.

“With the army now gathered the main assault will begin tomorrow,” Visteen said, her tone seeming bored, “We have dominace of the skies, and from what I hear the majority of the streets are already ours. Not to mention the castle.”

His crimson eyes drifted to the large palace standing atop the hill to the north east, its highest tower shining in the evening light, like a beacon of hope to the rebels.

“This fight will be over in a matter of days,” Visteen continued, “When it will be a simple thing to walk into the castle vaults and take that Spirit Ring for myself.”

“For Reparian, you mean,” Solordorr added flatly.

“Yes of course,” the sorceress snickered. “All the glory for the Empire.”

He did not say anything, his eyes continuing to stare towards the battered city.

“I am curious, Solordorr,” Visteen spoke up as the night started to tighten its grip, “Why are you here?”

“Curiosity,” he replied simply, not looking to the woman.

“In regards to what?” she was quick to ask, “How the fight ends? The Spirit Ring of Life? Or perhaps you’re interested to see the Empire’s new weapon in action?”

“I’m sure you’ll find out soon enough,” he replied simply, a slight smile coming to his face as he turned to the sorceress and back towards the encampment.

He saw a slight flicker of concern come to Visteen's eyes before he started down the path from the hill, a sight that made him smile wider.

## Chapter Thirty

With each breath the cold air shredded his lungs, making them feel numb. But it was a good feeling, and despite the frosty morning he was feeling good, albeit quite exhausted.

“Come on. Keep up,” the drill Sargent at the front of the column shouted back down the hill.

“The last one up the hill will be shining my boots for the rest of the week.”

Gritting his teeth Melodin pushed himself harder, making his legs ache all the more and causing his calves to burn with agony. His breaths came labored as he pushed himself up the last part of the steep hill. Stumbling onto the hilltop he dropped to his hands and knees gasping in the cold air and sending trails of steam into the dark morning.

Looking to the east he could see that the sun had only now just decided to peek above the horizon, sending its pale gold rays through the mist that hung in the valley over the river and lighting up the clouds of smoke that still rifted over Delaforr.

“You bunch of weak little girls,” the Sargent berated them loudly, “My grandma is fitter than all of you put together.”

“That’s a bit sexist,” someone remarked near Melodin.

“Is it?” roared the drill sargent, “Well in that case all you supposed men, drop and give me ten push ups.”

“Now that is sexist,” exclaimed one of the women on the group.

“That’s it,” the sargent yelled, “All of you down. Twenty push up from the lot of you.”

Melodin groaned quietly, and still breathing heavily he lay down to do the push ups alongside Eclair.

“Come on,” the sargent continued to yell, “Tits to the ground or you’ll do it all again.”

“No fair,” Derth exclaimed as he performed the exercise, “That means. The girls. Don’t need. To go as low.”

“Especially not Eclairé,” Orish snickered, watching the elf closely with a lewd expression on his face.

“Stop leering,” Zell exclaimed, “You dirty old man.”

“Old?” yelled Orish in reply, his face turning red.

“Shut it,” the sargent talked over the top of him, “Less talking more working. Come on you can get lower than that.”

“Pheg is like the girls, sir,” one of the others remarked, “He’s so fat. His boobs are as big as Eclairés.”

“Hey,” Pheg yelled back, “I’ve lost. Five kilograms since I signed up. I’m more like Zell’s size now.”

“What?” Zell cried in embarrassment.

“Enough,” the flustered sargent screamed, “If anyone else decides to talk before they’ve finished the push ups they’ll be ironing my shirts for rest of the campaign. Got it?”

No one made any more comments and with one final push Melodin finished and dropped back onto his knees before rolling onto his back to stare at the skies.

The others around him finished soon, and mercifully the sergeant let them have a brief respite from the morning’s harsh training.

“Look there,” Derth said suddenly jumping to his feet and pointing towards the city. “The tanks are making their advance across the bridge.”

Curiously Melodin got up and looked down the hill to the river in the valley. The metal of the armoured cavalry division shimmered in the morning light as they chugged across the wooden bridge, sending trails of steam into the air from their exhausts.

“The clockwork tanks,” another in the squad remarked with obvious admiration. “They’ll end this battle in no time once they reach the city.”

A feeling of concern came to Melodin then and he glanced to Eclairé who was also watching the advance of the tanks. Although she did not outwardly show it, he could tell she felt the

same as he did. She looked to him then, their eyes meeting as they silently understood what the other was thinking.

“Tonight,” he said quietly, but she shook her head slightly.

“Alright you bunch of ingrates,” the drill sergeant sudden yelled, “Enough lollygagging, let’s move it. With me.”

A groan shifted through the squad and Melodin joined as they followed the leader at a jog down the hillside, continuing on their usual path for the morning exercise.

This side of the hill was much more gradual than the other and easily they followed it into the treeline and along the hedgerows. Down here the mist still lingered, covering the path and causing him to lose sight of the company leader.

As they headed around one corner a scuffle erupted at the front of the lines and all the soldier he was following all quickly moved off the road as another company of soldier stormed along the path, coming in the opposite direction.

“Out the way scum,” the stern man at the lead of the other squad roared. “Make way for the Third Company.”

Quickly he scampered out of the way of the hardened veterans, into grass and rocks on the side of the path. His feet slipped on the wet grass causing him to stumble and trip on rock.

With a cry he fell face first into the grass and dirt, making the members of the Third Company roar with laughter as they passed by him.

“Talentless cur,” one woman of the Third Company laughed along with her comrades.

“Can’t even run properly,” laughed the man alongside her.

Spitting grass out of his mouth Melodin was quick to jump to his feet. Eclair was quick to offer her help and together they moved back onto the path and continued after the rest of the squad.

“Don’t listen to those kinds of comments, Melodin,” Eclair said seriously as they jogged along. “They think they’re superior just because they have rare talents.”

“Who are we talking about?” Melodin looked to the elf curiously, causing her to regard him with surprise.

“Those in the Third Company,” she explained with a confused look, “Just then when you tripped and they insulted you.”

“That?” Melodin laughed, “I wasn’t even listening. It was pretty silly of me though. I should have gotten the smaller sized boots. These just don’t feel right. But maybe that’s because I’m used to wearing sandals. Do you think that might be it?”

He looked to the elf who was still regarding him with a perplexed expression.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Eclairé was quick to say, looking back to the path ahead of them as they turned another corner and headed back into the army encampment.

Sucking in some deep breaths Melodin put his hands on his head and walked about the tired group slowly, trying to look composed as he laboured for air.

“That was pathetic,” yelled the drill sergeant. “The worst time I’ve ever seen. Mark my words you lot, you’ll be the fittest bunch of talentless gutter churls by the time I’m through with you all. Especially you private Pheg.”

“Sounds good to me, sarg,” Pheg exclaimed trying to stand upright, but wincing as he clutched his side, likely suffering from a stich.

“Now, get out of here all of you, dismissed,” with that the loud man turned about and stomped off into the rows of tents and pavilions.

“I’m too old to be fit,” Orish complained loudly as he sat slumped on the ground, looking quite pale.

“I thought you weren’t old?” Zell quipped playfully.

“What?” Orish blurted, his colour returning to his face as he jumped to his feet, “I’m not old. And don’t you forget that young lady.”

“I won’t,” Zell laughed.

“Come on, let’s get some food,” Derth said loudly, “I’m starving.”

“Coming you two?” Zell called over her shoulder to him and Eclairé.

“I’ve got to go and move cargo,” Melodin sighed heavily, “I’ll see you at lunch though.”

“I’ve also got early work,” added the elf.

“Alright,” Zell replied cheerfully and headed off with the others, “See you later.”

“Melodin,” Eclairé turned to him before he could move. “Are you sure?”

“About tonight?” he asked back curiously, drawing a stiff nod from the elf as her eyes glanced about the area uneasily.

“Yes,” she mumbled.

“Hey, don’t worry,” he smiled back, “I’ve got it all sorted.”

“That’s why I’m worried,” Eclairé replied simply.

“That’s not very nice,” he frowned at her, “Trust me.”

“We should wait,” Eclairé replied seriously, “Some deserters got caught the other night, I hear they’ve increased the patrols.”

Melodin scratched his chin thoughtfully, “Maybe you’re right then. Yeah, we should wait a little while yet. I just don’t think all this waiting around is going to help Nim though.”

“She’ll be fine,” Eclairé said quietly, moving closer to him, “Remember that she is in good company. It’s us that you should be more concerned about.”

He smiled at that, “We’ll be fine. There’s nothing to worry about here.”

“Alright,” Eclairé let out another deep breath, “I do need to get to my post however. See you tonight.”

“Have fun,” he called after the elf as she moved through the soldiers that mulled about the area, heading towards the back of the encampment.

A whistle came to his lips as he also headed off through the white tents towards the camp entrance where he was due to load and unload cargo for the rest of the morning.

“You’re late,” the sergeant yelled at him as he arrived at the loading zone.

“We were delayed on the training run,” he replied with a shrug, moving straight away to help the others with the unloading.

“This is the second time,” the sergeant was quick to reply.

“It’s not my fault, sarg,” he shrugged as he placed down one of the crates.

“See that it doesn’t happen again,” growled the woman as she turned away to go and yell at someone else.

He sighed heavily as he grabbed the next item off the tray. Looking to the sunrise he groaned despondently.

“Could this morning go any slower?” he mumbled to himself.

To his dismay the morning did indeed appear to go by at an excruciating pace and by the time it he was dismissed to get lunch his back was aching and his stomach grumbling.

Vacantly he walked back through the tents thinking about the food he was about to eat and not really paying attention to where he was going. He did, however, notice another person walking through the tents towards him, the woman’s scantily clad robes he recognised instantly.

“Visteen,” Melodin froze in his tracks, his eyes widening as the sorceress and the man accompanying her drew closer. “And that other guy. Damn.”

Quickly he darted into a tent beside him, hiding from view as the two came along the path.

“Not long now,” he heard Visteen say as she and Solordorr past the tent opening. “With the clockwork tanks breaking through the walls in Riverside the city will soon be mine.”

“Along with the Spirit Ring I suppose,” Solordorr added, his tone clearly showing his boredom.

Visteen’s reply was drowned out by the noise of the camp and Melodin cautiously peered out the tent flap. Letting out a deep breath he ran a hand over his face. A groan from behind him, caught his attention making his heart stop as he turned about slowly to see whose tent



he had invaded. His breath became stuck in his throat as he noticed it was the tent reserved for the female captains, and two of the beds were occupied.

He froze as one of the ladies moved in her bed as she slowly woke up, letting the blankets slip off. He could feel his cheeks go red as he stared at the woman in her undergarments, his mouth falling open.

Suddenly his wits returned to him and he scampered from the tent before the captain had fully woken from her slumbers. Fortunately for him no one had noticed him leave the tent restricted to the female captains, and he raced off to the eating pavilion feeling quite flustered and very thirsty.

\* \* \*

The battle for the clock tower had started in full, with him leading the charge into the Reparian forces. Most of the soldiers, on both sides in fact, were not the most talented and unleashed such abilities as incredible strength, super speed, flight, or threw projectiles of fire, or ice, or launched large rocks with minds.

One soldier right in front of him turned his skin into metal and displayed his large chest as if to absorb the coming punch. But clearly this fool had no idea who he was facing.

With one punch Tama sent the man flying backwards through the air and right to the back of the Reparian lines. Likely the soldier's metal skin saved his life, but it was unlikely the man would return to the fight any time soon.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw a flash of steel and threw his head back just in time to avoid the slash of another enemy. But the angle of the strike changed at the last second as the speedy soldier raced by, her sword cutting down on an angle slicing through his clothes and carving a deep line across his torso.

Tama cried out in pain as his blood erupted forth from the wound, but even as the stones of the road were splattered with red the wound had already healed itself.

"You bitch," Tama yelled angrily as looked down at his chest, "This is my favourite shirt."

Looking back to the soldier furiously he thought to chase the woman down and ruin her clothes as she did his, but the impact of a spear through his gut stopped him. Growling away the pain he looked for the new assailant, just in time to see several more spear thud into him. He started to say something, but his words came out as blood as he coughed and spluttered.

“Get him.” Someone screamed, “That’s Tama the undefeated.”

His rebel comrades around him tried to help him but the sudden onslaught sent them scrambling.

As more blood dribbled from the corner of his mouth he groaned loudly.

“This is going to hurt,” he spluttered as he saw a dozen enemy soldiers charge for him.

Ice suddenly wrapped around his legs, pinning him to the ground, and a volley of fire balls scorched through the air before crashing into him. Reflexively he covered his face with his arms as the burning flames coursed across his body melting his skin and creating such pain that he almost fainted.

But he was used to the agony. Nothing these fools could do to him could hurt as much as what he had already done to himself.

The flames soon died down and the smoke cleared before him as he turned his furious eyes upon the soldiers.

“Impossible.” The nearest Repararian gasped in horror.

“Get down,” came a call from behind the Repararians, drawing Tama’s gaze to the back of the squad.

Golden metal shimmered in the morning light as a huge machine climbed over some rubble at the back.

“Clockwork tanks,” Tama spat, angrily tearing the several spears from his chest.

Several more tanks appeared as he spoke and all their cannon pointed in his direction. Before he could think to move the machine's released their barrage towards him and it was all he could do to brace for the impact.

The familiar feeling of thunderous bullets made him clench his jaw as he felt the impact sending him flying backwards through the broken buildings that ended his flight in a pile of rubble.

\* \* \*

"Damn it," Melodin grumbled as he raced through the rows of tents.

The hour was late and the night had already come on heavy, there was no moon this night and the smoke from the city was clouding the stars.

"Stupid sergeant keeping me late," he continued to mumbled as he skipped by the other soldiers and around the burning lanterns.

He had to hurry to Eclair for it was past time they left this place, especially now that he knew Visteen and Solordorr were in the camp.

He slowed down as he reached the talentless squad's tents, and moving from the main path he slipped into the shadows of the pavilions and carefully snuck closer to the main fire.

"I'm sick of being talentless," he heard Derth grumble loudly, "No one gives you one ounce of respect."

"No point winging about it lad," Orish replied.

Melodin slowly peeked around the side of a tent and towards the fire side. The flames burned low throwing red light across the faces of those sitting around it, Orish was easy to make out, sitting with his back towards Melodin with Zell beside him, opposite the fire was Eclair, Derth and couple of others.

"You know you could always go to Aldorf, in City State," remarked one of the others, "There you can join one of the ruling families."

"You what?" Orish balked, "Why would you want to be a vampire, werewolf or demon?"

“Because they all have some kinds of racial abilities,” Derth said, nodding his head.

“But they’re all really strict about inducting new members,” Zell added seriously, “Besides I’d hate to become one of them.”

“There are other ways you can become one of the damned, as they’re called down there,” the other soldier said seriously.

“You’d be an idiot if you went to one of those blood traders,” Orsiah said wisely, “You’ll become nothing more than a slave, and nobody deserves that even if they do have some kind of talent as a result.”

“You could always become a mage,” Zell said thoughtfully.

“Do you know how hard that is?” Derth exclaimed, throwing a small stick into the fire.

“That’s what elves usually do when they have no abilities, right Eclairé?” Zell continued, grabbing the elf’s attention. “Why didn’t you do that?”

“Well,” Eclairé stammered, “Like Derth said, it’s really hard to learn magic, and I just couldn’t.”

She shrugged and looked away from the fire, giving Melodin the opportunity to wave in her direction. He thought he saw some kind of recognition flash across the elf’s face, but then she yawned wide. With a sigh he grumbled under his breath and waited impatiently for a chance to pull Eclairé away from the group.

“Nah, being a vampire is the way to go,” Derth said seriously, still staring into the flames.

“You’re a fool boy,” Orsiah shook his head, “If you’re going to join the damned then you have to be a demon.”

“What?” Derth looked up.

“That’s where all the hotties go,” the old man snickered, causing Zell to punch him in the arm.

“Trust you to say something like that,” the young woman exclaimed. “Derth shouldn’t join any of them. Just accept that you have no talent.”

“Accept it?” balked Derth, “How can I? You see how everyone else treats us. How can you be okay with that?”

In frustration the young man jumped to his feet and stormed off into the dark night.

“It’s just how it’s meant to be,” Zell said quietly and sighed.

“Don’t worry about him lass,” Orish said to Zell as a quietness fell over the group.

“Well,” Elaire spoke up, “I’m going to get some sleep.”

The others mumbled a response as the elf stood up and casually moved away from the fire.

Quickly Melodin moved from his hiding spot, and shadowing Eclairé’s trail through the tents he waited in place to pull her away. It was all too easy, and as Eclairé stopped and yawned he pulled her by the arm, out of the fire light and into the shadows of the tent.

He was quick to cover the elf’s mouth as he pulled her low into the darkness, expecting that she would cry out in surprise. But as soon as he drew her down into the shadow she pulled his hand from her mouth.

“Really Melodin,” she hissed quietly, “There’s no need for such secrecy, I saw you hiding behind the tent earlier.”

“You did?” he frowned in surprise.

“Yes, now what do you want?”

“We have to get out of here now,” he said quickly, sorting out his thoughts.

“What?” wondered the elf, “Why? I thought we-”

“Visteen is here,” he interrupted her, “As well as Solordorr. I saw them before. But don’t worry they didn’t see me. I also heard them talking about some ring in the city. Would that be another Spirit Ring?”

Eclairé took a deep breath to digest the news before she nodded slightly, a determined look coming to her face.

“You’re right, we should go,” she said seriously, “But I’m not sure how, I dare not use my magic in the middle of this camp.”

“Don’t worry, follow me,” he replied, jumping to his feet, and with Eclairé close behind him, he raced back through the camp.

As he sprinted along his mind raced for some kind of plan of escape, but in truth he had no idea what he was doing or where he was leading Eclairé. Before he realised they were at the camp gate where the path led up the hill that they run over with the drill sergeant on a daily basis.

“Halt there you two.” demanded the soldier at the exit, “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Just a half circuit before we go to bed,” Melodin was quick to reply before he could think about it. “Us talentless squad have to work had to keep up with the rest of you, you know.”

The soldier looked at him dismissively, making Melodin swallow anxiously.

“Whatever,” the soldier decided and motioned for them to go through. “Keep an eye out for ghouls and other such war vultures. You should take a torch too.”

“Yep, we’re meeting up with some others already out there,” Melodin smiled as he and Eclairé quickly jogged through the gate and up the incline to the top of the hill.

There he paused as the view across the burning city caught his attention, bringing a crease to his brow.

“Now what?” Eclairé wondered, “The soldiers patrol along this side of the river.”

“Don’t worry we’ll work it out,” he said reassuringly, “This way.”

Heading off at a run he lead the way directly down the hill opposite the camp, making sure he did not slip on the dew covered grass or stumble on the rocks. Swiftly they made to the treeline without being seen and the low hanging smoke creeped in around them making it virtually impossible to see where he was going.

He stopped as the darkness took his sight, and clenching his jaw he wondered if this was such a good idea.

“We’ve stopped?” Eclairé asked curiously, “Let me guess, you can’t see where you’re going?”

Melodin scratched the back of his head awkwardly, "Well ..."

The elf laughed lightly and he felt her grab his hand before gently pulling him along as she led the way through the trees.

"The ground is pretty even through here," Eclairé remarked, giving him some confidence, but that quickly vanished as his foot got caught on something and he almost fell on his face.

"Pretty even, right?" he asked sarcastically as Eclairé stopped him from falling.

"Quiet," he whispered firmly, "There are soldiers up ahead."

"How can they see?" he wondered.

"They're in the clearing between this woodland and the river," she replied flatly. "Come on. Easy now."

Slowly he followed the elf's pull and soon he could see the difference in the light as the trees ended and the field before the river came into sight.

"There's the bridge," he said quietly as they crouched behind a large tree trunk. "Looks vacant. Guess they don't care if the rebels try and attack the camp."

"Well, Reparian do have the larger force," replied Eclairé, her eyes scanning the view suspiciously.

"Let's go then," Melodin said starting for the bridge, but the hand of Eclairé stopped him before he could move. "What? Let's go before the patrol returns. Come on."

