

Tanja Veil

WEAVING DAWN

Light Eternal Trilogy

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Part One of the Trilogy

LIGHT ETERNAL

TANJA VEIL

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PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

- An acute (á) above a vowel indicates that that syllable should be stressed.
- A diaeresis (ä) above a single vowel—mostly at the end of a word—indicates that that vowel should be pronounced. When there is a diaeresis above one vowel of a vowel pair, the two vowels should be pronounced separately. For example:
 - ai is pronounced as /aɪ/ (eye), e.g. hike,
 - äi is pronounced as /a: /-/ɪ/ (a-i), e.g. naïve.
- A macron (ā) above a vowel means that that vowel is long.
- A circumflex (â) above a vowel indicates a rise and fall in tone.

THE CASE OF X

- In Dimedia, x is pronounced as (ks), e.g. Xianar is pronounced as ksɪ-anar.
- In the Sovereignty of Nirrh, x is pronounced as /x/ (kh), Dixuen is pronounced as dɪ-khoo-en.

PROLOGUE

The Last Day began with silence. Silence, then screams.

Tren-Cordian-Delas was in one of the towers at the time, honing his skills with the flareblades.

His First Tier test was next week. He had no choice but to pass it as the best of his class.

He stopped, breathing hard, sweat streaming down his face.

His parents were Explorers of the Seventh Tier. To have a crippled son was not only a burden, it was a shame. They never said so, but he knew it was true. He saw it in their eyes. The pity when they looked at him.

His fingers cramped around the flareblades, and he squeezed his eyes shut as he felt the hot prickling of tears.

He had to be the best of his class. He would show them all. Show them that he could become a Guard of the highest tier even with his handicap.

With a cry of frustration, he fell into one of the basic attack stances, stabbing and slashing his way through the room.

The gong of the bells droned through the tower, shaking the walls. Dust rained down on him from the high ceiling. His whole body vibrated along with the gongs.

He frowned. The bells had never been rung; their very existence was pure nostalgia. They stopped abruptly, and his frown deepened. What was going on?

He listened, but he could not hear anything out of the ordinary. Only his laborious pants filled the silence of the Guards' training tower.

Shaking his head, he fell into one of the offensive stances again. Then he heard the screams. They were weak and muffled, but it did not bode well that he could hear them at all up here in the tower. Not hesitating another second, he sprinted out of the room and down the winding staircase.

The farther he descended, the louder the screams became. His heart fluttered. There had to be a fight. But here? In the sanctum of the Crystal City? He gripped the blades tighter.

When the stairs finally spit him out into the broad corridor lining one of the side-halls, he stumbled into a rush of people. Guards, Explorers, Scholars, everyone was running past him, some throwing out portals in front of them to arrive quicker, cutting through the fabric of space

and time with as much thought as he paid to one of the basic forms he trained every day.

“What is going on?” he asked loudly, turning on the spot, trying to find out what was happening. No one paid him any heed.

He cursed and set off in the same direction as everyone else. The Myriad Guild complex was huge, and even the side hall he was in was several hundred meters long. It would take him too long to arrive at whatever was going on by foot.

A Guard to his right opened a portal, and he took his chance, dive rolling through it just as it was about to close. He came back to his feet in front of the liquid golden surface that separated the Diamond Hall from its side halls, stretching between the frame of a large stone arch. The screams were coming from the other side.

The Guard whose portal he had hitched ran through without hesitation, her spear’s glow intensifying before the gold curtain swallowed her. He gritted his teeth, and the flareblades jumped alive. Breaking into a run, he followed her.

The smell of blood punched him in the stomach before his brain could even make sense of what he saw on the other side, and he came to a skidding halt, standing like frozen for heartbeats that stretched time into an impossible thing as the sights and sounds threatened to overwhelm him. Fear sent its icy tendrils down his arms and legs, and one of the flareblades dropped from numb fingers.

In the middle of the hall raged a silent storm. A vicious, soundless storm of darkness and light. Its raw power had begun to crack the pillars and ceiling of the hall.

And all throughout the hall laid bodies in colorful garments. Shapes of darkness were moving between them.

A unit of Guards had assembled in a half-circle formation about fifty meters ahead of him, approaching the center slowly, glowing spears pointed forward, ready to strike.

Something was pulling itself out of the storm. Something that towered above them by several meters. Something that moved in the blink of an eye and turned the Guards’ shouts of surprise into a choir of dying screams.

For a moment, time seemed of no consequence as he stood and watched, helpless, how Guards of the Eighth Tier were slaughtered effortlessly.