Hesitantly Eclairé released her hold and he led the way quickly through the field to the bridge the clockwork tanks had used earlier that day.

The heavy smoke hung in the air around him, making his nose itch annoyingly and obscuring the other side of the river. The gentle flowing waters moved swiftly beneath the wooden bridge as they crossed, their footsteps echoing into the still night. It seemed so surreal to him as they moved through the smoke that hovered around them, mixing with the mist that came off the river and sending a shiver down his spine.

The sound of their running feet, bounced back off the smoke and river sounding hollow to his ears along with the sound of his own breathing.

“There’s the other side,” he remarked happily as the end of the bridge appeared out of the smoke. “See told you ...”

His voice trailed away as two shadowy figures also appeared in the smoke and he and Eclairé were quick to skid to a stop as the figures of Visteen and Solordorr appeared before them.

“So good to see the both of you again,” Visteen remarked, a sinister smile spreading across her face.



## Chapter Thirty-one

Melodin froze, his heart seeming to stop as his breath became stuck in his throat. The first drops of rain lightly touched down on his cheeks and head, the cold splatters filled with ash.

"I was disappointed when you left," Visteen pretended to pout, as Solordorr looked annoyingly to the falling rain. "But I'm glad I now have a chance to finally kill you, Eclairé."

The spell that was holding him still suddenly broke and he turned to Eclairé.

"Quick. Get out of here," he motioned to the elf in desperation.

A sudden gust of wind exploded past Melodin, thundering into the elf. Eclairé cried out as she was blown off the bridge and seemingly carried into the swirling smoke by an unseen bird. Her cries quickly disappeared as she vanished into the dark sky, leaving Melodin to gape in horror.

Slowly Melodin turned back to face Visteen, the sound of the rain pattering on the wooden boards all around him. The sorceress seemed just as surprised as himself, her mouth slightly open as she still stared towards the smoky sky where Eclairé had vanished.

"Well, that was unexpected," Solordorr remarked, breaking the still silence that had quickly encapsulated them.

Visteen looked unhappily at the crimson eyed man, who wore a bemused smile on his face.

Melodin saw his chance to flee and quickly turned about and sprinted back across the bridge. Suddenly white lights flashed before his eyes as an explosion of pain blinded him and the invisible barrier knocked him backwards to his rump.

"That hurt," he grumbled to himself, rubbing his face as he got back to his feet and turned back to the sorceress.

"Why don't you use that ring of yours to escape?" Solordorr mocked him.

"Don't give him ideas," Visteen snapped, "Now hurry and stop him from doing so."

Solordorr sighed unhappily before making a slight gesture towards Melodin. A bright light immediately enveloped Melodin's ringed hand, making him flinch. But feeling no pain he held his glowing hand up before his eyes curiously, moving it in the air and flexing his fingers.

"Now then," Visteen sighed, her irritation obvious, "How about we have a civilised chat, you and I?"

"Civilised?" Melodin scoffed back. "What part of you is civilised?"

Solordorr laughed slightly at that, drawing a scowl from the sorceress.

"I can be very civilised," Visteen objected, "When I want to be. It's just unfortunate for you that I'd rather not be at this moment. You ran away, just when we were starting to become close, and to make it worse you stole something that belonged to me."

"What?" asked Melodin, a frown coming to his face.

"Eclair is mine," replied Visteen, her voice slow and deadly. "I taught her like she was my daughter, and she betrayed me. No one betrays me, and lives."

"You're crazy," Melodin balked, causing a murderous glint come to the sorceress's eyes.

"I'm all for being civilised," Solordorr added loudly, flipping up the collar of his coat to ward off the rain. "So how about we continue this under cover from this rain?"

Visteen did not say anything, her vicious gaze not leaving Melodin, and with a sneer she clicked her fingers in the air, teleporting them away from the bridge.

Suddenly the rain and smoke was replaced by a large pavilion filled with furniture and rugs. Several rooms led away from the main space, their contents shielded from his gaze by heavy flaps.

The patter of rain could be heard as it fell upon the waxed canvas roof and low burning braziers flickered in the corners. A strange feeling washed over him as he looked about the large room and its several doorways. In fact this place seemed too large. If they were in the Imperial camp he thought that he would have noticed a tent this big, and yet he had not.

“No point trying to leave this place Melodin,” Visteen said, as she walked towards one of the flaps. “Enchantments have been placed at each of the doors and surrounding the entire tent. Might as well find a rug to sleep on, for I have no wish to talk at this point. Tonight’s events have put me in a foul mood.”

With that the sorceress flicked aside one of the flaps and disappeared into an adjoining room. Leaving him to awkwardly look about the place, his gaze inevitably coming to rest on the mysterious crimson eyed man. But instantly he looked away again as his eyes met with the piercing gaze of Solordorr, his eyes seeming to glow in the dim light.

Solordorr said nothing to him as he casually headed for another flap, one that lead out into the imperial camp. The man paused before leaving, looking back to Melodin.

Seconds slipped by slowly as Solordorr continued to stand there, staring at him. Eventually the man gave him a disappointed look before gesturing for Melodin to follow.

Melodin frowned, his eyes darting to the room where Visteen had gone into before looking back to crimson eyed man. Taking a deep breath Melodin cautiously walked to the exit, following Solordorr out into the heavy rain.

Without saying anything Solordorr led the way through the tents, casually passing through the gates and hiking up onto the hill that looked towards Delaforr. There the man stopped and Melodin stood beside him, his eyes watching the man in confusion.

The rain continued to fall around them, drowning out all other sounds and turning the dirt paths across the hill into mud. In the distance the city of Delaforr was dark, the downfall having snuffed out the fires that had been burning, filling the air with the smell of wet smoke.

Still he looked to Solordorr in confusion, and still the crimson eyed man did not say anything.

“Why are we here?” Melodin finally asked, breaking the quietness.

“I am here,” Solordorr replied, still gazing towards the city. “As for you, how should I know?”

Melodin’s frown deepened and he scratched his nose. But the sight of his hand made him jump in surprise. No longer was the golden light enveloping his digits causing his look of confusion to return quickly as he turned back to Solordorr.

“I don’t understand,” he shook his head, drawing a slight smile to Solordorr’s face. “Why would you do this? Visteen is you’re friend right?”

“Friend?” Solordorr scoffed, “I don’t make friends with people who have killed me in the past.”

Melodin’s face scrunched up in confusion once again as he studied Solordorr closely. Suddenly his eyes widened and his mouth fell open as he realised that Solordorr was completely dry, as if not a single drop of rain had touched him. Only now did he notice a very faint shimmer of golden light surrounding Solordorr’s frame, burning like an aura.

“What are you?” Melodin gasped, causing Solordorr to look at him, a light gleaming in his crimson eyes.

“Now that,” the man smiled, “Is an intelligent question. But I suggest you run after your friend Eclair while you have the cover of this rain.”

“Eclair,” Melodin gasped, his hand going to his head, “I hope she’s alright.”

Quickly he started down the hill, but stopped himself after a few steps.

“Thanks, by the way...” he started to say as he turned back to Solordorr, but his voice trailed away as he noticed that the crimson eyed man was no longer there.

Melodin’s frown returned as he slowly continued on his way back down the hill and towards the city he once called home.

\* \* \*

The sun cut through the misty morning, sending rainbows dancing through the dozens of waterfalls that cascaded down the jagged hills before racing off into the city to join the other many creeks and rivers that covered much of the northern part of Delaforr.

On the western end of the Golden Hill the creeks followed the grey stone path through the wealthy portion of the city, grand mansions loomed on the hilltops, clinging to the sharp cliff faces and teetering atop the narrow pillars of rock. Their curved rooftops and a red wood frames glowed brightly in the morning light filling her with memories of her early life in Delaforr.

She could see the red painted railings that lined the paths as they reached up through the rocky hills, jumping the waterfalls and clinging to the cliff side. Further up on top of the Golden Hill the wealthiest houses stood on the plateaus, their expansive grounds filled with beautiful gardens and amazing statues gilded with gold leaf.

She recalled staying at one of the mansions, though she could not remember why she was there, but she did remember how the exquisite grounds filled her with wonder. Or was she recalling the grounds of the castle?

Nim scratched her chin thoughtfully, before letting the memories slip away with a shrug.

“There is less fighting up through here,” Nalch was saying to Reith as she followed the groups over a wide bridge. “The rocky hills make it hard to get a foothold, and the many pathways always leave you open to flanking by the enemy. Which is why both sides do most of the fighting down in Market Street and Hebrodee.”

Nim looked out from the high bridge to the view across the city. She could see the clock tower, its damaged stone holding firm against the fires surrounding its base. Beyond that the dome roof of the Courthouse shimmered in the sun light, and even further beyond that she could just make out where the clockwork tanks of Reparian had broken through the city wall in Riverside.

The sight across the city did little to fill her with wonder, for the hundreds of pillars of black smoke and views of the broken buildings filled her heart with sorrow.

“It’s going to take years to repair,” she mumbled to herself, glancing down to Dog who trotted beside her.

“Don’t worry, Princess,” the soldier guarding the rear of the group replied, “It may take some time, but we will restore it.”

Nim smiled slightly at the stern looking woman and nodded, turning her eyes from the depressing views and back to the winding path ahead of them. The glimmer of gold veins through the rock face caught her attention and her eyes followed the thick golden ore as it

snaked through the grey rock face, up towards the over-hanging gardens of a mansion at the top.

“Is this gold ore?” Nim asked curiously, looking to the stern soldier.

“Aye,” the woman nodded, “You were probably too young to know how the nobles of the city used to brag about how much gold was in the rock of their estates. Some of the ore they mined, to cover their statues in gold leaf. But most of it they wore like a badge of status.”

From the woman’s tone Nim guessed the memory was a bitter one.

“The cowards were the first to leave when Reparian initially attacked,” the stern woman continued, her voice hard, “They grabbed all their goods and scampered from the city, leaving the fighting for the rest of us. No doubt once it’s over they’ll come back, reclaim their homes and continue on like nothing ever happened.”

“I would have thought these mansions looted clean by now,” Nim remarked.

“They have been,” the soldier replied with a slight smile. “Some of these mansions have been deserted for eight years, of course they’ve been looted. Not like there was much to take though. Owners took all the easy stuff to carry so there’s naught left but statues, too heavy to carry. I heard word that some opportunists are trying to mine the gold ore out the back of the hills near the walls, but Reparian soldiers have been quick to try and stop them.”

“I hope we won’t come across much trouble,” Nim remarked softly, her eyes falling to her hands.

“I will protect you, Princess,” the stern woman said, her voice filled with determination. “We all will. You’re the reason we fight.”

Nim felt her cheeks go warm and she awkwardly bit down on her bottom lip as she glanced to the several other soldiers that had accompanied them on this trek through the Golden Hills towards the castle.

“There’s always bloody trouble,” Tett said over his shoulder, stopping briefly so that Nim could catch up to him. “This is a damn war, ‘course there will be trouble girl. You’re not an

idiot, are you?"

"How dare you dwarf," snapped the stern soldier, "Show some respect to our future queen."

"Save your stupid threats," Tett grumbled in reply, "Bloody women, always quick to anger. I used to have a wife, you know, and she was the bloody worst of it. I say one harmless thing and she would bloody well throw something at my head. More often than not it was a bloody axe too."

Nim could not hide the smile that spread across her face, nor suppress the light laugh that escaped her lips.

"That's the spirit," Tett smiled back, "Never give up hope girl. If you do, so will all those who are fighting for you."

"For me," Nim echoed softly, her smile vanishing.

"Its bloody tough being looked up to by so many," Tett remarked quietly, "I know how you're feeling to some extent. Just remember, you're not alone girl. You may be surrounded by damn fools, but they're fools that will follow you to the bloody abyss."

Although she knew Tett's words were meant to make her feel better, they did little to do so. She looked away, her eyes going back to the mansion topped hills around them.

The red-railed path eventually climbed up a long staircase and led onto the table lands of the Golden Hills. From the top of the stairs Nim could see all the way to the northern walls down the gentle sloping plain which was occupied by many large estates. Continuing to follow the cliff line Nim gazed northwards, trying to catch glimpses of the gardens and grounds of the rich mansions.

"It seems so untouched by the fighting up here," Nim remarked, a slight smile coming to her face as she looked to Dog.

"Don't be fooled, Princess," Nalch said over his shoulder, "Appearances can be deceiving. Rather typical of this part of the city."

"Heads up," Reith said suddenly motioning down the path as a rebel soldier came running through the shade of the poplar trees.

“Captain,” the scout breathed heavily from his run, “It’s not good. Reparian’s have set up patrol points along the road ahead.”

“I thought our scouts said there was little activity up here,” Nalch grumbled, crossing his arms across his big chest as he pondered some alternative routes.

“They must’ve come up in the night,” shrugged the scout, “I was up here yesterday afternoon and the way was clear. If we go through the estates around us, we will have good cover through the gardens. But we’ll have to take it slow.”

“You’re right,” Nalch nodded seriously, “Let’s go. But we must be cautious.”

“Yes sir,” replied the scout before opening a path through the closest hedgerow.

“Not a bad ability for a bloody scout,” Tett nodded quietly as they watched the branches simply curl aside to let them through. “I wonder if he can make damn plants grow quicker to grant him some bloody cover?”

A smile came to Nim’s face as she moved through the gap in hedge, watching the moving vines and branches with wonder. As the stern soldier came through, covering the rear of the group as always, the plants crept back to their original position, seeming as if no one had ever passed through there.

Moving through the green lawns of the estate Nim’s eyes widened as they passed by large statues covered in gold. But the sudden realisation that they were in the middle of a war fell over her as she saw the broken limbs and the scratched paint of the figures.

Her eyes lingered on one large statue of a lion as she moved past it, the golden guild had been stripped away leaving the bronze underneath at the mercy of the elements. Already the metal had begun to turn green, twisting the lion’s features and leaving a haunting feeling hanging over the lawns. All of the other statues were in a similar state, staring mournfully at her as she walked through the gardens that had become overgrown and unkempt.

He focus soon changed from the hollow figures to the main building as its white walls rose up through the trees, standing resolute amid the evidence of battles. But its proud



demeanour soon changed as the scout led them to the front doors that were broken from their hinges and lay half splintered in the entrance hall.

“If we head through the building and the rear gardens we’ll be able to avoid the checkpoint on the road,” the scout said over his shoulder as he led them through the deserted and dirt filled hallways.

The place was empty, home only to the wind and whatever small animals had decided to take up residence. Leaves skipped across the tiled floors, pushed about by the breeze that rushed through the broken windows and open doors. The paint on the walls had started to fade and crack, not suited to combating the elements that now so easily rushed inside. Even a few vines had decided to creep in to the mansion, climbing the wall of the ballroom and curling around the large chandelier.

Surprisingly a piano still sat by a large fire, likely to heavy for looters to consider snatching, its keys now covered in dust and leaves.

“Wait.” Another scout in the lead suddenly stopped, holding up her hand to them, her head cocking to the side as she listened intently. “This is not good.”

As she spoke a dozen soldiers walked into the ballroom through the large doors that lead onto the back terrace, all of them wearing the colours of Reparian.

“Quick.” The stern soldier behind Nim said, but her words became caught in her mouth as two more soldiers blocked their retreat. “Damn it.”

“Well, well, well,” a tall man said loudly as he slowly walked down the stairs from the side of the room, the few plates of armour and mail sowed into his clothing clinking with each step.

“If it isn’t princess Nimroldell. Welcome home, little princess. I’m sorry I could not greet you more formally, but-”

“Traitor,” one of the rebel soldiers shouted angrily, his face masked with hate. “How dare you talk to our queen in the manner. Have you no pride?”

A low threatening growl from Dog, briefly caught Nim’s attention and causing her to frown as she Dog’s hackles standing on end as her green eyes watched the tall man closely.

“Easy lad,” Nalch said quietly to the soldier, placing a hand on the man’s shoulder as he stepped to the front. “You have some gall, showing up here.”

Nim watched closely as the tall man with broad shoulders laughed, casually moving across in front of them.

“Did you think this a coincidence?” asked the leader of the Reparians.

Nim narrowed her eyes at the man, something about him seemed familiar, he did not look like one of Reparian’s commanders. Quite the opposite in fact.

“That crest,” Nim gasped as she noticed a coat of arms displayed on the tall man’s chest.

“The Kingsguard. You’re the one who betrayed my family.”

Anger flared within her as the man regarded her curiously, gently touching the worn emblem on his armour.

“Do not waste you’re words on him, Princess,” Nalch spoke up, “He is The Traitor, yes, and is not worthy of your time.”

“Traitor?” the man raised and eye brow, “Don’t speak of what you don’t understand, Nalch. But if we are to talk of betrayals, let us get yours out of the way, shall we?”

“What?” Nalch exclaimed angrily, “I have nev-”

“Not you,” The Traitor cut in, pulling a pouch of coins from his belt, “But your scout of course.”

The scout who led them here quickly skipped away from the group and over to The Traitor, grabbing the sack of coins as he headed for the exit.

“Sorry Captain,” the man glanced over his shoulder briefly before departing the room.

“Get back here,” Nalch screamed furiously, drawing a large sword from his belt, “I’ll rip you to shreds.”

“Really Nalch, you can’t win,” The Traitor said calmly, “Surrender now and your men will be spared.”

“You can go to hell Arilden.” Nalch snapped back.

“Arilden,” Nim said suddenly, her brow furrowing, “Known as The Tower. Melodin’s father?”

The Traitor looked to her in surprise, “Melodin? That is .. ”

Arilden turned abruptly and with a short nod to one of the other soldiers he strode away heading for the doors that lead onto the garden terrace.

“Get back here and fight you bastard,” Nalch roared, brandishing his sword eagerly.

“I would. But I have other, more important things to do,” Arildin said over his shoulder.

The Traitor paused at the exit, his back still to them.

“Remember, we only want the princess,” Arilden said to his soldiers, “Kill the rest.”

## Chapter Thirty-two

“That little rodent.” Visteen cursed loudly as she paced about her tent, her night gown trailing behind her. “How did he get past the wards? It doesn’t make sense, I placed them myself, and none have been disturbed. How? Unless ...”

She stopped pacing and turned a vicious look towards him.

“What?” he asked flatly, leaning against the thick central support pillar, “Do you think I helped him escape? Why would I?”

Visteen continued to frown at him, “The same reason you do anything, Solordorr, I don’t know.”

“Alright,” he said with a bored expression, “You caught me. I confess, I betrayed you and let the boy free because I just like to annoy you.”

The sorceress scoffed and looked away as she pulled her gown around her body, hiding her silk negligée, and returned to her pacing.

“What does it matter anyway?” Solordorr asked, looking towards the exit of the tent.

“Because he wears one of the Spirit Rings,” Visteen snapped over her shoulder, walking to one of her small tables she lit some incense. “If I am to wield the ring of life and death I must know the extent of its powers, as well as the effects on the body.”

“Well clearly it was powerful enough to break your magical wards without you even noticing,” Solodorr replied, rubbing his nose in an attempt to block the pungent smell of the incense.

The sorceress turned a suspicious eye towards him, her arms crossed before her chest. Seconds slipped by as she stared intensely at him. He did not look away from her piercing gaze, he could tell she thought he released Melodin, but it did not matter. He hid back his sly smile, but his eyes sparkled as he continued to regard the foolish sorceress.

Finally Visteen looked away, he could see the woman's jaw muscles twitch as she took a deep and steady breath.

"Commander Visteen," a call came from outside the tent, "Captain Gerbath reporting, Ma'am."

"Enter," Visteen called back.

Still feeling quite bored with this whole situation Solordorr looked to the exit to see a tall man push aside the tent flap and enter.

"Commander," Gerbath stared before his eyes suddenly went wide as he looked at the sorceress. "I'm sorry commander, forgive my intrusion. Shall I return once you've dressed?"

"Just tell me why you're here, Captain," Visteen huffed.

"Yes, of course, ma'am," Gerbath replied, clearly flustered as he turned away so he could not see the woman in her night gown. "Well, yes, I came to tell you, I mean report to you-"

"Captain," Visteen cut in, her tone serious, but Solordorr could see the amusement on the sorceress's face. "Do you not respect me?"

"What? Of course I do," Gerbath stammered, still with his back to Visteen.

"Then turn around and look at me when you speak," Visteen replied, her voice rising.

"But you're-"

"Turn around."

The Reparian captain quickly turned about, his shoulders back and his body ridged as he looked Visteen in the eyes.

"I bring word," Gerbath reported before pausing and clearing his throat, trying very hard not to let his eyes wander, "It has arrived."

"The tank from the laboratories?" Visteen raised an eyebrow.

"Yes ma'am."

“Excellent,” the sorceress beamed, beginning her pacing once again, and letting her gown slip away to reveal to silk negligee again. “Not a moment too soon either. Gerbath, inform me when they’re ready to make their advance. I will be there when they assault the city.”

“They’re ready momentarily, ma’am,” Gerbath replied, seeming to gather some of his composure. “I shall inform the men of your intentions immediately.”

“Good,” nodded Visteen, “I shall be there soon.”

With that she dismissed the captain with a wave of her hand as she quickly departed into her bedroom. Gerbath gave Solordorr a brief nod before he too left, leaving him to continue lean against the main support pillar, a bemused expression on his face.

“So they did manage to create a weapon out of it,” he said quietly to himself, absently inspecting his finger nails and the many rings on his fingers. “This should be very interesting.”

Visteen soon burst from her bedroom wearing her typical, revealing, robes and rushed for the exit.

“Are you coming?” she asked, pausing at the exit and glancing at him over her shoulder.

“Of course,” he replied, a sly smile on his face.

\* \* \*

The grey stone of the building scattered under his feet as he scrambled up the ruined wall. Up the pile of debris he climbed before pulling himself up onto the top of the wall and carefully edged up the broken roof. His climb made several tiles slip under his feet but he made it to the ridge.

Facing northwest the ruined city of Delaforr spread out before him, filling his eyes with smoke, fire and jagged rooftops. Everywhere he looked there was chaos and destruction. Another explosion ruptured the buildings towards the clock tower at the city centre, sending more smoke and fire through the streets.

“That way doesn’t look good,” he mumbled to himself and took a deep breath as he looked across the city. “But I’m sure that was the way Eclairé flew. I wonder how she even did that? She could’ve taken me with her though.”

Still wearing his Reparian army fatigues he had had no trouble entering the city through the gaping hole the clockwork tanks had made in the walls into the area of Riverside. Of course he had past other soldiers, but they had given him little regard. Avoiding the command camps near the walls he had managed to slip away from the front lines and headed further into Riverside.

“If I was Nim, where would I be?” he wondered aloud, his eyes moving across the broken rooftops, lingering on the two larger buildings towards the north. Finally his gaze came to rest on the castle, its white stone towers standing proudly through the smoke, seeming untouched by the fires of war.

Rockets of fire reaching up into the sky from the west caught his attention, and Melodin brought his hand to his brow, squinting as he watched the balls of flame scorch through the air.

“What’s that?” he wondered, “Trebuchet?”

Suddenly his eyes widened as he realised the missiles were flying towards him. desperately he looked for the quickest way down from the roof top, but he was too slow. Deafening explosions sounded all around him as the missiles thundered into the buildings, sending flame and rock into the air. Suddenly he was falling, desperately he scrambled about trying to grab a hold of something, but his hands found nothing and pain snapped through his body as he fell onto his back and tumbled down the piles of rock.

Finally he stopped his bouncing roll, groaning in pain he propped himself up onto his elbow he glanced about. Curiously his brow furrowed as he looked to the garden he had fallen into, the surprisingly soft grass having broken his fall. Slowly he got to his feet as the fire of the trebuchet soared into the sky around him, sending black smoke into the air as the flames stuck to the stones.

“Wait,” he mumbled as a strange feeling washed over him, “This place, I know it.”

Bits of debris rained down around him as he slowly moved through the overgrown garden that seemed very familiar to him. The remnants of a tall tree stood in the corner of the yard, its limbs long since died and now black from the fires, but still the chains of a swing dangled from one of its branches.

As if in a dream he slowly turned about the area, his eyes examining every little detail as closely as possible as he looked to the house. A lump got stuck in his throat as he gazed upon the damaged building, its roof had caved in, its windows smashed, and much of its structure had crumbled, but he still recognised the place.

“My home,” he said, his voice barely a whisper.

Before he realised he was walking towards the broken doorway and into the house. Beams had collapsed and leaned down from the open roof, forcing him to walk through a maze as he absently wandered through the rooms. It was clear a fire had raged through the place as all was naught but ash and scorched stone. He paused in one of the rooms, his eyes going to a cupboard in the corner, much of its wood saved from the ravages of the flames. It was beautiful, he could not tear his eyes away from the intricate designs carved across the wood, its elegant structure, its comforting feel.

He blinked in surprise as he felt a tear streak down his face. Curiously he wiped the moisture with his fingers and took a deep breath. Suddenly he felt a chill wash over him and his heart seemed to stop as he looked through the open window to the front of the house and the small yard that was filled with large debris.

Without even thinking about it he found himself walking through the rest of house and out into the front yard. His breathing came in shallow gasps as he moved through the rocks, everything around him a blur of red and orange as the fires continued to burn.

Turning around a large boulder he froze, his breath catching in his throat, his eyes unblinking as he stared down at the white bone of a skull lying in the grass. He felt his gut go tight as the tears streamed down his cheeks.



“No,” he gasped, dropping to his knees before the skull. “No. No, not again. Not this again. Mother. Why?”

He slowly reached out for the skull but his shaking hand could not touch it, and his shoulder slumped. Bringing his hand to his face the feelings ripped through him, sending more tears down his face and causing his breathing to become erratic.

“Why?” he gasped again, his despair turning to anger, “Why must I live this again?”

As the anger took hold of him he looked down at the Reparian army uniform he wore, gritting his teeth he tore it from his body and scrunching it into a ball threw towards the closest fire.

“Damn it,” he cried, dropping forwards to his hands, tears continuing to fall from his eyes. “I’ll kill them. I’ll kill all of them.”

The diamond on his ring began to glow fiercely, grabbing his attention and seeming to swell along with the rage burning in his heart. Something deep inside him screamed for him to unleash the power of the Spirit held inside the stone, and he so dearly wanted to do so. But something stopped him, and his eyes slowly drifted back to the hollow eyes sockets of his mother’s skull.

“I’m sorry mother,” he mumbled, “I’m sorry I wasn’t strong enough to save you. But the Spirit Ring is not the answer, I know this. You wouldn’t want me to sacrifice my life for revenge.”

In an instant his anger vanished, leaving behind a flood of sadness followed by a strange peace as he continued to look upon his mother’s remains. For the first time he noticed the flowers growing beside the white bones, and despite the carnage and ruin they were bright and vibrant, denying the war ravaged land they were in.

The black hollow depths of her eyes reached out to him, pulling him in deeper. But in that darkness there was no fear for him, only remorse.

Again he reached for the skull, his hand steady, but again he pulled back without touching its smooth bone. Taking a deep breath he pushed himself to his feet, his eyes still lingering on the remains.

“I’ll come back,” he said quietly, “I’ll come back once I’ve chased these Imperial bastards from our home and Nim is on her throne. Don’t worry, I’ll burry you out by the river. Would you like that?”

Taking another deep breath he forced himself to turn away and walk from his mother’s remains. Pangs of sadness throbbbed in his chest, but still he walked and soon those feeling were overtaken by determination.

With each step he took the feelings of anger started to broil within him again. Reparian had taken everything from him, his parents, his home, and almost his life, he would get his revenge. Even if he had no powers to fight the Empire full on, he would find a way, he would see his homeland free of the Reparian scum. Even if he had to die to achieve it, he would fight.

\* \* \*

“Get ‘em.”

Suddenly it was nothing but a swarm of action around her. The Reparian soldiers struck hard and fast, forcing the rebel fighters onto the back foot instantly. Fire and ice rippled through the air and people let out their battle cries that sounded more like screams of fear to her ears.

Her wits quickly returned to her and she fumbled to get her pistol out of the holster on her hip.

“Damn it,” she cursed as her numb fingers dropped the weapon to the dirty tiles.

She was fast to drop down and grab it, but the bark from Dog stole her attention, making her miss grabbing the handle. As she looked up her eyes widened in surprise as two hands reached out of nowhere and grabbed her roughly by the shoulder. She screamed out to Dog as the hand gripped her firmly and pulled her forwards off her feet.

Though the air she flew, right through the battle and out the back of the fighting where she came face to face with a grinning Reparian soldier. Her mouth fell open in fear, her mind

racing to sort out how she was now standing out on the garden terrace that over looked the overgrown fountain.

“Can’t get away from my reach, princess,” the Reparian soldier smiled at her.

No words came to her as the man roughly turned her about and pushed her down the stairs to where the deep fountain stood, its waters turned green from the build-up of slime. Vines tangled the figure at the centre masking its shape from sight and clogging the flow of water.

“Dijo,” the Reparian soldier yelled back up towards the terrace. “Hey Dijo. I’ve got her, let’s get out of here already.”

There came no answer, causing the soldier to curse quietly as he forced her to sit at the edge of the fountain.

“Stay here,” he smirked, and to Nim’s horror the man’s arm elongated, wrapping around her waist, pinning her arms like a rope.

Her eyes widened still as the young man raced back up the stair, his arm continuing to lengthen all the way back onto the terrace.

Several explosions sounded from within the mansion, pulling her attention from the soldier’s stretching arm to the gust of dirt that burst from the large doors. The cries she could hear made her blood turn cold and a strange feeling curled within her gut. She had to do something. She had to help the rebel fighters somehow.

But how could she? She had foolishly dropped her pistol, and with no talent she could not even escape from this stretchy man’s grasp. Another explosion shook the earth beneath her feet, cracking the foundations of the mansion and reminding her of the Spirit Ring she had dangling on a chain about her neck. She could just see the topaz shimmering in her cleavage, but with her arms bound she had no way of grabbing it.

“Damn. I’m so useless,” she said quietly, tears beginning to well in her eyes. “What kind of queen could I possibly be if cannot even protect myself?”

She tried to fight back the tears but they fell anyway, making her feel worse as she noticed the stretchy soldier returning with his comrade in the other hand.

“Pull yourself together Dijo,” the soldier encourage the woman, “It’s just a scratch.”

Nim’s eyes were draw to the arrow shaft protruding from Dijo’s thigh, the point where is punctured her leg encrusted with ice.

“It burns,” the woman gritted her teeth. “I can’t fly with this Luff.”

“Damn it,” the man cursed, “You have to, that was the plan. What’s the matter, its only an arrow.”

“I can’t feel my leg,” Dijo winced painfully.

“How does that matter?”

“It does alright.”

“Fine,” Luff growled, “I’ll just have to-”

The soldier’s words were cut short as bolt of white fur shot down the stairs and latched onto his arm that supported Dijo. Luff screamed in pain as the woman fell to the ground, the other arm that held Nim retracted back to normal length as the man tried to fend off Dog’s attacks. But the poor man had no hope against Dog and was quickly on his back trying to protect himself.

Freed from the man’s hold Nim jumped to her feet, torn between helping Dog and running for her life. Firming her jaw she started towards Dog and Luff but stopped herself, a look of worry covering her features. Her frown deepened as she grabbed the ring that dangled at her chest. A strange feeling swelled within her as she slowly brought the sparkling topaz before her eyes.

“Get off mutt,” Luff cried out angrily, tossing Dog aside as he jumped back to his feet.

Nim gasped as Dog landed heavily in the overgrown garden, but she was back on her feet quickly, a snarl on her scruffy face.

“No further, you mongrel,” Dijo cried out and Nim felt a strong hand grab her by the hair, pulling her head.

Nim gasped, her body going stiff as she felt the sharp edge of a blade on her throat.

“You can’t reason with a stupid animal, Dijo,” Luff cried out, but Dog stopped before she struck drawing a surprised look from the man. “So, you’re not just a dog after all. Well, not like it matters. Take this you mutt.”

“No,” Nim cried out as the stretchy man’s arms shot towards Dog.

The yelp Dog made shattered her heart as Luff grabbed her by the scruff of her neck and tossed her into the deep water of the fountain.

“Stupid mongrel,” Luff cursed, turning back to her and Dijo with a grin on his face, “Now, let’s get out of here whilst we can.”

Suddenly Nim winced as Dijo’s hand twitched, drawing a line of blood across her skin and sending a chill right through her. A heavy weight collapsed down onto her shoulders, causing her to stagger forwards. No longer did Dijo have hold of her hair, making Nim turn around to see what had happened. She gasped at the sight, just as Dijo slumped to her knees before falling flat on her face, an arrow shaft sticking out of her skull.

Nim felt sick as she tore her eyes away from the corpse and towards the railing of the terrace where Reith stood, bow in hand and a grim look on his face. Blood flowed freely from a wound across his scalp, turning half his face red as it trickled down his open shirt.

“Dijo,” Luff wailed loudly, grabbing Nim’s attention and making her turn back around. “I’ll kill both of you.”

A hand suddenly stretched towards her face, making her flinch and cry out. A flash of blue burst before her eyes, cracking into the stretching arm, knocking it aside, and making Luff cry in pain. The outstretched hand of the man grabbed hold of the fountain edge pulling him towards her as his arm retracted. Another flash of blue shot down from above as Reith fired again, but it did not stop Luff’s attack.

Before Nim realised the Reperian soldier had hold of her once again, roughly grabbing her about the shoulders as he turned her around to make her a shield in the way of the Sky Pirate’s arrows.

“Missed me that time,” Luff spat angrily, making Nim wince as he used the arrow imbedded in his forearm as a blade against her ribs.

“I don’t miss,” Reith replied flatly, lowering his bow, “You can’t feel it due to the cold my arrows create, but I severed your femoral artery. You’ll be dead in a matter of seconds.”

“What?” Luff balked and started to laugh.

The man’s laugh stopped abruptly and Nim felt him drop away from her. Quickly she pulled from his weakened grip and back away towards the stairs.

“I ... I can’t,” Luff stammered his eyes wide as he collapsed into a pool of his own blood.

“Am I ... am I going to ... to die? Here? Like this? How ... how pointless.”

His last words vanished into the still air, the light in his eyes fading as the bleeding slowed from the wound on his leg, staining the dirty tiles and seeping into the stones around the fountain.

A splash from the side tore her stare from the dead man and towards Dog as she scrambled out of the stagnate fountain, seeming completely unhurt. With a violent shake to rid her fur of water she trotted over to Nim, her green eyes sparkling.

“Nim,” Reith called down from above, his voice filling her with worry, “Come. You’d best hurry.”

Concern filled her as she raced up the stairs and back into the ballroom where the sight stole her breath. A chill washed over her as she cautiously walked into the room, her feet crunching on patches of ice. Scorch marks covered the walls and around the dozens of bodies that lay in the large room. The piano was now nothing but a pile of rubble with a bloodied body atop it, and the chandelier was now naught but a broken mess in the centre of the room.

Next to the fallen chandelier Reith stood over the broken body of Nalch, as the proud man barely clung to life.

She could feel her tears returning as she slowly walked over and dropped to her knees beside the Captain of Delaforr guards. Blood covered the man’s face, and soaked his

clothes. His entire left arm was nothing but a smouldering blackened stump that gave off the foulest of smells.

“Princess,” Nalch gasped, barely able to open one eye to see her. “You’re ... alive. I’m glad.”

“Don’t strain yourself,” Nim stammered, “We’ll get you help.”

Nalch shook his head slightly, “I’m dead. But ... I’m glad to see you returned. This is your home ... and you’ll make a fine queen ...”

She tried to say something, but no words could get passed the lump in her throat.

“Funny,” coughed the Captain, “Always thought I’d be afraid of dying ... but I’m not. Don’t cry for me ... I died fighting for what I believe in ... I’m happy.”

“Thank you,” Nim found herself whispering as tears flowed from her eyes.

She watched as Nalch let out his last breath and closed his one working eye, a smile on his face as death took him.

Nim’s head dropped to her hands as she sobbed heavily.

“Damn it,” she muttered, “I’m so useless. Why? Why do people continue to get hurt and die for me? I don’t want them to. If this is what it means to be queen I don’t want it. I’ve never wanted it. How can I be a queen if I can’t even protect myself or the people I care about? I just ... I just ...”

Her voice left her as the sobs took over, wracking her body and stinging her eyes. Dog whined softly as she sat down beside her and placed her head on Nim’s lap, trying to offer comfort to little avail.

The sound of the broken piano, caught her attention as what was left of it collapsed and someone tumbled out from its splinters.

“Damn that hurt,” Tett grumbled loudly, as he rolled to his feet and dusted himself off.

“Bloody shame I broke it.”

“Still alive I see,” Reith called out, “Did you conjure a place to hide?”

“How about I conjure a bloody axe in your stupid face?” Tett roared back, half of his white beard smeared with blood and one of the lenses of his round glasses cracked.

Although she felt some sense of relief that Tett had survived when she looked back to the body of Nalch her tears started to well up again.

“We should continue on quickly,” Reith said to her softly.

“What’s the point?” she snapped, jumping to her feet. “Continue where? Some place where more people can die needlessly?”

“More Reparian soldier will show up soon,” Reith replied calmly.

“So?” she ran a hand through her hair, her eyes falling back to Nalch.

“Are you an idiot?” Tett roared angrily, stealing her attention. “How can you bloody well ask that?”

The dwarf’s sudden ferocity made her take a step back, her grief seeming to vanish.

“What’s the point?” Tett repeated her words, his expression furious, “What’s the point? Are you an idiot? These soldiers died protecting you.”

“I never asked them t-” she began, but Tett cut her off.

“Idiot,” snapped the old dwarf, “You didn’t need to, they fought for their homeland. To be free of the bloody Reparians and to see their country independent once again. You’ve got a lot of responsibility, that be damn true, being queen of this country. A lot of people look up to you. You’re a bloody symbol of their dreams. You might not like the idea, but you damn well better accept it. Because if you don’t, all their fighting, all these death, will be for nothing.”

“I don’t want to be queen,” Nim exploded, her tears flowing again. “I just want to be me.”

“And who are you?” Tett was quick to ask in reply.

The dwarf’s question stopped her as a great emptiness opened around her and seemed to swallow everyone in the room whole, dragging them down into the hungry silence.



“Why?” she asked, her voice barely a whisper, “Why can’t I choose what I am? It was decided I would be queen the moment I was born. But no one ever asked me what I want to be.”

“You don’t need them to,” Reith’s calm voice arrested her attention, “You can make that choice any time you want. But you have to live with the consequences that it will create.”

Nim blinked slowly, sending the last of her tears running down her face.

“Either way,” the Sky Piate continued, “It’s a decision you should make somewhere other than here. Come on, let’s go.”

Nim did not reply, her mind filled with fog as she followed Reith and Tett from the ballroom and down the terrace stairs. They had barely past the large fountain before Dog started to bark loudly.

“What’s got into you?” Tett asked curiously, as they all stopped and turned to the animal.

“Dog?” Nim wondered, looking at her companion curiously as she continued to bark anxiously, her gaze reaching up into the sky behind them.

“What’s that?” Reith asked aloud, squinting in the direction that Dog was barking.

Nim raised her hand to shield her eyes from the glare, just making out a dark speck in the clear sky. As she frowned the dot rapidly grew larger and the sound of screaming came down from above.

“Is that-?” Reith started to say, but cut himself short as the yelling object flew over their heads and crashed into the fountain, sending water high into the air as a wave of magic burst outwards.

Droplets showered down around her as Nim covered her head before slowly straightening and curiously looking towards the fountain. All of a sudden someone burst out of the water cough and spluttering, bits of slime clung to the woman’s blue hair and drenched Reparian uniform.

“Another bloody Reparian soldier,” Tett grumbled, a double edged axe suddenly appearing in his strong hands.

“No,” Reith said suddenly, “It’s ... it’s Eclair?”