And when the last of them had fallen, the thing turned its head to stare at him with several circles of eyes. Eyes that were smoldering stars on a canvas of living darkness.

It moved, flowing from one place to another, almost like it was liquid. There was no contrast, no shades about it to give it dimensions. As if someone had cut its silhouette from the world. It stood four or five meters high, and tendrils of blackness were wafting and snaking out from it as it moved closer.

His heart was beating so hard it almost hurt. His breath came raggedly, and cold sweat clung to his skin. His flight instinct was screaming at him, but his limbs refused to obey. The second flareblade dropped to the floor.

The closer the thing came, the more light around it disappeared until it felt like the darkest

of nights. From its edges, darkness was wafting like smoke.

It stopped a mere meter from him, and its form seemed to flow and change, reaching towards him. Still he couldn't move. A strange coldness began to take hold of him.

"Delas!"

A bluish shield appeared between him and the thing. He blinked and shook his head as warmth returned to his limbs.

"Delas!" His sister rushed to his side, her hands moving quickly and jerkily. The shield folded and engulfed the black entity.

"Come on! Come on!" His sister began to drag him away and finally he snapped out of it.

"My blades!" He tore away from her and dove for the flareblades.

"Delas!" His sister's voice almost cracked. The sudden loss of light in his peripheral vision told him why. He looked up.

The shield was gone, but it had left obvious imprints on the surface of the thing.

You shall pay

The voice boomed in his mind, ripping through his thoughts, and he stumbled back, clutching his head in pain.

"Come on!" screamed his sister. "We need to get out of here!"

He cast a quick glance over his shoulder. She was moving her hands frantically in a tell-tale manner. Fear washed over him. "No! You're not strong enough!"

His sister ignored him.

He faced forward again and, with bravery born from desperation, jumped towards the living darkness, bringing both flareblades down in a wide arch.

A roar as from a wounded beast swelled in his skull, and he dropped the blades again, falling to his knees and screaming, hands pressed to his ears. Wetness was dripping down his neck.

Seething hatred rolled over him in waves.

Gathering every ounce of strength, he opened his eyes.

The thing had reared back. Some of the tendrils that had reached towards them were severed, writhing in the air like dying snakes before dissipating like a drop of ink in too much water.

"Delas..." His sister's voice was weak, pleading. He turned to see her crouched on all fours, face screwed up in pain. Blood was trickling from her nose and ears. Behind her, a small portal hovered in the air.

He grabbed his blades and crawled towards her.

A snarling voice slashed through his mind, full of sharp hatred: *You cannot hide—Our domain is eternal—You cannot run*

His sister lifted a trembling hand, and a flash of light zoomed past him. Another shriek of pain sent a stab of agony through his brain and almost immobilized him.

But the fear on his sister's face had him will his tormented body into a last action of

resistance. With strength he hadn't known he possessed, he grabbed her under the arms and dragged them both through the portal.

RED

Red is often associated with Marsad. It is regarded by many as a color of power and passion and new beginnings.

To me, Red is the sweetest oxymoron. It is a strand of low power, but its presence in a webbing can make it more powerful than logic would dictate. And its effect on the viewer is certainly one of strength. I enjoy studying it, trying to unravel this discrepancy.

-A Short Study of the Colors

14940 AE

Nema

RESCUE

"Mother!"

"It's alright, everything will be alright. Just do as they say, and you will be alright."

"I don't want to go!"

"You have to, my love, you have to."

"Mom!"

"We have no choice. Please, go with them, darling."

"Mom, I don't want to go!"

"I love you, Nema."

Lightning struck on the plains below, for the breath of a moment ripping the world from the grasp of darkness, painting it in harsh contrasts of jagged, unnatural shapes.

Cor wished it hadn't. He was no coward, but these lands gave him the creeps. The sky never cleared. The black, billowing clouds never dispersed, turning day and night into the same mash of hopeless darkness.

He sighed and petted the pecdara's flank. They resumed their march, Cor's feet sinking a few inches into the soggy ground with each step. It had poured almost constantly for the last few days. The rain had let up in the last hour, but the clouds were still dark and piled high, blocking out every beam of moonlight. As if the Darklands were not bleak enough already.

Next to him, the pecdara shook his wet mane and snorted in dismay.

"I know, I know," Cor said, stroking the wet coat of the large animal. "Believe me, I don't want to be here, either."

The pecdara snorted again.

Around them, the dead trees stood tall and gnarled, their leafless branches twisted like bony fingers stretched out to grab them. A particularly low-hanging branch brushed against his head, and he ducked low, suppressing a shudder.