## Chapter Thirty-three

Adjusting the flag of Delaforr that was tied around his shoulder, Tama strode determinedly towards the clock tower. Something exploded near him, sending dirt and balls of fire into the clear morning and showering down around him. That blast was followed by several others as the rebel forces clashed with the Reparian soldiers. Most of the combatants using talents of fire and ice, with the occasional blast of lightning, all the others had more benign abilities that only helped in a peaceful daily life. Those fighters were using more prosaic means of battle, brandishing their weapons of steel and defending themselves with wooden shields.

Only the elite warriors like himself used rare talents of great power, but seeing this battle it was clear that it was those with menial talents that were fighting the hardest. For the rebels, this was their home and they were all prepared to die if that meant the Reparian armies were defeated. As for the enemy, Tama had no idea what they were fighting for, some false promise perchance.

The sudden appearance of a wall of stone shooting up from the ground in front of him disrupted his thoughts, making him take a step back. Above the thick wall the clock tower loomed, its old stones marked with signs of battle, but at the top the clock face still shone brightly, keeping the correct time perfectly.

“Do you even know who I am?” Tama shouted loudly for any to here, raising his fist. “I’m Tama the Unstoppable. No little wall can stop me.”

With a yell his fist shot forwards, cracking into the hard stone and turning it to rubble. The closest soldiers, on both sides, stopped their fighting and looked at him in awe. The rebel forces were quick to cheer loudly as he walked through the hole he had made and up the steps of the clock tower.

“It’s so loud,” he muttered, casually walking up the steps as chaos surrounded him.

More explosions cracked into the stone beside him, sending many fighters flying in all directions, their cries of pain piercing Tama's ears and making him wince.

One foolish Reparian soldier suddenly lunged at him, her fiery sword swinging for his head.

"Take this baldy," the soldier cried.

Grumbling under his breath Tama caught the sword with his hand, stopping it dead in its strike and making the woman gasp in horror. Knocking the sword aside he grabbed the soldier by the front of her tunic and with a twist sent her flying into several other Reparian soldiers.

"I shave," Tama grumbled under his breath as he climbed the last of the stairs, heading for the wide open entrance. "Stupid gi-

"Tama," the shout drawing his attention to the small man standing at the centre of the entrance. "You will go no further."

"Who are you?" he wondered curiously, not stopping.

"I am Commander Len, and I will stop you," the short thin man declared, drawing cheers from the nearby Reparians.

Tama smirked, "Sure. Whatever. Now, get out of the way before I hurt you little ma-

Again he was cut short as the small commander suddenly became huge, his muscle bound chest and arms ripping through his uniform. With nothing but tatters left of his underwear the man's seven foot frame loomed over Tama, causing his jaw to drop slightly.

"That's pretty awesome," he said with genuine surprise as Commander Len's skin turned to bright steel that shimmered in the light of the fires.

"Listen well Tama," Len laughed loudly, "You shall not pa-

Tama cut the man's words short as he covered the short distance between them in a heartbeat, his fist landing heavily into Len's gut. A great sound like that of a gong echoed around the entrance as the Commander went flying backwards from Tama's strike, shooting through the air and smashing right through the tower wall opposite the entrance.

With a shake of his smoking fist Tama continued his casual walk into the clock tower and up the stairs that would take him to the top. The Reparian soldiers in the area all stood with dumbfounded expressions as they watched him pass, but none of them were foolish enough to try and stop him.

The sounds of battle followed him up the tower, blasts shaking the stone around him and dropping dust from above. No more soldiers were there to stop him and soon he reached the top of the tower, coming out onto the open roof.

A smile came to his face as he pulled the rebel flag from his shoulders and jumped atop the railing. The flag unfurled in the wind, displaying the Delaforr crest for all the soldiers below to see.

Not daring to look down he imagined the Delaforr warriors to be spurred on by the display of their country's flag.

"Stupid heights," he muttered, trying to look heroic as he stood teetering on the edge and staring the east across the city. "Why'd Artharis get me to do this?"

He thought he heard some cheers from below, sounding above the fighting and drawing a smile to his face. Subconsciously he eyes dropped slightly, trying to see the bright faces of the warriors he was encouraging. But the shimmer of copper caught his attention as a great clockwork tank trundled over the top of some rubble in the distance.

"Another one?" Tama wondered as the tank stopped beside the smoking skeletons of the other tanks that had tried to shift the balance of power in the fight. "This one looks a bit different."

Raising his hand to his brow to stop the morning light from shining in his eyes he squinted towards the machine. It looked like the others, much bigger of course, but basically the same. Although the large cannon was different, and instead of the copper barrel this one had a large shard of crystal sticking out from the body, its glassy depths glowing with a deep blue.

"What is that?" Tama wondered as the glow seemed to grow.

In fact there was no doubt about it, the crystal spear was indeed glowing brightly, rivalling the light of the sun. Above the cries of battle he could hear a deep hum that he felt right in the pit of his stomach. Around the glowing crystal reality seemed to warp, twisting his sight of the tank's structure and making the rubble seem to twist on itself.

"This can't be good," he realised, the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end as he felt a wave of immense power ripple out from the clockwork tank. "Maybe I shouldn't be up here?"

Before he could move the throbbing energy shot out from the crystal, scorching through the air towards the clock tower. His eyes widened in surprise, but that was all he could do before the spear of deep blue light cracked into the stone of the tower. Everything seemed to stop as the energy warped in on itself, again twisting reality around it and stealing all noise from his ears. The light of day vanished as the energy swelled before it erupted out.

He did not even know what had happened, but suddenly he was flying through the air, the sounds of a thunderous explosion reverberating right through him. Pain wracked his body, such agony he had never felt before. What had happened? What was this new type of clockwork tank?

He never had the chance to ponder such mysteries for something smashed into the back of his head, stealing his consciousness and throwing him into the abyss.

\* \* \*

"And that's how I got here," Eclairé was saying as she walked beside Reith at the front of the group.

"Remarkable," Reith said with a slight laugh, a smile on his face.

"Hear that Dog," Nim said quietly to their four legged companion who walked beside her.

"Melodin is alive, though perhaps in trouble."

Dog barked confidently, seeming happy with the news.

"Enough with the bloody chatter," Tett snorted, "We're behind the enemy lines here. But I doubt those damn idiots would even realise."

“No, you’re right Tett,” Reith said over his shoulder, his dark eyes sparkling like Nim had never seen before. “We must be vigilant if we are to make it to the castle. I’ll scout ahead, the rest of you be sure to look after Nim.”

Nim frowned at the remark and Reith started off at a jog.

A wave of energy and wind suddenly burst into them from the south, sending her staggering to the side and nearly off her feet.

“What’s that?” Reith exclaimed, having skidded to a halt and pointed towards the southern end of the plateau where a dome of blue lightning had appeared above the poplars and rooftops of the mansions.

Nim’s mouth fell open in terror, the energy from the dome pressing against her chest and making it hard to breath. Clouds suddenly appeared in the skies overhead and a cold rain began to sprinkle down from the heavens, making her shield her eyes to see the sight.

“Come on,” Eclairé said, “Through here.”

Taking the lead the elf lead the way through the open gates of an estate and quickly down the drive to the old stone building that was covered in vines. Nim was close behind Eclairé, as were the others, and they rushed around the side of the building and onto the terrace that looked out over the city from the cliff top.

“By the gods,” Reith gasped as the incredible sight was laid before them.

Nim felt her knees go weak as saw the huge dome of energy at the centre of the city. An ache made itself present at her chest as tears filled her eyes, not even realising that she had collapsed to her knees.

“No,” she said in horror, “The clock tower, that’s where Tama and the others are fighting. What happened? What could have done this?”

None of her companions could offer an answer as they all stood staring in awe as the lightning dome slowly vanished leaving behind a great crater at the centre of Delaforr.

“Dead,” Nim sniffed, her tears falling down her checks, “They’re all dead. And for what? Why? They died for nothing. The city is destroyed.”

Bringing a hand up to her face she continued to cry, the cold rain falling on her head and shoulders, making her shiver.

“Cities can be rebuilt,” Tett remarked softly.

“And what of the people?” Nim snapped jumping to her feet, “Tama, Artharis, Nalch. Melodin was probably down there somewhere. They’re all dead. They died for nothing and the Delaforr is lost, destroyed.”

Tett looked away from her and another wave of tears made her shoulders shake.

“Destroyed by Reparian,” she said quietly, her despair turning to anger. “Damn them. Damn those Imperial bastards. They killed everyone, even their own men.”

Her eyes burning with anger she clutched at her chest, her fingers wrapping around the ring that hung on her chain. The metal felt cold to her touch, but as she tore it off the links the topaz began to glow. Warm energy flowed through her, washing away the cold of the rain and fanning the fires of hate that burned in her heart.

“Nim, wait,” Reith said seriously. “Don’t be foolish.”

“Is it foolish to want to avenge your friends and people?” she asked back, holding the Spirit Ring before her eyes. “Is it foolish to want the power to defeat your enemies?”

“Think of the cost,” the Sky Pirate was quick to reply. “Is it worth your life?”

She paused, a flicker of doubt coming to her heart.

“There are other ways,” Eclairé added seriously.

She glanced away from the glowing crystal to her two companions.

“Here now,” Tett added gruffly, “Didn’t you say that you didn’t want to be the bloody queen anyway? If Delaforr is lost then you can do what you want, can’t you? Move on I say.”

“Tett you’re not helping,” Reith snapped.

“Not helping who?” the dwarf snapped back angrily. “It’s not your bloody choice, pirate. It’s Nim’s decision to do what she likes, and if that means using the bloody ring than who are we to stop her?”



“I’m trying to stop her from making a bad decision,” Reith argued, “If she puts that ring on its virtually signing her own death warrant. Nim, listen to me-”

“Stop.” Nim shouted, she could feel her tears returning, “All of you.”

The others fell quiet, looking away sheepishly.

“Reith, I know the consequences,” she continued, her voice calmer, “But how can I sit by and do nothing? The power Reparian wields is right before us to see. How can we defend against something like that? The only way to fight great power is with an even greater one. With this ring ...”

Her voice trailed away as she looked back to the simmering topaz, its warmth continuing to flow through her despite the cold rain.

Silence fell over them, only the sound of rain pattering on the stones could be heard. There was no noise of fighting echoing up from the city, nothing, it was if the once bustling Delaforr had been turned into a graveyard.

“With the help of the earth spirit in this ring I will destroy Reparian,” Nim said seriously, her expression grave as she slipped the ring onto her finger.

\* \* \*

He took a hold of the railing of the ship as the shock wave rolled over them, making the airship sway, the immense energy rolling across the city and reverberating in his gut uncomfortably. Rain started to fall as heavy clouds appeared from the clear sky, but with a simple thought he made sure no drops would land on his head and shoulders.

“Beautiful,” Visteen exclaimed with wide eyes beside him, her laugh of delight, grating on his nerves. “So beautiful. Never did I think it would be this effective.”

“The researchers and scientists of the Emperious laboratories worked hard to create this,” Captain Gerbath remarked with a shaky voice, his expression one of awe as he looked upon the sight. “Of course it would be nothing less than the best. Although, I’m still amazed that they were able to harness the power of the cursed ring.”

“They’re not cursed,” Solordorr mumbled quietly, his muscles tense as he watched the blast dissipate.

“This rain is a surprise though,” the sorceress remarked, not hearing what he had said, “Likely it is a result of the blast. Or maybe because it is the Spirit Ring of water whose power we harnessed. No matter, come let us make for the castle already. Send word to the driver of the clockwork tank to meet us in the royal keep.”

“Yes ma’am,” Gerbath nodded and left, his features pale.

“Come now Solordorr, cheer up,” Visteen smiled at him, “Did you ever think those rings had such power?”

He did not reply, in fact he did not even bother regarding the sorceress, his crimson eyes lingering on the massive crater of destruction that now sat in the middle of the city.

\* \* \*

“What was that?” Melodin exclaimed as a wave of energy rolled over him and a great explosion deafened his ears.

Once he regained his balance he raced towards the closest pile of rubble, scrambling over the rocks as he climbed his way to the top. Rain began to fall as he climbed the broken building, drenching his simple undershirt that he wore and making him shiver.

“What?” he gasped as he got to the top of the broken structure, his eyes going wide and his mouth falling open.

A huge dome of blue lightning loomed before him, sending energy throbbing against his temples and making his knees feel weak.

“Impossible. What is this?” he exclaimed in horror.

The dome vanished and naught but the sound of rain echoed around him, turning the sight across the city into a grey haze. For many minutes he stood there, unblinking and mouth agape. The clock tower that had stood so proudly above the other rooftops had been destroyed along with half of the domed roof of the court house.

The sight of an airship drifting lazily overhead towards the castle caught his attention, and blinking through the rain drops he recognised the colours and crest of Reparian. The sight filled him with anger, causing his hands to ball into fists at his sides.

“Visteen,” he muttered through clenched teeth, “I bet she was the one who orchestrated this. Doesn’t she care that she just killed hundreds of people?”

Baring his teeth angrily Melodin scampered down the ruined building, tripping over the shoes that were too big for him and racing off through the city streets. The buildings of Riverside flew by him as he sprinted along the cobblestone roads, over the bridges that arched one of the streams that flowed in off the main river behind the castle keep.

Piles of bricks and timber frames were scattered about the pathways, making him feel like he was running an obstacle course through the streets. The rain continued to splatter against his face, drenching his clothes. But he did not feel the cold as he ran, his breathing getting heavier as the streets and bridges continued to reach out before him. Although damaged, and many ruined, the tall buildings loomed all around him, their different coloured stone and balconies making him think that this place would have been amazing when it had been at its peak, and he wished he remembered them. But now it was nothing more than a deserted city, broken and filled with death.

Over another bridge he raced, the waterway below clogged with wooden beams and broken furniture. Reaching the other side he slowed to a walk and finally stopped, turning about with his eyes to the rooftops.

“I think I’m lost,” he said between breaths and scratched the back of his head. “Perfect.”

With a groan he continued, absently kicking a stone with his big shoes and holding his arms close around his chest. A violent sneeze suddenly erupted forth, making him sniff and rub his nose.

“When did it get so cold?” he mumbled, a shiver running through his body.

What flames had been through the streets were no nothing more than smouldering ash giving off nothing but choking smoke and no warmth at all.

A wind picked up, racing through the roads, making him shiver all the more as it forced the already heavy rain harder into his face. The flap of material caught his attention, drawing his eyes to a heavy coat that had become snagged on the splinters of a great beam.

He paused at the sight and with a shrug he pulled it from the rubble and slipped it onto his shoulders.

“Decent fit,” he remarked in surprise, looking down at the long coat. “I don’t recognise this symbol though. I don’t think it’s Reparian. Probably Delaforr military then.”

With another shrug he buttoned up the coat and continued at a walk along the road, his eyes wandering about the unfamiliar pathways, a blank expression on his face. All of a sudden the buildings fell away as the path led onto a wide road that stretched far in both directions. Following the street to the east his eyes widened in surprise as the huge castle loomed very close to him.

“Just as I planned,” he laughed to himself, a wide smile creeping across his face, “Who said I was lost.”

With a grin he looked down to his side where Dog would usually trot, but with his fury companion nowhere to be seen his smile slowly vanished. Taking a deep breath he looked back to the castle and started towards the gate house that he could see not far ahead.

A loud rumbling sound slowed his walk and drawing his attention to the road behind him as a large clockwork tank rolled down the road. A chill suddenly washed over him, and his eyes darted about for a place to hide, but it was too late, the soldier sitting atop the copper construct had already spotted him.

Gritting his teeth Melodin held his ground, his stomach twisting into uncomfortable knots as the huge tank rolled closer, making the ground beneath his feet shake.

## Chapter Thirty-four

“Get out the way!”

The voice of Lancer cried over the top of the thundering hooves of their steed. Fires raged all around them as the group of Kingsguard raced her from the city. She caught a glimpse of two young boys about her own age dive out of the way of her horse before an explosion covered her eyes with dust and smoke.

Tears filled her eyes as she clung on to the mane of Lancer’s horse, her knuckles turning white from lack of blood. Suddenly the horse lurched beneath her, she cried out as she felt herself falling towards the hungry flames. But the strong arm of Lancer kept her on the saddle in front of him.

Tears continued to fall as the city of Delaforr crumbled into dust around her. Her home, her family, were all being destroyed.

“Why?” she cried to herself, “Why is this happening?”

Shutting her eyes tightly she tried to make it all go away, but the noises of death and destruction rung loudly in her ears.

A whack on the top of her head made the noises go away and she opened her eyes with surprise to see herself standing in a large and sunny chamber filled with rich furniture and decoration.

“Are you listening to me princess?” the harsh voice of an older woman spoke loudly in front of her.

The sunlight from the windows masked the woman’s face with shadow and made the woman tower above her.

“I was,” she replied sheepishly, her own voice sounding distant.

“How many times have I told you not to go running about the gardens playing games with the servant’s children,” the towering woman berated her. “You are a princess, and you must not behave in such a manner. One day you will be Queen of Lakelinds. How do you expect the soldiers and commoners to look up to you and revere you if you act like one of them? You are royalty, and by that mere fact you are better than them. They are your subjects, to do as you command. What do you suppose your parents would say about this if they were still alive?”

She bit down on her lip, a mixture of emotion churning inside her.

“And regardless,” the dark woman continued irritably, “You were supposed to be studying the art of war with Lancer and Tama. How are you to reclaim Delaforr and your country with no knowledge of war? I honestly do not know how they put up with you girl. They are members of the Kingsguard, true, but I’m sure they have other places they want to be instead of babysitting their queen-to-be. They have high expectations from you, as do the rest of your subjects that still live, and yet you continue to insult them by playing childish games with your lessors. You should be ashamed of yourself.”

Tears began to fall as she bit down on her lip so hard she drew blood. Shutting her eyes tightly she suppressed the urge to scream.

She felt herself become light and her eyes popped open to see the floor open up and swallow her, sucking her down in a impenetrable darkness. She cried out in fear as the wind whistled past her ears accompanied by the sounds of fighting and the screams of the dying. Below her a light pieced the shadows, its angry red glow reaching up to her and pulling her down faster.

She cried out again, but her breath was stolen as she landed face first into some sticky swamp. She gasped as she recoiled and jumped to her feet, the smell was unbearable. She started to cough, but her breath became caught in her throat as she realised she was standing amidst a sea of corpses.

“What?” she gasped in horror, the putrid fluids trickling down her face.

“Be strong princess,” one of the corpses beside her croaked.

Eyes wide she looked down to see the pale face of Nalch, his faded eyes staring up at her.

“In war people die,” Nalch croaked, his blue lips barely moving. “I would gladly lay down my life for yours. My Princess. My Queen.”

“No,” Nim gasped, tears filling her eyes again. “I never asked you to die for me. I never asked anyone to die for me.”

“That’s not the point.”

The deep voice grabbed her attention away from Nalch and she looked up across the corpses. She gasped as she looked about, no longer was she surrounded by dead bodies, but instead a wide and barren plane. White skies loomed over her head and the deep red stone beneath her feet seemed to glow.

“Princess.”

The voice made her turn about quickly and she gasped as he eyes fell upon the face of Lancer who stood several paces from her. Her eyes widened in horror as she looked upon the elf’s pale face and deep red gash across his throat. Blood slowly trickled from that wound, causing her to take a step backwards.

“It’s not about whether you asked them to die for you,” Lancer said slowly, his words making more blood flow from his wound. “It is their choice. They fight for their homeland. They fight for their comrades. You are the symbol of their wish to fight, a symbol of the dream that Lakelinds will once again be an independent realm. You have a duty to be that beautiful symbol, to become the Queen you were born to be.”

“And what about me?” she snapped suddenly, tears coming to her eyes. “No one has ever asked me if I want to be that symbol of hope. They never asked me if I want to be queen. Don’t I get a say in what I want to do with my life?”

“You would abandon them then?” Lancer asked back, his dead face showing no expression.

“I never said that,” she quickly replied, “I just want them to stop fighting, to stop dying in my name. I just want ... I just ...”

Her voice trailed away as tears rolled down her cheek and she slowly shook her head.

“I don’t know what I want,” she mumbled and sniffed, wiping the moisture from her cheeks.

“Then why did you ask for my help?”

The tone of Lancer’s voice had changed, grabbing her attention. She gasped slightly as she looked up to see that the elf was no longer there, and in his place stood a large stone golem made from many huge rocks that somehow held together. It had no mouth to speak, nor a face, but two large eyes stared at her, their deep golden hue glowing with warmth and knowledge.

“What?” she wondered, her voice barely a whisper, “Who are you?”

“I am the spirit of the earth,” the golem replied calmly, its voice like an earthquake. “I am trapped in the ring you now wear.”

She looked down to her hand to see the silver ring on her finger, its topaz stone glowing like the golem’s eyes.

“So tell me, descendant of the Tyrant King,” said the golem, drawing her eyes back to its,

“What do you want of me? And what do you offer in return?”

It was then she realised she was in her own mind, oblivious to the real world and all she had just been through were merely memories and thoughts.

“What do I want?” she wondered aloud.

“Why did you put my ring on your finger?”

Her jaw firmed and a stern look came to her face as she managed to sort out her own thoughts.

“I need your power to defeat the armies of Reparian,” Nim replied seriously, her ringed hand clenching into a fist.

“And what do you offer in return for my power?” asked the golem, its eyes watching her closely.

“My life.”



“Interesting,” mused the earth spirit, “You do not want others to die in this fight, and yet you readily offer your own life to see it end.”

“Why should I give anything less to see my homeland restored?” she asked back, a frown coming to her face.

“You would give your life for a dream that is not your own?” asked the golem curiously.

“What? It is mine,” she argued, but her words sounded hollow to her ears.

“If you say so,” replied the spirit, “I have seen your thoughts, your memories, your desires, and even your deepest secrets. But if this is your wish, then it will be so. In exchange for use of my powers I will take your life.”

Suddenly the golem vanished and darkness took her sight, leaving her confused and drifting on a still wind of indecision.

“Nim? Nim are you alright?” a familiar voice reached out through the abyss.

“Just carry her,” said another voice. “We need to get to that vault.”

“The bloody vault?” asked another voice, this one louder and much more gruff. “What are you on about?”

“Only a member of the royal family can open it,” replied the first voice, slowly coming clearer to her ears. “But it doesn’t mean that member need be conscious.”

“What the bloody hell are you two saying?” the voice of Tett grumbled, “You’re just after that damn Spirit Ring, aren’t you?”

“Why did you think we were here?” asked the voice of Eclair flatly. “The war doesn’t matter.”

“Eclair’s right,” said Reith, “If we don’t get that ring before ... Nim, are you alright?”

Her eyes fluttered open to see the Sky Pirate looking down at her. The brightness of the rainy day making her cover her eyes as Reith helped her to sit up.

“Why did you put on that ring?” Reith asked, his tone serious, “Have my warnings not been dire enough? You will die.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Nim replied, her gaze going to the large crater in the middle of the city that was left by the blast. “Only the defeat of Reparian matters. Lakelinds will once again be an independent realm.”

Pushing herself to her feet a frown came to her face, for once again her own words sounded very hollow to her ears. The rain continued to fall around her, making small puddles on the overgrown balcony that splashed beneath her footsteps as she walked back through the estate towards the main entrance.

“Hold up, damn it,” Tett grumbled loudly as he and the others followed her, “What the bloody hell happened back there? Why’d you pass out Princess?”

“I would have thought that would be obvious to a genius like you, Tett,” Reith joked.

“Just shut up and tell me, you idiot,” the dwarf snapped back.

“Nim put on the ring with the intention of using it,” Eclair spoke up, grabbing Nim’s curiosity as they walked from the estate and back onto the roads. “So, the Spirit drew her into her mind to forged a deal with it.”

A low growl beside her drew Nim’s gaze down to Dog who trotted easily along the road.

“I follow you,” Tett nodded, scratching his balding head, “So what deal did you make princess?”

“I need its power to defeat Reparian,” Nim replied simply, her eyes fixed on the road ahead.

“And what did you offer in exchange?” Tett asked curiously.

“Her life,” Reith answered for her, “That is all the spirits ever want.”

“That’s right, you got one of them bloody things as well,” remarked the dwarf, “How’d you come buy it anyway?”

“Through a series of bad luck,” replied the sky pirate, “Although I knew what it was when I put it on and had heard about them before. I knew it would take my life for its power, but back then I did not care and willingly made a deal with the spirit.”

Nim looked to Reith in surprise, "You made the deal willingly? You've always been furious at Melodin for wearing his."

"I was foolish to put on the spirit ring," Reith replied, "It was something I regretted all too soon after making the deal, and something I want to spare others from enduring."

"You're angry with me then?" Nim lowered her eyes.

"Furious in fact," Reith replied before he sighed heavily, "After all my warnings you still did it, just for a little bit of power. I wonder how you could be so foolish. But, despite my disappointment and anger I can understand why you did."

She looked up at the sky pirate curiously.

"I just wish you would have trusted in your friends and subjects to win this fight instead of resorting to sacrificing yourself," Reith looked sadly at her before he sighed again and looked away.

"Subjects," Nim echoed quietly, the word causing some anger to spark within her.

Dog growled low again as she walked beside her.

"How can I not sacrifice myself?" Nim asked, her voice rising, grabbing the attention of her comrades, "How can I stand back and watch others die and do nothing? If I'm not willing to die for this then how can I expect others to do so? I have no abilities, no powers, like Melodin I could only survive on the strength from others. No more. This is my home, and if I have to die to see it reborn then I will."

Angrily she stormed ahead of the others, hands clenched into fists at her side as tears trickled down her cheeks. Determination filled her as the road headed over a lip and began a slow descent towards the area of the city called Hebrodee and the castle on the other side of the river.

"If I have to put on the spirit ring in the castle vault as well I will do so willingly," she said quietly to herself as her eyes locked onto the tall spires of the castle.

Trotting beside her she heard Dog growl low again.

\* \* \*

“So Melodin is your name,” nodded the soldier sitting beside him as they rode the large clockwork tank through the streets towards the castle. “Not very Reparian, is it? But I guess you wouldn’t be a very good spy if you looked like an Imperial. Still can’t believe someone as young as you could be part of the Spy Corps.”

“Well,” Melodin stammered, scratching the back of his head, “The emblem on this jacket doesn’t lie, I am a spy for Reparian doing a bit of scouting. Thanks for the ride by the way.”

“No worries,” smiled the Reparian soldier, “You’re just lucky we’re heading to the castle after sorting out the fighting at the clock tower.”

“Wait,” he frowned slightly, “You mean that blast before was you guys?”

The young woman grinned at him, “Damn right. This baby you’re riding on is the latest in technology from the labs of Emperious. I’d tell you what made it so powerful, but if you don’t already know then you don’t have authority to know. Secrets and all that, I’m sure you understand.”

He nodded slightly and looked away, a deep crease coming to his brow. That blast had killed so many, and not only rebel soldiers, there must have been hundreds of Imperial troops fighting there too, and this tank had been the one to kill them all.

His hands clenched into on his lap and the muscles of his jaw twitched angrily.

“So Melodin,” the soldier asked curiously, “What are you doing scouting around this area? Riverside has been under our control from the very beginning, as well as Hebrodee.”

“Well,” he replied hesitantly, “I could tell you, but then I’d have to kill you.”

The young woman burst out laughing and slapped her thigh, “You lot always say that.”

“We do like to keep secrets,” he strained a smile, causing the soldier to laugh harder.

“Your comrades in the castle are just as funny as yourself, Melodin,” the soldier said when she had finished laughing, taking off her hat to run a hand over her half shaved head. “I guess you already know them, right? Is that why you’re going this way, to meet up with

them? Seems like a good idea. After all this war is pretty much won, it's almost time to celebrate. My favourite part of battles. Hey, share a drink with me during the celebrations."

"Yeah, sure," he replied subconsciously before a sudden realisation hit him like a bolt of lightning, "Wait, did you say other spies were at the castle already?"

"Yep," nodded the soldier, "There's the sorceress lady, Visteen is her name I think. There's also that creepy red eyed man and that former Kingsguard member. Haven't you met them before? I suppose you're a rookie compared to them. Wait, don't tell me that the reason we met you back there was because you got lost?"

Melodin looked away and towards the castle that loomed closer, just beyond the two gates and the bridge that crossed the river.

The sudden laughter from the young woman brought his attention back to her and her pretty face filled with life.

"You were lost," the soldier laughed, slapping her thigh again before she calmed, "Not to worry, everyone gets lost now and then. I'll tell you what, I'll keep it a secret if you promise to have a drink with me at the victory celebrations. Deal?"

Melodin felt his cheeks go warm and he looked back to the castle uneasily.

"Sure," he managed to stammer, "It's a deal."

"Great," exclaimed the young woman, "Hey look. Is that ice in the river?"

Curiously Melodin looked over the tank to where the soldier was pointing to the slow moving river below. His mouth fell open slightly as he spotted several large chunks of ice drifting on the current and moving under the drawbridge. A frown came to his brow and he looked upstream, but spotted nothing unusual at the river bank. Slowly his eyes drifted up the stair case that headed up from the bank and through a small doorway that lead into the bailey. A flash of blue caught his attention at the doorway, making him blink and squint.

"Spot something?" asked the soldier curiously.

"No," he shook his head.

“Wouldn’t think there’d be ice in the rivers at this time of year,” the soldier remarked thoughtfully and yawned wide. “Man, I’m tired. I’ll be glad to get some rest once we reach the castle. I never thought that kicking rebel bums would be so tiring.”

She snickered slightly and leaned back on the brass tank, her mirth causing a swell of anger to build within him once again. But taking a deep breath he pushed it away, telling himself that soldiers like this woman, on both sides, did not know any better. That they were just following orders from their superiors and it was those in command that were to blame for all this fighting. It was people like Visteen that were the ones that would pay for this gross disregard of life.

His anger still seething he waited patiently as the clockwork tank rolled through the castle gates and into the bailey where a small detachment of Reparian soldiers mingled, watching the gates and a small portion of the wall.

At the front of the grand castle doors the tank rolled to a stop, drawing a curious crowd of fighters.

“So this is what the labs have been working on?” called on soldier as Melodin and the young woman jumped off.

“Damn right,” grinned the young woman, “And I’m the mechanic that makes this baby run.”

“It was you lot who ended the fighting at the clock tower?” asked another Reparian fighter.

“Yep.”

“Why would you do that?” blurted another angrily, “Hundreds of our men were still there. You dumb bitch. How cou-”

“We had our orders,” said a deep voice of an older man as he climbed out from the cockpit of the tank and to the ground. “Same as all of you.”

“Captain Gerbath?” one of the gathered said with surprise, the name causing Melodin to freeze and a cold sweat to form on his brow. “Why would they order such an attack? It’s evil beyond compare.”

“This order came from the Emperor himself,” Gerbath snapped back, “Now, all of you back to your posts, this battle is nowhere near finished.”

“Yes sir,” came the reply from most of the gathered as they turned about and continued about their duties.

Quietly Melodin turned away and calmly started walking, thinking to quickly slip away before the soldier recognised him.

“Your name is Melodin, correct?” the question from Gerbath made him stop, a feeling of terror flooded over him. “You’re the one I recommended for promotion.”

“That’s right,” Melodin replied, slowly turning around, keeping his voice as steady as he could.

“I did not know you were part of the Spy Corps,” Gerbath narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

“Well,” Melodin shrugged, “If you did that would defeat the purpose of my mission.”

“Your mission?” the Captain asked curiously.

“It’s top secret,” Melodin looked to the young woman’s curious expression. “Only two others know about it.”

“I see,” Gerbath nodded his head slowly, his eyes still filled with suspicions. “Visteen is no doubt one of them?”

Melodin shrugged vaguely and took a deep breath.

“I’ll take you to her then,” declared Gerbath, making Melodin’s stomach twist uncomfortably.

“No,” he was quick to say, drawing a surprised look from the Captain, “I mean, I’m not finished yet. No point speaking to Visteen just yet. Still much I need to do you see. I do thank you for the ride here, Captain.”

“Of course,” Gerbath nodded slowly, “Well, if you need anything, be sure to let me know.”

“I will do that,” he smiled stiffly, “I’ll see you around then. What was your name again?”

The young woman frowned at him, “It’s Hash. Don’t forget it again. And don’t forget our deal.”

“I won’t,” he turned away, waving over his shoulder as he thought to disappear into the castle grounds.

However, he stopped in his tracks once again as he met the eyes of a tall and imposing man who stood in his way.

“Wait one moment, if you will,” the tall man said, his blue eyes sparkling. “You’re name is Melodin, yes?”

“It is,” Melodin replied slowly, a deep frown on his face as he regarded the tall man closely.

There was something about him that Melodin did not like and yet something incredibly familiar.

A grin crept across the man’s face, his eyes sparkling all the more, making Melodin feel uneasy.

“You have your mother’s face,” the tall man remarked simply.

“What?” he wondered aloud, “Who are you? You knew my mother?”

The imposing man chuckled slightly and turned away, “Walk with me. I wish to have a word in private with you, Melodin the spy.”

Uneasily he glanced back to Hash and Gerbath, who were both watching the interaction curiously, before slowly moving to follow the large warrior towards the castle.

Who was this man? How did he know his mother?

“Why do I know you?” Melodin whispered to himself as he followed the man through the castle doors and into the darkened castle halls.



## Chapter Thirty-five

Never keeping his frown off the tall warrior that was leading him through the castles main hall he walked slowly across the dusty stone. No lights shone on the walls, leaving only the natural light from the day to drift in through the windows. But with the day still overcast and raining it did little to illuminate the shadows that hid in the corners.

At the end of the hall a broken throne stood silently in front of a great stain-glass window, its glass cracked and shattered granting wide views towards the large river beyond. The sun peaked from the clouds as he drew closer, lighting up the splintered back of the throne, but it vanished as quickly as it had come.

“What’s this?” Melodin remarked in surprise as he stopped before a gaping hole in the floor that reached down into the darkness.

“It was the quickest way to the vault,” the warrior shrugged, starting down the rubble and into the tunnel.

Hesitantly Melodin followed, cautiously skipping down the broken bricks onto the stone of the tunnel. Torches hung periodically along the curved passage walls, allowing him to see where he was going and to take a closer look at the curious tunnel. Strangely it seemed as if this passageway had been formed by some strange magic instead of cut by pickaxes.

“So, you’re a spy for Reparian?” the tall warrior asked over his shoulder, hints of amusement in his voice.

“That’s right,” replied Melodin, trying to sound confident, “Is that so hard to believe?”

“Not at all,” the man laughed slightly. “You just seem very young. Who trained you?”

“Visteen, of course,” Melodin was quick to say.

“Of course.”

Melodin narrowed his eyes at the comment, a mixture of fear and curiosity swirling within him. He knew he should be weary of this warrior, whose strength was obvious, and yet there was something else there, something familiar.

“Who are you anyway?” Melodin found himself asking before he realised.

“I thought you’d know that,” the man replied, glancing over his armoured shoulder, his blue eyes sparkling in the torch light. “You being a Reparian spy and all.”

“Well,” he stammered, looking away, “I’m just being polite is all.”

“Polite?”

“That’s right,” Melodin steadied his voice, “It’s quite obvious who you are.”

The warrior smiled slightly, bringing a frown to Melodin’s face and a tension to creep into his neck.

“You’re the Kingsguard traitor everyone talks about,” Melodin said confidently

“The Traitor, am I?”

“Yes,” Melodin nodded, reaffirming his thoughts, but the man’s tone was rather strange.

A heavy silence drifted over them as they continued to follow the path downwards, spiralling slowly through the stone. Their footsteps echoed with a dull tap, sounding hollow, as if the tension between them was stifling all else.

Melodin’s frown deepened the further they walked, his suspicious eyes never leaving the back of The Traitor’s head. This man was dangerous, he knew that, and if it was discovered that Melodin had been lying about his identity all this time he would be in a very dangerous situation. But still, he was not scared.

The Traitor did not scare him at all, strangely the more he thought about it, the more it seemed as if the opposite was more accurate.

The stone passageway soon opened out into another corridor, but this one was built with grey brick and a tiled floor. Crystal lights sat upon columns along the walls, floating near the high ceiling beneath gentle archways that held up the earth.

Taking a left The Traitor led the way down the hall and into a small area in front of a huge metal door. Boulders were strewn about the area, remnants of large stone statues that had once stood at either side of the door. Looking closer at the broken face of one of the proud knight he could see that the stone had in fact been cut and burned in many places.

“They were the vault guardians,” The Traitor remarked offhandedly as he sat down upon one of the statues torso. “Tough bastards.”

Melodin narrowed his eyes at the man suspiciously, his gaze falling upon The Traitor’s bright blue eyes, rugged jawline and dark brown hair that was tired back from his face. The former Kingsguard member wore impressive armour of dark steel plate and scale, a scarf of black curled around his shoulders, dangling off one shoulder, its ends tattered and frayed. Another black satin sash was twisted about his waist, holding a fine looking katana at his hip, and accompanied by a jagged chainmail skirt.

“Who are you?” Melodin wondered aloud, causing the man to raise an eyebrow. “How do you know my mother?”

“I’m The Traitor, aren’t I?” the man asked back before taking a deep breath as a flicker of pain flashed across his features. “As for your mother, Mythrin, we were close for a time.”

“Close?” he eyes narrowed in confusion, “What do you mean? Did you know my father as well?”

“Well, yes, I know your father quite well,” The Traitor remarked with another chuckle.

The odd reply made his gut twist uncomfortably, bringing a frown to his face.

“Who are you?” Melodin asked hesitantly.

“You keep asking me that,” The Traitor replied, his voice sending a chill down Melodin’s spine. “Surely you know the truth without asking.”

“The truth?” stammered Melodin, unconsciously taking a step back, his head shaking as a cold sweat beaded on his brow.

“That’s right,” The Traitor said, standing up, his broad frame stealing the light from one of the crystals.

“No,” Melodin whispered as the realisation sunk in.

The Traitor nodded, a warm smile coming to his face, “Melodin, I am your father.”

Melodin took another step back, his mouth falling open.

“No, that’s not true. It can’t be true,” he stammered, the stone face of a vault guardian halting his retreat. “Arildin died defending Delaforr from Reparian soldiers, everyone I asked said so. He would never betray his homeland and his family.”

“Many think betrayal as a death,” the warrior shrugged.

“No,” Melodin yelled, “You’re lying. My father was a hero, and you’re The Traitor.”

“Traitor?” a look of anger came to Arildin’s face, “I never betrayed my homeland, boy. Do I look like a native of Lakelinds to you? No, I was born in Reparian and have been working for the Empire since the first Repairan-Solegrad war.”

“That impossible,” Melodin stammered, “I don’t believe you, you’re lying.”

“You’re lying to yourself if you believe those words,” Arildin replied calmly, “I am your father, you are my son.”

“You are lying,” Melodin snapped, “If you’re not then you are a traitor. You betrayed me and my mother, your wife. Did you not love us? How could you be a Reparian spy and build a family in Delaforr?”

“Are you that foolish?” Arildin asked sternly, “Building a family was a way to solidify my cover, but that is not to say I didn’t love Mythrin or you. Of course I did. News of her death saddened me greatly, as did your disappearance.”

“Then why didn’t you find me,” Melodin cut in fiercely, he could feel tears welling in his eyes.

“Do you think I didn’t try?” The Traitor looked at him in confusion, his voice raising slightly.

“Of course I did.”

“Why should I believe you?” Melodin snapped, “You’re nothing but a Reparian spy.”

Anger drove his movements as he slipped his toe under a rock and launched it at Arildin’s face. The rock whistled through the air before connecting solidly with The Traitor’s cheek.

Surprised at his own violence Melodin gasped as blood slowly trickled down Arildin's face.

"Stupid boy," The Traitor said darkly, a mask of anger coming to his face.

Slowly Arildin drew his marvellous katana and took a step towards him.

"Don't call me boy," Melodin snapped back kicking another rock towards his father.

But the stone never got close to its mark and with a flash of purple light the projectile bounced away to the side.

Looking back to Arildin's fierce visage a swell of fear twisted in the pit of his stomach and his eyes widened as The Traitor raised his hand towards him. Swirls of purple wind snaked around the man's arm, pooling at the centre of his palm. Melodin could feel the build-up of energy, but he was not eager to wait around to see what was about to happen.