He squinted. The flash of lightning had revealed the end of the forest a few meters ahead,

and he didn't want to risk stumbling onto the Fields of Pain by accident.

Low growls to his right made him freeze and prick his ears. The peccara stopped in his tracks and remained still, ears turning to catch more of the sound.

Cor curled his hand around the saddle-strap. "How many?" he asked quietly. "Be my eyes." His gaze went vacant as his mind paired with that of the peccara. The world became a jumble of gray streaks, shapes accentuated by their outlines. He saw four gangly shapes approach them, crouching and hopping through the undergrowth on four appendages. He blinked, his mind his own again.

"You stay back," he whispered to the peccara. He drew one of his blades and activated the armor, hardly even feeling it when the hard shell encased him.

With a flash, the flareblade jumped to life, dense light sprouting from the hilt and licking along the black core, crackling with energy. It revealed the sad remains of a once proud forest, the trees' black bark glistening wetly.

The growls grew in volume, mixed with hisses.

Cor smiled. Bringing the blade up to his face in a mocking salute, he felt its destructive power, casting uncomfortable heat onto his skin.

"Bring it on," he murmured as he marched towards the tree line.

The blade's light revealed the four crawlers stalking between the trees. They were hideous creatures: vaguely humanoid, with grayish black, slick skin. They moved on hands and feet, scurrying across the ground with unnatural speed, but their faces and bodies still showed enough of their median ancestry to inspire pity in Cor's heart. No one deserved to be a building block for such a wrecked fate.

He stepped between the dead trees. Here, the ground was less soggy, veined by thick roots, allowing him to move more freely. He planted his feet in a wide, secure stance, readying himself. The crawlers were fast, but they were dumb. He could simply wait for them.

The creatures didn't disappoint. Instead of trying to surround him, they came charging right at him, screeching loudly.

He didn't budge, didn't so much as flinch at their screams, not even when they were within two meters of him. To more intelligent creatures, this would have been a warning signal. Not so to the crawlers. They scurried across the little distance separating them and jumped at him, their big, black eyes reflecting the light of his blade, their large mouths opened wide, emitting harsh, high-pitched noises. Slaver connected the yellowish, thin fangs of the lower and upper jaw.

With a calm that bespoke many past encounters of similar nature, Cor took a step forward and to the right, turning with the movement so that his back was to the creatures. His sword left a wide arch of light in front of him. He heard the wet thuds as the creatures met the ground and felt the impact when one or two crashed against him. He turned again.

Three of the four crawlers lay still, with wide, cauterized gashes through their faces or upper torsos. Only one was still alive, wheezing loudly, trying to drag itself upright with only one of

its arms working.

For a moment, Cor felt the urge to try and help the creature. He shifted, hesitant, and the crawler's head whipped up to focus on him. It screeched at him, teeth bared. The noise ended in a suffocated gurgle, and it slumped next to the others. Cor drew his arm back and whirled the blade around. It came to rest at his side, outstretched. It was a silly movement, but after so many years, he had learned to find joy in small things.

Darkness flooded back when the flare-blade went out, its image still burned into his retinas. He blinked. Behind him, the pecdara nickered quietly.

He made his way back, sheathing the sword again. Slowly, his night vision returned.

The pecdara was impatiently pawing at the ground.

"Yes, yes, I know, Pec." He shook his head. "Come on. The quicker we're in, the quicker we're out again." He patted the pecdara's flank.

The large animal snorted but moved forward in pace with his labored, squelching steps without further complaints.

"I'll praise the hour when the ground is no longer trying to swallow me," Cor muttered after he'd pulled his boot free from the mud with a particularly loud slurping sound.

Even with the almost total absence of light, he could tell the moment they left the trees. Dead and leafless though it was, the forest had still provided them with some protection against the never-ceasing wind. Stepping out of the woods, it attacked them anew, howling in their ears.

He heaved a sigh and squared his shoulders. Instinctively, he sought Pec's vicinity, the big animal blocking at least the worst gushes of cold air.

Pec snorted and shook his head.

Cor patted his flank, feeling the warm body of the pecdara under his palm. "Let's go."

Knowing the motion by heart, he swung himself into the saddle with ease. He gripped the pommel of the saddle with one hand, gathering the reins in the other. Exhaling, he closed his eyes. It hardly made a difference.

Mind reaching out, he found Pec's. Touching it, waiting for the pecdara to give him permission to enter, he let the animal's impressions and feelings be his own.