Quickly he turned to the side and started to sprint back the way they had come, but it was too late and the purple energy fired towards him.

He was done for.

Suddenly his foot got caught on something, tripping up his feet and sending him sprawling to the ground. The air hissed angrily as the wave of energy raced over the top of him before slamming into the stone wall, sending great cracks running across its surface.

"Are you insane?" Melodin roared, jumping to his feet, "You could've killed me."

"To think," Arildin said slowly, "A child of mine with no powers. But I should not be surprised, given who your mother was."

"What was that?" Melodin shouted, his anger growing. "Don't you dare talk about my mother like that."

"Do you even remember her?" Arildin asked back, his voice very controlled. "I doubt you do. Although her talents were minor she was pleasant enough, although nothing compared to my first wife. You call me a traitor, but that just shows how ignorant you are."

"Shut up," Melodin yelled, his hands clenched into fists at his sides.

“She was killed, you know,” Arildin continued, “My one true love. She was killed by a Lakelinds raid into Reparian, along with my daughter who was barely five years old at the time.”

Melodin’s furious expression lessened then, as he saw the pain came to Arildin’s eyes.

“So you see,” the man continued, “There is no betrayal, boy.”

“Stop calling me boy,” Melodin yelled, his anger building again, “You are a traitor. You betrayed me and my mother. And I will make you pay.”

Grabbing the broken hilt of vault guardian’s sword he charged at his father. Thoughts of defeat never entered his mind as fury guided his movements.

“Stupid child,” Arildin said quietly, swirls of purple magic rushing around his form and sword.

Although broken the stone sword hilt was still heavy in his hands as he swung for Arildin’s shoulder. But all too easily was his attack slapped aside by his father’s katana, the impact making his arms vibrate and causing cracks to break through the hilt of his sword.

Before he had a chance to strike again he felt a wave of energy thunder into his gut, pushing him backwards and into the rubble of the broken statues. The pain of hitting the rocks made him cry out as the crash blew the air from his lungs. Gritting away the bruises he felt, Melodin rolled back to his feet and faced his father once again.

His eyes widened in surprise as a barrage of purple lights raced towards him. Quickly he ducked back down behind the rubble as the energy balls cracked into the stone, sending vibration right through and showering him with debris.

“Damn it. What do I do?” he grumbled to himself as he slunk down further behind the quickly deteriorating stone.

A flash of light above him grabbed his attention as a ball of amethyst flames dropped down on him from the ceiling.

Eyes wide he quickly scrambled to the side as the fires crashed down where he had been hiding, melting the stone and scorching the back of his jacket.

“Fire. not good,” he cried as he tore the Reparian coat from his shoulders and tossed it to the ground.

Another flash of light caught his attention and without thinking he dived behind another large rock as a vein of purple lightning flew towards him. The blast of electricity bounced off the rock just above his head before it cracked into the stone wall a few paces in front of him, leaving his hair to stand on end.

“What the hell kind of powers do you have?” Melodin yelled in frustration as he hid behind the stone clutching the broken sword tightly in his hands.

“Powers?” Arildin asked curiously in reply.

Melodin’s eyes widened in terror as his father suddenly appeared right in front of him, his muscular frame looming over him.

Desperately he kicked out at Arildin’s shins as he jumped to his feet, stabbing with his sword at the man’s ribs. His kick bounced off the metal plate guards of Arildin’s high boots and before the point of the broken sword reached the man’s armour a strong hand stopped his attack.

“What powers do you think I have, boy?” Arildin asked seriously as he brought the edge of his katana close to Melodin’s neck.

“What then?” Melodin asked back, his eyes wide, “You a sorcerer?”

A thin smile came to the man’s face, “Battlemage to be more accurate. But like you, I have no natural talents.”

As he spoke Arildin sheathed his sword, allowing Melodin to breathe a bit easier.

“Regardless,” his father continued, his tone still dark, “You have no hope of beating me, boy. Give up and accept what is.”

His father’s words echoed painfully in his mind, making him feel as if a great void had opened up beneath his feet and swallowed him whole.

What chance did he have at winning?

Arlidin was too strong. He was one of the Kingsguard after all. How could he have ever thought he could defeat The Tower?

It was useless.

He was useless.

“Melodin?”

The surprised voice caught his attention pulling his eyes towards the passageway that led from the vault and to the group of familiar faces that had appeared there.

“Nim?” he cried out in delight as his eyes met with the bright gaze of the young woman at the front of the group. “What are you d-”

His voice was cut short as a heavy fist thundered into his gut, blasting his air from his lungs. Before he knew what was happening he was flying through the air. But that flight ended quickly as he crashed into the stone wall, whacking his head on the rock as he tumbled to the floor.

“Melodin?” he heard Reith cry out, though the Sky pirate’s voice was very distant.

“No,” screamed Nim, as if she was calling to him above the surface of the water that was drowning his senses.

Through bleary eyes he looked to his friends, catching the sight of swirling purple magic and flying arrows of pale blue. They were attacking Arlidin in his defence.

“No,” Melodin croaked with a voice that seemed very much separated from where he was,

“You can’t win.”

Brief flashes of more magic reached into his eyes that were taken by darkness and the sounds of fighting drifted away on the wind.

“I’m so useless,” his own voice said in his mind as he slowly sunk deeper into the bottomless lake of unconsciousness.



His eyes suddenly popped open and he bolted upright. Green plains stretched around him, reaching as far as the eye could see with not even a tree to break the horizon. Above his head the sky was white, shining with no sun to mark the passage of time.

“What is this?” he wondered, though his lips did not move and his voice sounded all around him. “What’s going on? Where am I? This is really not normal.”

“My, my, so many questions,” another voice spoke through the air. “I would have thought you would have worked it out by now, child.”

“Who said that?” he cried out, jumping to his feet and looking around at the far reaching carpet of grass.

“It was I,” said the voice as a gust of wind swirled around him, picking up the blades of grass as it massed together to form a beautiful woman.

His mouth fell open in wonder as his wide eyes drank up the incredible sight before him.

The woman smiled at him as she flicked her long silvery hair from her face to let it float strangely on a gentle breeze. Floating too were the white robes of almost translucent clothe that drifted around her, concealing her body only where it was necessary. Amazingly her beauty and figure was not what amazed him the most and the reason his mouth fell open was that this woman was hovering a few inches off the ground.

“This is really not normal,” he said, taking a step back.

“You’re the only one to blame for that,” the woman replied, her amusement obvious, “This is your mind after all.”

“I’m in my own head?”

“That’s right.”

“Really?” he wondered, looking about, “Why is it so empty then?”

“Nim.” A voice cried out from above, sounding distant and yet piecing at the same time.

“Sounds like your friends are in trouble,” the woman remarked, drawing his attention back to her. “You should probably help them.”

“Help them?” Melodin asked with frustration, “How can I do that? I’m useless when it comes to fighting.”

A sly smile came to the woman’s face, her features became menacing.

“Maybe I can help you with that? I am after all the spirit of the wind.”

“You’re the ...” he voice trailed away.

“You wear me, and still have not made a deal with me,” the woman continued, her appearance becoming light once again, “Don’t you know its rude to keep a lady waiting?”

“A deal?” he balked, “You want my life in exchange for your powers, right? Reith told me as such, but you can forget it. I won’t be fooled by the likes of you.”

“But you want to help your friends, right?” she looked at him in surprise, “How do you expect to do that without any power?”

He frowned deeply and looked to the grass beneath his feet, a feeling of despair clutching at his chest.

“You poor thing,” the spirit remarked. “You put this ring on without a wish for power, and yet that’s exactly what you need to survive in this world. But now you understand and yet you’re unwilling to make the sacrifice. What are you to do? I mean, if you really don’t want me help then pass me onto someone who does, it might save you further troubles.”

“Pass you on?” he wondered, looking back to the spirit who was now reclining on an unseen bench. “How can I do that? The ring won’t come off.”

“You foolish child,” the spirit sighed, “Like so many before you, you fail to understand the truth.”

“What truth?”

She looked at his slyly, “Well, I could tell you, but what do you offer in return?”

He clenched his jaw, “Damn, I don’t have time for your games. I need to get back and help my friends.”

“Without any powers of your own?” she asked back in surprise, “What do you hope to achieve? You would just get in the way.”

He took a deep breath before straightening his shoulders, “Maybe you’re right. Maybe I don’t have a chance at winning. I have no power, that’s true. But even if I make a deal with you I still would only be borrowing yours. I can’t rely on others anymore.”

“You’ll likely die,” the spirit replied flatly, a bored expression on her face.

“Probably,” he agreed, his jaw firm, “But if I have to rely on others for the rest of my life I might as well be dead.”

The spirit of wind cocked her head to the side curiously, “You’re a strange one, you know that. I don’t think I understand you.”

“I don’t think I understand me,” he conceded, “But enough of this. How do I get out of here?”

“It’s your head,” the spirit replied flatly, “I think there would be a problem if you were not in it.”

“But ...” he voice trailed away and he scrunched up his face in confusion, “Well, how do I get back to where I was? I need to be out there helping my friends. Can’t you hear them fighting? I need to help them.”

“You could always just try waking up,” the spirit replied with a slight laugh.

Suddenly everything went dark and the sounds of fighting thundered in his ears. With a coughing breath his eyes fluttered opened to the sight of flashing magic as his father easily defeated his friends as they fought bravely.

## Chapter Thirty-six

He gasped in awe as his father sent both Reith and Eclairé flying backwards down the passageway where they collapsed in a heap.

Such power the man had.

Wincing as he pushed himself to his feet he could see a dwarf he did not know squirming to the side as he wrestled with magical bindings. But his main concern was Nim, who stood terrified before Arildin, pointing her pistol at the man. In front of her Dog stood guard, her teeth bared and hackles on end.

Slowly Arildin walked towards her, forcing Nim to fire her pistol. But the missile had little effect, ricocheting off an unseen barrier with a flash of light.

The Traitor continued forwards, forcing Nim backwards towards the wall. Dog barked viciously and lunged at the tall man, her fangs snapping for his throat.

“No,” Melodin cried out in unison with Nim, but all he could do was watch as Arildin easily cast Dog aside with a wave of his hand.

Dog yelped in pain as she was sent flying through the air and crashing into the dwarf who still struggled with his bindings, loud curses streaming from his lips.

“Stay back,” Nim shouted angrily, “Don’t come any closer. I wear the Spirit Ring of earth.”

A deep frown came to his face as he watch Nim hold up her right hand to display the glowing ring upon her finger.

Her threats fell on deaf ears and Arildin laughed at her.

“Do you know who I am girl?” Arildin chuckled, his tone deep and menacing.

“You’re The Traitor,” she snapped back, her eyes burning with anger.

“From your point of view, yes I am,” the man continued to slowly approach Nim, “I am the strongest of the Kingsguard, even with that bauble of yours you have no chance of beating me. The Spirit Rings are powerful, true, but only in the right hands.”

There was a sudden flash of light that threw Nim backwards into the wall. Melodin gasped as he saw Arildin appear in front of Nim, grabbing her by the throat with one hand and pinning her ringed hand against the stone with the other.

“You’re a fool, little princess,” Arildin said, slowly squeezing the life from Nim, “You will die by my hand, just like your parents.”

Tears flowed down Nim’s cheeks as she struggled to breath, weakly hitting with her free hand at the arm that held her.

“Nim,” Melodin cried out in horror.

Without thinking he was racing towards his father. He had to do something to save his friend, anything. Arildin was his father, yes, but he could accept he was the son of such a vicious man.

His mind raced, trying to think of what he could do to stop this. But his body seemed to move on its own as he charged into the back of Arildin, punch for the man’s kidneys with all his strength.

A sickening thud sounded in his ears as his fist connected with his father’s back, followed by a harsh intake of breath as Arildin released Nim and went rigid. Nim collapsed to the ground coughing and holding her sore neck. In surprise Melodin looked down at the hand that punched Arildin, his eyes widening.

“No,” he gasped as he looked at the bloody sword hilt clenched tightly in his fist.

He watched in fear as his father staggered back and to the side, collapsing against the stone wall as he coughed up blood. Angry eyes turned upon Melodin and the man drew his deadly sword. But with a growl his father slumped against the wall and dropped to the floor into a sitting position.

Head bowed a low chuckle escaped from the man's bloodied lips as he rested back against the stone, holding his sword by his shoulder.

"To be stabbed in the back by my own son," Arildin chuckled again before coughing up some more blood.

"I didn't ..." he stammered in reply, dropping the broken hilt as he took a step back. "I don't ... I'm ..."

Arildin's low laughter interrupted his thoughts and Melodin dropped to his knees, his hands shaking.

"Well done, Melodin," his father said seriously, grabbing his attention.

Arildin coughed some more blood up and his head slowly bowed, his breath vanishing.

Blankly he stared at the man slumped against the wall, he felt like crying, but his confusion and anger stifled what sadness he felt. This man was his father, and yet he had killed him.

A wet tongue on his cheek pulled his attention away from the corpse and to the bright green eyes of his dearest friend.

"Dog," Melodin exclaimed, quickly wrapping the furry canine in a tight hug. "I missed you, you know. Are you alright?"

Dog barked happily in reply, but he could see that she was favouring one of her front legs.

Pushing himself to his feet he looked to Nim as she was helped to her feet by Reith as Eclair and the dwarf came over.

"You guys," Melodin smiled happily, "Are you alright? Eclair what did you do back at the bridge?"

"I didn't do anything," the elf snapped, but she had a smile on her face, "It was you who blew me into the clouds."

"Me?" he exclaimed with a frown, "How could I do that?"

"Likely you used your Spirit Ring without realising," Reith replied seriously, his expression stern as he looked at Melodin.

“You wear one of these bloody rings as well, kid?” asked the dwarf curiously.

“Yep,” he nodded, “And don’t call me kid. The name is Melodin. Who are you anyway?”

“Names Tett,” the dwarf replied gruffly, slapping his chest, “I’m a bloody scholar from Arch Eden.”

“Arch Eden?” Melodin scrunched up his face in confusion. “Why would you study blood?”

“What?” Tett asked back.

“Enough chatter,” Reith cut in seriously, “We can all catch up later once this fight is over. Nim?”

“You’re right,” the young woman nodded, firming her jaw before heading towards the huge metal doors of the vault.

The others were quick to follow her, and with another glance to his dead father Melodin jumped to catch up.

“So, what’s in this vault?” he asked curiously, standing alongside Nim as she stopped in front of the doors.

“Another Spirit Ring,” she replied, her eyes hard.

“Why would you want that?” he asked.

“So I can defeat the Reparian forces,” she was quick to reply, her tone showing some annoyance.

“But you said you’ve already got one right?” he asked, “Why do you want another one?”

“Did you see what happened to the clock tower?” Nim snapped.

“Yeah.”

“That’s why,” Nim clenched her jaw as she looked back to the vault.

“I still don’t get it,” he sighed, “These rings are cursed right? They drain your life away. Why would you want another one to speed up your death?”

“We must also stop Visteen from getting it,” Eclair explained seriously.

“And with this one in our possession we will be one step closer to collecting them all,” Reith added, “And then we can destroy them.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Melodin conceded and let out a deep breath, “So, what are you waiting for, open these doors already.”

“Well,” Nim looked awkwardly to him, “I don’t know how.”

His mouth fell open slightly before he laughed and shook his head.

“Do you know, Rieth?” Nim looked to the sky pirate innocently.

“No,” the man shook his head and turned to the elf, “Eclair?”

She also shook her head and shrugged before moving closer to the doors to look close for any clues.

“What about you, Dog?” Melodin looked down to his white friend.

Dog whined slightly and lied down on the stone.

“Well you’re pretty useless,” he replied quietly, causing Dog to glare at him and growl.

The response brought a wide smile to his face, and slowly he looked from Dog to his other friends.

“What about you, Tett?” Eclair asked curiously as she looked over her shoulder at the dwarf. “You are a scholar, right?”

Melodin looked to Tett curiously, watching the balding, white bearded dwarf closely as he stood staring at the door. He could hear a stream of low grumbles and curses come from the dwarf mouth as he scratched his chin thoughtfully.

“What would a blood scholar know about vault doors?” Melodin asked curiously, drawing agitated looks from all his friends.

“I never said I was a blood scholar you damned idiot,” Tett exploded and glared at him, “I have spent most of my bloody life studying those damn Spirit Rings, not blood. I never said blood. You bloody moron.”

“But you just did,” Melodin frowned, “Several times.”



“Shut you’re bloody trap,” Tett roared, “I can’t think with your stupid questions.”

“No need to be rude,” grumbled Melodin, crossing his arms as he pouted.

“Wait,” Tett said suddenly, “Blood might in fact be the answer.”

“So you do know about blood then?” Melodin asked, scratching his head in confusion.

“Shut up,” Tett snapped back, “Hey Eclair, you see any handles or locks?”

“No,” the elf replied flatly, “There’s nothing like that, which would mean it’s likely magical. It probably reacts to a royal item or heirloom possessed by the ruler of Lakelinds.”

“I don’t know anything about that,” Nim replied, her voice filled with worry.

“Or something that every one of the royal family already possess,” Tett said, his eyes sparkling as he looked to the princess. “The blood of their ancestors.”

Nim frowned and looked to the metal door, “My blood?”

“Place your hand upon the door,” Reith instructed Nim.

Slowly Nim moved to the vault door and placed her hand upon the metal. Instantly a wave of golden light rippled out from her touch, lighting up the designs across the door and making them come alive.

Melodin gasped as he watched the hard steel gently weave back into the stone, opening the way for them all to walk into the vault.

“Look at this place,” he exclaimed with wonder as he moved ahead of the group and raced into the large room that was lit up by floating crystals.

The path was wide with rows of shelves at either side, each one holding tons of relics. Pieces of artwork hung on the walls and several marble statues stood about the place, curiously watching the people enter. Several large wooden chests sat in the corners, some propped open by piles of coins and baubles that had spilled out onto the floor.

“What’s with all these books?” he wondered, noticing that many of the shelves only had dusty old tomes on them.

“Some books are worth more than you can imagine, you idiot,” Tett snapped angrily as he quickly walked over to the closest shelf to look at the books.

“Hey look,” Melodin suddenly said as he noticed the wall opposite the entrance where the wall of water that seemed to flow beyond some thick glass. “We’re under the river. Incredible. What’s that?”

His brow furrowed slightly, spotting a small altar atop the short flight of stairs in front of the glass wall. Sitting on top of the stone altar was a small box of wood and iron bindings.

“Amazing,” said a voice from the vault entrance behind him.

“I know,” Melodin agreed as he turned about, “Where d-?”

His words became stuck in his mouth and his eye widened as they fell upon the sinister smile of Visteen as she stood gazing at the sights before her. Behind the sorceress he could see the man Solordorr standing quietly, looking about the vault with a bored expression.

“Who’s this?” Tett asked loudly, looking curiously from the newcomers to Melodin and the others.

“Visteen,” Eclairé replied, her voice filled with anger and fear.

“She is not an ally,” Reith added, his tone also grave.

“I’m sorry you feel that way,” Visteen replied, feigning sadness.

“What do you want?” Nim spoke up, her voice shaking slightly.

“Why Princess, I’m surprised you have to ask,” laughed the sorceress, “The Spirit Ring of course.”

Melodin glanced over his shoulder at the small box atop the altar, before returning his glare to Visteen.

“I believe thanks are in order though,” the sorceress continued, flicking back her long black hair, “For opening the vault door for me. I would have had to use that vial of your blood otherwise. Quite disgusting.”

“You stay away,” Nim shouted, “You can’t have the ring.”

“So naive,” Visteen replied, her tone becoming dark. “Do you really think such words will be enough to stop me? I have orchestrated two wars to get my hands on this Spirit Ring. There are no lengths I am unwilling to go to foolish princess. So if you, all of you, value your lives in the slightest, I suggest you leave now.”

“It was because of you Reparian attacked?” Nim asked in disbelief, “All for some stupid ring?”

“It’s not just some stupid ring, dear girl,” Visteen was quick to reply, “If the stories are true here lies the Spirit Ring of Life, the most powerful of them all and with it I will be able to conquer death itself.”

“You’ve had thousands killed in battle so you can live forever?” Melodin balked in horror. Visteen did not reply, but the thin smile that spread across her face told him everything.

“Of course she did,” Eclairé said bitterly.

“Are you jealous Eclairé?” Visteen laughed back.

“Why would she be?” Nim snapped, “You’re evil. Why would anyone be jealous of you?”

The sorceress laughed at that, “Evil, you say? Tell me, how much do you really know about Eclairé and her sky pirate lover? What makes you think they are any nobler than myself?”

“What?” Nim balked, “What are you talking about? Do you think I will turn against my companions?”

“Have you asked them why they are both even here?” Visteen asked back, her smug expression never leaving her face. “Why, they also want the ring of course. They want all of them.”

“To destroy them, we already know,” Melodin spoke up angrily.

“Is that what they told you?” Visteen was quick to reply.

“It’s the truth,” he snapped back.

“If you say so,” shrugged the sorceress, “But of course you know that the one who wields all the rings is invincible, immune to the life sucking desires of the spirits in the rings. And of

course you know that the tale about the method to destroy the rings was written by a forgotten bard three hundred years after they were created.”

“What?” he scrunched up his face in confusion.

“So dense,” Visteen sighed, “There is no way to destroy the rings child. Reith and Eclairé are collecting all the rings so that the sky pirate can wear them and become the most powerful force this world has ever seen. Their talk of destroying them is a lie.”

“You’re the one whose lying,” Nim cried out, anger masking her face.

“Yeah,” he agreed wholeheartedly, glaring at the sorceress, “You’re filled with nothing but deceit.”

“Deceit?” Visteen asked back, her eyes sparkling and making him feel uncomfortable. “You are aware that Eclairé was a spy for Solegrad during the first war? I know first-hand what she is capable of. Tell them, Eclairé, how many innocent people have you killed?”

He looked to the elf, studying her pained features closely.

“I know you would have counted the lives you have taken,” Visteen smiled nastily.

“Shut up,” Nim yelled, “Just shut up and leave us alone.”

The sorceress laughed at the princesses outburst, “Need I even begin telling you about what Reith has done? Sky pirates are not the noble warriors of the sky you think they are.”

“Enough of your lies,” Nim cried out.

“What she says is true enough,” Reith spoke up, his voice calm, “I have killed many and stolen hundreds of things that were not mine.”

“Tell them how many you have killed,” Visteen smiled nastily.

The sky pirate shrugged, “I never bothered to count.”

“Reith?” Nim said softly, her eyes wide as she looked at the man.

“Visteen is also correct in saying Eclairé and I are trying to collect all the Spirit Rings,” continued Reith simply.

“But she is wrong in saying they cannot be destroyed,” Eclairé added seriously, “I know they can be, and that is what we are trying to do.”

“You’ve heard whispers of fairy tales, that is all,” Visteen spoke up loudly. “You being here is nothing but selfish desire, like myself. Like all of us I would think.”

“Not me,” Melodin said flatly.

“And you’re nothing but a moron, so you do not count,” the sorceress was quick to say vehemently.

“That’s not very nice,” he grumbled, looking down to Dog who was growling angrily at Visteen.

“I don’t even know you lady,” Tett huffed, “But I guess you’re accurate enough in your statement.”

“I am your friend, Nim,” Reith said seriously, readying his bow in his hands, “That will never change.”

“I know,” Nim replied with a smile.

“How touching,” Visteen spoke over the top of them, “But I grow tired of this. Come Solordorr let us collect what we have come for.”

“Finally,” the crimson eyed man replied with a smile.

A sudden motion of Visteen’s hand sent a wave of energies thundering into Melodin, sending him and the others sprawling across the ground.

“What’s the deal?” Melodin grumbled as he rolled to his feet and looked back to the sorceress, but she and Solordorr were no longer there. “Where did they go?”

Looking to his companions he found his answer, for they were all facing towards the altar and where Visteens and Solordorr now stood.

“Finally,” Visteen said loudly, her elation making her face glow as she slowly reached for the small chest.

Suddenly a spasm shot through the sorceress and she gasped in horror as a hand burst out of Visteen's chest, holding her heart.

"Consider us even," Solordorr said darkly as his crimson eyes appeared over the sorceress's shoulder and the woman's severed heart burst into red flames.

Visteen's mouth open and twisted in a silent scream of denial and pain, but as Solordorr retracted his arm she fell lifelessly to the ground, her blood trickling down the steps of the dais towards the stunned onlookers.

## Chapter Thirty-seven

“What the hell?”

Melodin’s exclamation echoed around the silent vault as everyone stared at the dead body of Visteen and Solordorr looming over the top of it, her blood dripping from his elbow.

“Well, that solves that problem,” he heard Reith remark quietly.

Solordorr laughed aloud at the comment, grabbing Melodin’s attention as the man absently tore off some of Visteen’s robe to wipe his arm.

“You are right about that, Sky Pirate,” the man’s crimson eyes sparkled, “But it is only one of many?”

“Why?” gasped Melodin, catching Solordorr’s attention.

“Because I hated her,” replied Solordorr flatly, wiping the last of the blood from his hand and dropping the rag onto Visteen’s head, covering her twisted death mask.

“Makes sense,” Reith agreed, “If you had not have done it, I would have.”

“I didn’t think your little boyfriend had so much sense, Eclair,” Solordorr smirked, bringing a scowl to Reith’s features.

“And you are to be next after Visteen,” Reith said flatly, his voice filled with threat.

But to Melodin’s surprise, Solordorr laughed at that and shook his head before looking to the small chest atop the pedestal.

“Now,” the crimson eyed man said, as much to himself as to the rest of them, “To the reason why we are all here.”

The man’s face lit up as he reached for the small chest, easily flipping open the lid to see what was inside.

“Stop,” Nim shouted, pulling everyone’s attention to her, “That doesn’t belong to you.”

“It doesn’t belong to you either, little princess,” Solordorr looked at her, his voice dark.

“What are you talking about?” Nim demanded angrily, “King Olcost, the first King of Mi-”

“Olcost was a thief,” Solordorr cut in loudly, “These Spirit Rings were peace offerings from the Fae during negotiations over the ownership of the meteor that had fallen from the heavens. It was agreed that the Fae would take the gemstone from the meteor and create rings of power to be divided between the two nations. But seeing the incredible power of the rings Olcost killed the Fae leaders and took all the rings for himself.”

“What?” Nim frowned deeply, “You lie. I know my history, that is not what happened at all.”

“He is not lying, Nim,” Eclair spoke up seriously, “The history you have studied was written by King Olcost and his descendants, so naturally, it shows him as the hero. What Solordorr says is the truth.”

“I bloody knew it,” Tett exclaimed quietly to the side, grabbing Melodin’s attention as the dwarf furiously wrote down notes in a small notebook.

“So you’re saying that everything I know, knew, to be true, is actually a lie?” Nim exclaimed, “What about these rings? Are they not what they seem to be either?”

The young woman held up her hand where she wore the Spirit Ring of earth, her actions making Melodin also look to the ring on his hand.

“History’s tales of these rings are true enough,” Reith replied seriously, glancing to his own ring.

“Are they, sky pirate?” Solordorr’s eyes flashed, “Really Eclair, I thought you were attracted to intelligence, or have your tastes in men dropped so much.”

Melodin watched as Reith clenched his jaw, his eyes narrowed.

“Enough, Solordorr,” the elf snapped irritably, drawing a laugh from the man. “Why are you even here?”

“I had come for the Spirit Ring of Life, of course,” the man replied with a sigh, his eyes going to the contents of the chest again.



“I thought you cared little for these cursed rings?” Eclairé wondered, bringing Solordorr’s eyes back to her and the group.

“This one was different,” Solordorr replied simply, “Originally I was curious to see how the boy could use his ring so effortlessly, but once I heard that it was the ring of life that was thought to be here, my plans changed,”

“Are you talking about me?” Melodin asked curiously, “What do you mean?”

“Why the ring of life?” Eclairé asked over the top of him. “Is it simply because you wish to cheat death?”

Solordorr laughed at that, “All of you are so full of questions. But I find myself unwilling to answer.”

Casually the man took a small ring from the chest atop the pedestal and raised it into the air, the black gemstone set on the silver band shimmered in the light.

“Drop it,” Reith said seriously, an arrow suddenly coming to his bow as he levelled it towards the crimson eyed man.

“Or else what?” Solordorr asked back, not even bothering to look at Reith.

Without a word the arrow launched from the bow and with a flash of pale blue it sped through the air. Solordorr did not even bother to move, or even regard the attack. But inches from impact the arrow burst into a rain of light blue shards and disappeared before they touched the ground.

“Come now,” Solodorr said with a dull tone as he slowly faced Reith. “There’s no need for such rudeness, mister pirate.”

Reith sneered slightly, bringing a smirk to the face of Solordorr.

“Catch,” said Solordorr flatly as he tossed the ring to Nim before he casually stepped down the dais and headed for the exit of the vault.

“What?” exclaimed Nim as she fumbled a catch of the small ring. “Why would y-”

“Because it’s not the Spirit Ring of Life,” Solordorr interrupted, pausing at the exit of the vault, his back to them. “In fact it is not even a Spirit Ring.”

“Wait,” Melodin called out before the man continued, “Please, wait.”

Slowly Solordorr looked over his shoulder, his crimson eyes sparkling with a hint of curiosity.

“What are these rings?” Melodin asked, “Where do they come from?”

“You’re asking me?” Solordorr asked in reply, “Eclaire, the authority on Spirit Rings now that Visteen is dead, is standing right next to you. Ask her.”

“But you clearly know more than she does,” Melodin replied flatly.

“Hey,” Eclaire exclaimed, causing Solordorr to laugh.

“Very well,” Solordorr said seriously, “Since you asked nicely, I will tell you. The rings were made in the Fae lands during a time when the veil between our two worlds was thin. In that beautiful realm nearly everything you can think of has a physical manifestation, be it wind, water, fire, or even concepts like justice, revenge, lust, and envy. The ring you wear is the one of wind.”

Melodin looked to the ring on his finger curiously.

“The leaders of the Fae have always sought to control these physical manifestation,” Solordorr continued, “So they seized the opportunity when it came along, capturing the spirits they thought most useful, or powerful, and imprisoning them in the gems of the meteor.”

“So they are prisoners,” Melodin remarked thoughtfully.

“And also demons that will consume your life,” Reith added seriously.

“Why can’t they be taken off once put on?” Nim asked curiously.

“Because you made a deal with the spirit held in the gem,” Solordorr replied simply, “Taking off the ring would be breaking the contract.”

“But I haven’t made any deal,” Melodin remarked.

“Then take it off.”

Curiously he looked from Solordorr to his companions and then to the ring on his hand. Slowly he grabbed the silver band and tried to slip it from his finger. To his surprise the ring easily came from his digit and into his palm. Mouth open he looked back to the stunned expressions of his companions.

"It came off," he exclaimed even though it was obvious.

"How?" Reith breathed.

"Because he rejected the spirit's offer," Solordorr stated, "Those that put on the Spirit Rings do so with a desire for power, and thus they readily make the deal with the Spirit trapped in the gem."

A smile slowly crept across Melodin's face as he looked down at the ring in his hand, but the gasp from Nim caught his attention. With tears falling down her cheek Nim sat down heavily onto the bottom step of the dais, her hand over her mouth.

"I'm such an idiot," she cried, "Why am I always such a fool?"

"That's a question I don't have an answer to," Solordorr remarked, his amusement obvious.

"Shut up," Reith snapped angrily, before he sat down beside the princess, "Don't worry, we're both fools."

Although his comments were meant to bring a smile to Nim's face, they had little effect.

"That you are," Solordorr said loudly, and yawned.

Reith jumped to his feet, bow at the ready, his expression fierce, "I've had enough of you."

Quickly he notched an arrow and as he drew it back a layer of ice crept along the shaft and arrow head, sending wisps of steam and glowing with a pale blue light.

"This again," Solordorr remarked with a dull expression on his face, "Before you try and kill me again, tell me: have you ever thought to renegotiate your deals with the spirit?"

A slight frown came to Reith's face, and he slowly released the tension in the bow.

"I thought as much," Solordorr continued, "You have believed the misconceptions of these rings and spirits and think that to receive the power of the spirits you must sacrifice your life."

“You don’t have to?” Nim asked, jumping to her feet.

“How should I know?” shrugged Solordorr, “Have you asked them?”

With that the crimson eyed man turned away and left the vault, disappearing into the shadows of the passageway.

“Eclairé, is what he says true?” Nim asked excitedly, turning to the elf.

“Honestly,” replied Eclairé slowly, “I don’t know. Solordorr seems to know a lot more about it than I do.”

“Why is that?” Melodin asked, slipping the spirit ring into his pocket.

“He’s a bloody Fae of course,” Tett spoke up in his typical gruff tone.

“What?” Nim exclaimed.

“He is,” Eclairé confirmed.

“Why would one of the Fae be running around in Middenland?” wondered the Princess.

“That is a good question,” Reith replied seriously, his eyes lingering on the ring on his finger.

“But if what he says it true, and I can remove this ring, than I owe him some thanks, even if I cannot bring myself to like the man.”

A sudden rumbled echoed down from above their heads, causing the ground to shake and dust to fall from the ceiling.

“That’s right,” Melodin remarked, “There’s still a war going on.”

“Come on,” Reith said, starting for the exit at a jog, “With Visteen no longer in the picture, our chances of winning this have greatly improved.”

“But without the spirit ring, how can we hope to defeat Reparian?” Nim asked with worry as they all followed Reith from the vault.

“I’ll think of something, don’t worry,” Reith replied.

Nim said something more, but Melodin did not hear it for he looked to where his father had slumped against the walls. But his mouth fell open and his jog slowed when he noticed his father’s body was nowhere to be seen.

“What?” Melodin wondered aloud, moving slowly to where he had last seen the man.

Beside him Dog growled low and sniffed around the drying pool of blood on the ground.

“Melodin?” the call from Reith caught his attention.

“But my father,” he called back, scratching his head in confusion.

“Worry about that later, come on,” Nim cried out, “We have to stop the fighting before Delaforr is destroyed.”

He frowned as he looked again to the pool of blood but slowly he turned from the area and caught up to the others with Dog right beside him.

“If we stand any chance we got to find out what caused that big explosion,” Tett was saying as he turned his attention back to the moment. “Half the damn city is nothing but a crater now. Makes you wonder if the rebels have any soldiers left after that bloody massacre.”

The path soon turned upwards, following the spiralling staircase up into the castle corridors where Reith led the way through the hallways and out into the baily.

The rain met him as he followed the others outside, the cool drops still falling from the dark clouds over head and splattering against his cheek.

“Is that the clockwork tank over there?” Eclair spoke up, pointing to the large brass construct sitting stationary in front of the castle’s main doors. “It looks different.”

“That’s what caused the explosion,” Melodin remarked, drawing the other’s eyes to his.

“Then we must steal it or destroy it,” Reith stated seriously, his gaze going back to the clockwork tank with the large blue crystal for a gun barrel.

“Alright, I’ll handle it,” Melodin replied confidently, skipping past his companion’s curious expressions and towards the tank.

As he approached he recognised a few of the many soldiers standing about the place talking between themselves and running about to secure the castle walls. Another large explosion erupted in the city just beyond the river, vibrating the ground under his feet and almost making him fall over.

“Hash,” Melodin called out as he drew closer to the tank, “Captain Gerbath.”

“Melodin the spy,” Gerbath returned the greeting, “You’ve returned. But lost your coat in the process.”

“Where’s Arildin?” Hash asked curiously, “We need him to help fight back against the rebels, we have no commander here.”

“Well,” Melodin replied awkwardly.

“Who are these people?” Hash turned his attention to his companions who had followed him.

“They’re special operatives under my command,” Melodin stammered, dismissing the question, “Arildin and Visteen have both left the defences to me, for they have to go to do other things.”

“Other things?” Gerbath raised an eyebrow curiously.

“Exactly,” he nodded in reply, feeling the nervous looks from his companions behind him.

“So what’s the report?”

“The rebels have retaliated with surprising force,” Gerbath replied, “The assault we made on the city centre was not as effective as we had hoped, and our forces that remain have been pushed back to the castle.”

Another explosion sent a cloud of black smoke reaching up from over the walls.

“As you can see,” Gerbath finished. “Use of the tank is not an option, considering the amount of damage it caused previously, we would destroy half the castle as well.”

“That depends,” Eclair spoke up, “How exactly does the tank work?”

Gerbath and Hash looked to the elf curiously.

“Well?” Melodin prompted, “Eclair is my top agent in regards to mechanical engineering, so come on, answer her.”

“Mechanical what?” Gerbath asked back in confusion.

“It’s quiet simple,” Hash spoke up with a smile, “I’m the head mechanic of this girl, so if you’d give me a moment I’ll show you.”

Happily the young woman swung up onto the tank beside the long crystal shard and after a few seconds of moving some latches she pressed something. Several locks sounded before a latch opened up behind the crystal gun barrel and a small glass dome was raised up out of the core of the tank.

“That’s the Spirit Ring of Water,” Hash explained as she jumped down from the tank, “The engine oscillators draw on the ring’s power and directs the current into the radiating crystal you see here where the cannon would normally sit.”

“Fascinating,” Tett remarked, scratching notes in his book, “Bloody fascinating.”

“The crystal harnesses the power and releases it at the desired target,” Hash finished, a proud smile on her face as she placed her hands on her hips.

“Well?” Melodin looked to the elf’s blank expression, “What’s your expert thoughts?”

“My thoughts,” Eclairé stammered before she cleared her throat, “Yes, well. You-”

“Stupid tank,” the sudden scream interrupted the elf, “I’ll kill you.”

“What?” he wondered looking about for the scream before he noticed something flying above the castle walls. “Is that-?”

His words were cut short as an object suddenly flew closer and crashed down atop the clockwork tank. The flash of a bald head caught Melodin’s attention before a powerful fist thundered down into the glass dome. A wave of energy burst forth from the single punch, throwing Melodin’s backwards to the ground as the tank simply crumpled under the power of the attack.

All the sound in the world seemed to vanish as he slowly pushed himself to his feet and looked to see the man Tama standing on top of the broken tank. But his attention was quickly stolen by the glow of light amongst the broken machine. It was faint at first but it grew quickly, stealing the light of the day along with the colours of the world.

Just beyond hearing he noticed a slight buzzing noise that grated on his nerves and sent a shiver along his spine. The buzz turned into a rumble that shook the very ground and the sound of rushing water was heard as the river reached up beyond the castle bailey like a wall.

The throb of energy continued to build, pressing against his temples and gut, making him wince in pain as a feeling of dread washed over him.

The sound of Dog barking brought his mind back to the situation and he looked to the dumbfounded looks of all those around him.

“We need to get out of here,” Melodin exclaimed fearfully, though he did not know why.

“Come on, let’s go.”

“What?” Nim looked to him as if coming from a daze.

“Quickly. Run,” he yelled as loud as he could, trying to be heard above the whistling of the mounting energy. “Into the castle.”

All of those around him did not argue, and with him in the lead they sprinted through the castle doors. Not knowing what he was doing he just followed Dog through the passageways and up the spiralling staircases.

“Where are we going?” someone cried from behind him.

“Up,” he shouted in reply, his voice sounding feint alongside the throbbing power he could feel all around them.

Passing one window he caught a glimpse of the river beyond the castle, its water too had reached into the sky and had now begun to flood the royal grounds.

“What’s happening?” came another cry of confusion, which was answered by many more.

But he had no answers, no one did, and all he could do was follow Dog higher into the castle and as far away from the broken tank as possible.

Suddenly his feet were thrown from under him and he crashed to the ground as a great explosion rocked the castle stones. There came dozens of cries from behind him



accompanied by the crash of rocks. The glass of the windows shattered, covering him in shards that cut into his skin. His head ached, throbbing as if it would explode and making his eyes blurry.

Somehow he managed to focus on Dog who stood barking anxiously ahead of him. With a groan he pushed himself to his feet, helping the person beside him as well before they quickly followed after Dog.

As he ran the side of the building crumbled away, taking with it half of the floor and opening up views across the city as a maelstrom of water raced through the streets, destroying everything in their path.

His mind slowly cleared as he raced after Dog, the throbbing had stopped and no longer did he feel sick in his stomach. Up another flight of stairs they raced as Dog led them out onto a high terrace that looked out across the city.

“What happened?” he wondered aloud, his breathing heavy, his eyes wide as he looked at the devastation that had been brought upon Delaforr.

The rivers had burst their banks with tremendous force, sending water gushing through the buildings, tearing down the stone and ripping up the roads.

“Look,” someone gasped, grabbing his attention away from the flooded city, “The castle.”

He gasped, along with several others as he looked to see that half of it had been destroyed by the powerful blast. If they had stayed by the tank they would have been ripped apart, just as the main hall of the castle had been.

Suddenly his thoughts went to his companions and desperately he looked around at the people gathered on the terrace. Relief was quick to flood through him as he saw the stunned faces of all his friends, including Tama, Hash and Gerbath, along with a dozen or so Repararian soldiers.

“Melodin,” Nim asked quietly, beside him, her face pale, “How’d you know?”

“I didn’t,” he replied honestly, “I just knew something bad was about to happen and then followed Dog, she always knows which way to go.”

A slight smile came to the Princess's face as she looked down to Dog who was looked out across the city, seeming unfazed by the mad dash through the castle.

"I'm glad everyone's alright," he said softly, "But the city ... what happened?"

"You bastard, you destroyed my baby," the angry shout from Hash grabbed his attention, and he looked to see the young woman pointing accusingly at Tama. "How could you?"

"That thing destroyed half the city," Tama shouted back, "Nearly killed me too. Twice now."

"Wait, that's Tama," one of the Reparian soldier said, "Tama the Invincible."

"I don't care who he is," Hash snapped, "I'll kick his butt."

"Enough Hash," Gerbath spoke up commandingly. "We have other issues to deal with at the moment."

"Yeah, like what happened?" exclaimed another of the soldiers.

Everyone looked around at each other for answers, but none came.

"I'm not sure," Eclair spoke up, "Maybe Tama broke the Spirit Ring, unleashing the power held within it."

"He released the spirit?" Melodin asked curiously.

The elf shrugged, "Perhaps. I don't know."

"So you can destroy them without a specific ritual" Nim asked curiously, looking to the ring on her hand.

"Be prepared for some kind of apocalyptic destruction if you do so, though," Reith added seriously, and all eyes looked back to the city and its flooded streets.

"Forgive me," Tama suddenly exclaimed dropping to his knees in front of Nim, "Please forgive me Princess. We returned to save Delaforr from Reparian hands, but I've destroyed it. I'm not worthy of being a Kingsguard, please you must punish me for my foolishness."

"Princess?" Gerbath echoed curiously, causing everyone to look to Nim as the young woman chewed on her bottom lip uncomfortably.

“She’s princess Nimrodell,” Hash exclaimed, her eyes wide.

“Well this just got awkward,” Melodin mumbled, looking to Dog who growled low.

“The enemy,” several of the soldiers whispered to each other.

“But that means,” Hash said thoughtfully her eyes moving to Melodin, “You lied to me, you’re no Reparian agent.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s true,” he replied hesitantly, scratching the back of his head. “Sorry.”

“You bastard,” Hash roared.

“That’s enough, everyone,” Gerbath spoke up again, easing his Reparian soldiers,

“Everything changed the moment Sir Tama destroyed the clockwork tank, the fighting is over as of now. Our first priority is to regroup with our commanders back at the camp, look for any survivors and if it is decided, make another strike against the city.”

“But Captain,” one soldier started to say, but Gerbath cut him off.

“Move out men,” the Reparian Captain shouted sternly, and slowly the soldiers started back down the stairs.

“How are we supposed to regroup anyway?” Melodin heard one of the soldiers grumbled,

“Everything’s flooded.”

“Hey, you, Melodin,” the shout from Hash caught his attention, “Don’t think I’ll forget this, next time I see you I’ll kick your butt.”

With that the Reparian soldiers disappeared down the stairs in search of a way out, leaving the rest of them on the terrace to look back in awe at the destruction across the city.

“Please forgive me princess,” Tama wailed again, his head bowed.

“It’s alright, Tama,” Nim replied softly.

“But the city,” replied Kingsguard, his distress obvious, “It was my fault.”

“Don’t worry,” Nim cut in, “Buildings can be rebuilt. As the Reparian Captain said, we should first look for survivors, and I’m trusting you do so.”

“Yes, your majesty,” Tama said, jumping to his feet before racing from the terrace, “I shall return with good news.”

Silence fell over the group as Tama left and their eyes returned to the devastating view. Melodin looked to Nim, seeing clearly the pain on her face as she fiddled with the ring on her hand. He wanted to say something to cheer her up, but nothing came to mind and with a sigh he looked down to Dog who sat comfortably beside him, her green eyes staring up at him and bringing a smile to his face.

## Chapter Thirty-eight

“That meal was amazing.”

Letting out a loud burp he rested back in his seat, a wide smile on his face as he rubbed his full stomach. On the bench beside him Dog barked and gave him a disgusted look.

“I quite agree Dog,” Eclairé remarked, a similar mask of disgust on her face as she looked at Melodin.

“What?” he asked curiously, “It’s just good manners.”

“In what realm?” Reith wondered, taking a sip of his drink.

The tavern around them was typically busy, filled with tired workers after a hard day’s work.

“I didn’t see you two helping today,” Melodin looked to his two companions. “With the Reparian army gone all the rebels are trying to fix up the city, even those who were injured during the fight, they could really use your help you know.”

“Come now,” Reith sighed, “It’s been a few weeks already. We were happy to help initially, but now that things are moving along Eclairé and I are looking to do the same.”

“Neither of us like staying in one place very long,” Eclairé added. “Unless there is a reason to do so.”

The pair of them shared a sly smile.

“I suppose,” Melodin agreed quietly, a slight frown coming to his face.

“What?” asked Reith, his dark eye sparkling behind the strands of his hair that fell across his face, “You’re not planning on staying. But I thought Delaforr was your home.”

“Was,” he echoed, his eyes falling to the table top, “I was thinking of staying around for Nim’s sake, but, I don’t know. I guess the open road is calling to me.”

“I’m sure Nim will be fine,” Eclairé remarked, “She is to be queen of Lakelinds, after all.”

“Yeah, I suppose,” he nodded, “And she will have Tama and the rest of the Queensguard with her. It’s just, I always got the impression she never wanted to be queen.”

“You’re probably right,” Eclairé replied, drawing his eyes to hers, “It’s a great responsibility, and one she doesn’t think she is ready for, even though she is.”

Dog whined slightly, drawing his attention as he absently scratched his furry companion behind the ear.

“Hey, Eclairé,” Melodin said thoughtfully, looking back to the elf across the table, “Where did you learn magic? Was it with the elves?”

“No,” she replied simply, “It was at the Magic Academy in Solaris.”

“Narglefar?”

“That’s right. Are you thinking of applying?”

He looked away, “Yeah, maybe. My father was a battlemage, so I thought that maybe I could be one too.”

“If you have the aptitude, I don’t see why not,” remarked the elf, bringing his eyes back to hers, “You won’t know until you try, and a lot of people with no talent end up going through the academy. Although, without a scholarship or referral, it is quite expensive to attend.”

“I thought most went to join one of the three families in Altor,” Melodin scratched his cheek thoughtfully.

“As far as I know that’s usually a last resort,” shrugged Eclairé, “Anyway, I could write you a letter of referral that may help you enrol in the Academy.”

“Really?” Melodin exclaimed, “That would be great. Thanks Eclairé.”

“Well, if you are set on this course we can give you a lift to Solaris,” Reith added, bringing a winder smile to Melodin’s face. “The fighting between Reparian and Narglefar has stopped for the time being, so it should be an easy flight.”

“Alright,” he exclaimed excitedly, shooting Dog a wide smile, “Let’s do it.”

“Make ready to leave tomorrow then,” Reith added, stealing the grin from his face.

“So soon?” Melodin bit down on his lip.

“We were planning on leaving tomorrow regardless,” shrugged the Sky Pirate.

“But I won’t be able to say farewell to Nim,” replied Melodin quietly.

“Maybe it would be better that way,” Ecalire offered.

His brow furrowed and he let out a deep breath, his eye turning across the tavern towards the door. He gaze absently drifted over the cheerful faces of the patrons as they ate and drank, and sung for a bright future. The bar door opened and his eyes focused on the balding head of an old dwarf, the sight bringing a smile to his face.

“Hey, it’s Tett,” Melodin pointed and waved the dwarf over.

“Damn streets are still a bloody mess,” Tett grumbled as he grabbed a chair and pulled it over to their table.

“Haven’t seen you in a while,” Melodin remarked happily.

“Thank that bloody flood for that,” snapped the dwarf, “Hey, pirate, where’s the meal you promised me. Thought I’d forget did you?”

“Not at all,” Reith smirked, “I was just waiting until you arrived before I had it cooked. Else it would have gone cold waiting for you. Short legs must be such a hassle.”

“What’d you say, pirate?” Tett roared angrily, narrowing his eyes at Reith, “I ought to bloody well smack you.”

“Wait until after you eat at least,” Reith replied with a smile, waving to one of the waiters, who gave a nod of understanding before heading towards the kitchens.

“Better be a damn good feed,” grumbled the dwarf.

“It will be,” Melodin added, “The food here is great.”

“So why’d you want me to come?” Tett turned his attention to Reith, “You lot heading off are you?”

“That’s right, how very perceptive of you,” replied the sky pirate his dark eyes sparkling.

"I'm no idiot," Tett was quick to say, "Bloody sky pirates, you lot never stay in one place for long. But you could've just come and said your damn farewells instead of disturbing my work."

"What are you doing anyway?" Melodin asked curiously.

"Retrieving those books we saw in the vault of course," Tett replied gruffly, "In their water logged state any other idiot would destroy them in the process."

"Have you managed to recover many of them?" Eclairé asked curiously.

"Most of them," nodded Tett, before he became distracted by the arrival of his meal. "Damn, it does smell good."

"It tastes even better," Melodin assured the dwarf.

"You're bloody right there," Tett agreed as he began stuffing his mouth.

"You know," Melodin remarked thoughtfully, "I still don't think I really understand what happened back there, with Solordorr."

"I'm hardly surprised," Reith remarked flatly.

"Are all the Fae as powerful as Solordorr?" Melodin wondered, looking to Eclairé.

"No," she shook her head, "Like us, the Fae have their share of talents and powers. Some are powerful, others seemingly redundant."

"But the Fae lands do sound amazing," Melodin said, his imagination whirling. "I want to go there."

"I doubt they'll let you in," Reith remarked, "They guard the entrance and are very strict about who passes through. No doubt we can thank King Olcost for his betrayal for that."

"Shame," Melodin sighed, his eyes lingering on Tett's food, which made his stomach grumble hungrily. "Maybe Solordorr would take me through the gates."

"That I doubt," Eclairé replied.

"Why? He seems friendly enough," Melodin looked to the elf to see her surprised expression.



“Friendly?” Tett balked, his mouth half full, “Did we meet the same Solordorr? The guy is a bloody nut-case.”

“He did help me escape from Visteen in the Reparian camp,” Melodin replied simply.

“I’m sure he had some other motive,” Reith said, taking another drink from his mug. “He still believed the Spirit Ring of Life was in the vault then.”

“Yeah,” Melodin replied offhandedly, before a thought came to his mind, “Speaking of spirit rings, Reith, why are you still wearing yours?”

“Because it won’t come off, obviously,” the sky pirate replied flatly. “It seems that because I have already made a deal with the spirit I cannot take it off until that deal is completed.”

“You don’t seem as depressed about it anymore though,” Melodin continued, drawing a curious look from the man.

“I did managed to renegotiate the terms of the agreement,” Reith said slowly.

“So you’re not going to die then?”

“Not for a while yet, I hope.”

“That’s great,” Melodin exclaimed, a smile on his face, “So you won’t be as moody anymore.”

“Moody?” Reith’s eyes narrowed as Tett let out a great laugh. “I was never moody.”

“You weren’t?” asked Melodin curiously, “But you were always so grumpy.”

Tett continued to laugh loudly and Eclairé joined in with a gently titter which brought a deep frown to Reith’s face.

“Do you think Nim was able to renegotiate?” Melodin wondered, causing the laughter to die down.

“Most likely,” Eclairé nodded.

“Damn that was a good feed,” Tett said loudly, slapping his gut and letting out a great burp.

“Disgusting,” Eclairé sighed, giving the dwarf a revolted look.

“What?” Tett exclaimed, “It’s good manners to burp after a meal.”

“Told you,” Melodin laughed, causing Reith to chuckle, but Eclairé just shook her head.

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Letting out a wide yawn he pushed his way through the door into his room.

“I’m going to miss that dwarf,” he mumbled, rubbing his eye.

Beside him Dog barked before racing across the room and jumping onto his bed.

“I think I’ll miss Nim more though,” he paused, slowly closing the door behind him, “I’d like to go see her, but I’m sure she’s really busy. Maybe I could write her a letter? What do you think Dog?”

Dog let out a low growl as she lay on the bed, resting her head on the pillow.

“Yeah, I think I’ll do that,” with a nod he moved over to the small desk in the small tavern room and lighting the candle he sat himself down to write a letter.

But as the seconds drifted into minutes, the page before him remained blank and soon Dog’s snores echoed around the room. Absently playing with the spirit ring of wind he now held on a chain about his neck Melodin struggled long into the night to think of the right words to write in goodbye.

\* \* \*

“No deal.”

The deep voice reverberated right through her chest, making the ground rumble beneath her feet.

“What?” Nim exclaimed, her voice sounding all around her, “But why not?”

The stone golem in front of her growled low, making the skies overhead change colour and swirl about. Slowly its stone frame melted and shifted until it took the form a giant man sitting on the ground.

“Because you’re the descendant of King Olcost,” the earth spirit replied.

“So?”

“And because I want to be free from this prison.”

“So consuming my life is a way for you to be free?” Nim felt the cold clutches of despair wrapping around her.

“No.”

Confusion filled her.

“I don’t understand.”

“Dear girl,” the large spirit replied, his voice becoming warm and soothing. “You can free me, so why would I wish to be parted from you?”

“What?” she wondered, “How can I free you?”

The earth spirit chuckled, its voice like thunder rolling through the ground.

“It took great power to imprison me here,” replied the giant, “And it will take no less than great power to free me.”

“But I have no natural talents.”

“That may be so,” nodded the spirit, “But neither did King Olcost. You should know there are many different forms of power, you need only to find one that will suit you. You do not wish to lose your life, fair enough, so I will not ask for it. So in exchange for my powers I want you to free me.”

“How?” she shook her head in confusion.

“You will find a way, I’m sure,” smiled the spirit, “As of now, you should wake up.”

Nim’s eyes fluttered open and she drew in a deep breath, the crisp morning air chilling her lungs and refreshing her mind. With a wide yawn she pushed herself out of bed and moved to get changed.

It would be yet another a busy day, she knew, so much planning for her coronation to become queen as well as overseeing the repairs of the city.

Straightening her clothes in front of her full length mirror she paused and sighed heavily.

“I wonder why Melodin and the others haven’t come to see me?” she pouted, feelings of loneliness churning in her gut.

Taking another deep breath she left the mirror and headed from her room into the castle corridors. As usual Tama was waiting outside her doors, awake and ready to see her needs met. No doubt it would be a reassuring sight to most, but for some reason he seemed more like a prison guard than loyal subject.

“Princess,” Tama greeted her, “You’re awake early this morning. I hope you’re sleeping well, with all that’s going on you should be getting more rest.”

“I’m fine,” she replied flatly, “What is the schedule for today?”

“More meetings with the rebel soldiers first,” Tama replied as he walked a step behind her, “Then you are to approve the details for the final castle repairs. Lunch is to be with Artharis who has been overseeing the negotiations with Reparian. You then have time for a brief rest before we are to take a walk through the city to see how the repairs are going there. Does that sound good to you?”

“Sure.”

“By the way,” Tama said suddenly, “A letter came for you this morning, delivered by Dog.”

Nim stopped and turned about quickly, her eyes wide and her heart beating faster.

“Quick let me see it,” she implored the bald man as he pulled it from his coat.

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“You’re late.”

“I know,” Melodin mumbled and yawned as he walked through the doors into the airship hanger. “I’m sorry. I didn’t get a lot of sleep last night.”

“Is your room still leaking?” Eclairé asked curiously as she helped Reith move items onto the Banshee.

“Well yes, but that wasn’t why,” he yawned again and rested up against a pile of boxes, “I was trying to write a letter.”

“No wonder it took all night,” Reith jested as he motioned for Melodin to step aside from the crates so they could be taken on board.

Dog growled low beside him before she scratched at her ear.

“Yeah, it was harder than I thought,” Melodin nodded, drawing a snicker from the sky pirate.

“Well, hurry up,” Eclairé called to him, “Help us make ready.”

With another wide yawn he nodded and set about carrying the stock onto Reith’s airship.

With all three of them working hard it did not take long before everything was ready.

“Stop there you pirate scum,” a loud yell stopped them before they climbed aboard.

“Tett,” Melodin exclaimed happily.

“Come to see us off have you?” Reith smiled, “I didn’t think you the sentimental type.”

“Shut your bloody mouth,” the dwarf snapped back, “That ain’t the only reason I’m here.”

“Thought you guys could leave without me, did you?” Nim said angrily as she walked into the hanger to stand beside Tett.

“Nim,” Melodin smiled wide, “It’s goo-”

“You shut up,” Nim snapped, “Did you really think a letter was good enough? You jerk, after everything you thought to say goodbye with a simple letter? How could you?”

“Sorry,” Melodin mumbled, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly.

“You’re wearing rather plain clothes for a princess, aren’t you?” Reith asked curiously.

“Did you have to bring so much stuff?” Tama exclaimed as he came around the corner carrying several large bags.

“Of course,” Nim smiled wide, “Go ahead and put them on board please.”

“What?” Reith asked aloud.

“You’re coming?” Eclairé gave the princess a surprised look.

“Only as far as Solaris,” Nim smiled back, “I’m joining the Magic Academy there.”

“What?” Melodin exclaimed.

“After reading that that was you intended to do, I thought I would as well,” Nim said, a proud look on her face. “If I am to be queen I cannot rely on the power of this ring alone, nor that of those around me.”

“How long were you practicing that little speech?” Tett snickered, causing Nim to blush awkwardly.

“Well, you’re welcome to come, Nim,” Reith smiled and headed up the stairs into the Banshee.

“Best get on board then,” Eclairé added as she too headed inside, “We’re leaving momentarily.”

“Alright, I’m coming,” Nim replied, her calm demeanor suddenly changing. “Good bye Tama. Good bye Tett. Look after the place while I’m gone won’t you?”

“Of course, you’re highness,” Tama said bowing his head.

“Yeah, yeah, get going,” Tett huffed as Nim skipped up the stairs.

“Hurry up Melodin,” Nim said and Dog barked loudly as the airship engines roared to life.

“Yes, right,” Melodin said suddenly, coming from his stunned stupor and rushing up the steps behind Dog.

A wide smile came to his face as he pulled up the steps and shut the doors.

“The Magic Academy with Nim,” he said thoughtfully to himself, his smile widening, “Doesn’t sound too bad.”

## Epilogue

“You failed.”

The statement made him stop walking and he turned to see her move into the light from the dark corridor.

“The information was wrong,” he replied simply.

“Still a failure as far as I can see,” she replied, crimson eyes flashing.

“Then it is good that it is up to the elders to decide and not you.”

She rolled her eyes and brushed her golden hair behind one of her pointed ears.

“Elders,” she scoffed, “A term that applies to all of us now, don’t you think.”

He did not reply and turned to leave.

“Solordorr,” she called after him, making him pause, “You promised you would return the Spirit Ring of Life. Never forget that. Without it there is no death here, nor any new life amongst the Fae.”

“How could I forget? It was my failure, and I will atone for it it.”