The world became a jumble of hardly visible streaks that still showed more than he could have perceived with his own eyes, and he noted scents he'd not smelled or paid attention to before. Rain-soaked earth, wet stone, decaying wood, the faint scent of fresh death from behind them and old death in front of them... Pec registered all of them as non-threatening.

Cor blinked back into his own mind.

The pecdara spread his wings. Cor felt the muscles work under his legs as he gathered speed with a few strong strides, rushing down the small slope. A powerful jump, and they were airborne.

The ground fell away quickly below Pec's wings as they sped towards their goal. Around them was a sea of darkness, but Cor knew the pecdara would find his way. He looked down. He did not expect to see anything, but he could not pass over the Fields of Pain and pretend it

was just another normal patch of dirt.

By flying, they did not trigger the horrible trap the Nightshade had set up for people trying to approach his lair. Cor was infinitely grateful for that. He had experienced it once, and that had been quite enough.

After the First Battle, he had volunteered to be part of the recovery commando. A group of a hundred people, they had wanted to recover the soldiers fallen or wounded in the confrontation with the Nightshade. As they had ventured out onto what thereafter would be known as the Fields of Pain, they had found it curiously empty of bodies. They hadn't had the luxury of wondering for too long—all too soon they had heard it: the dying screams. Begging and crying, screeching and yelling...

Cor closed his eyes and shook his head in a vain attempt to shut out the images of the recurring memories. Trickery. Nothing more. A debased, evil trick to make them think they were hearing the death struggles of their friends and comrades. Nothing less.

Pec swerved to the right, and Cor opened his eyes again, straightening out the pained grimace that had twisted his features. Ahead, he could make out the twinkling lights of beacons, falling off to the left as Pec aimed to approach it from the right side.

"Careful now," he whispered to him.

The pecdara sent him a feeling that Cor recognized as the equivalent of a raised eyebrow. He grinned.

The lights came closer, illuminating parts of the inner walls of the Nightshade's stronghold. The rest of the building remained hidden in shadows, but Cor knew it well enough: the Omntalan fortress. The Bloodstone.

Veering into a sharp left turn, the pecdara sailed over the walls soundlessly. Much too late, Cor worried about possibly lethal wards or guard posts, but already they were circling above the courtyard... still in one piece. He exhaled quietly. Pec sent him reproach through their mental link.

He patted one of the pecdara's four horns conciliatorily.

Below them, the courtyard looked empty and forlorn. Slowly, Pec circled lowered.

While his instinct was to scoff at the lack of guards, Cor could understand why the Nightshade felt secure enough behind the walls of his fortress to forgo the trouble of wards and wardens. By foot, it was all but impossible to reach it bodily and mentally unscathed.

That left an approach by sky—which would be given away long before one even reached the castle, as wyverns tended to glow. They were effective—and impressive—weapons, but not stealthy ones.

Unless one had a flying animal other than a wyvern, there was practically no way in.

Cor smiled smugly.

It was a mistake not to include one of mankind's greatest heroes in one's defense plans. He had *earned* his reputation, after all.

The pecdara landed with clattering hooves, and Cor jumped out of the saddle and landed in

a wary crouch that bespoke years of practice. One hand on the hilt of one of the blades, he took in his surroundings. The courtyard was as silent as a grave.

Pec folded his wings, prancing on the spot and throwing his head from side to side.

“Calm down,” he whispered to him. “We’ll be gone soon.”

The courtyard was a square, about a hundred by a hundred meters. Torches mounted on the walls sent flickering and jerking shadows across the walls. On one side, Cor could make out weapon racks. He grimaced. He was tempted to destroy them but knew better than to waste time on such childish sabotage.

Instead, he moved towards the door on the northern side of the yard. His price was likely to be found in the dungeons.

Pec nickered, and Cor whirled around. “Shhh!” he hissed.

The pecdara didn’t heed him, instead trotting off towards one of the corners of the courtyard, hidden in the shadows of the looming walls.

“Pec!” Cor pressed out between gritted teeth. “Come back here, you — damn you, what are you doing?” Cursing under his breath, he hurried after the stallion, eyes darting around to make sure they hadn’t been spotted yet. “Pec! I swear, if you —” The words died in his throat when the shadows revealed their secret: there was a stake erected in the corner. And chained to the stake was the unmistakable form of a human. Pec was sniffing him, then gently licked his face.

Cor hurried over to him, ears strained to hear if their intrusion had been detected, but everything remained silent.

The prisoner was in terrible shape. One of his eyes was swollen shut, what little was left of his clothes was in tatters, and the metallic stench of blood was thick about him. It was obvious that he had been beaten and likely tortured.

Cor swallowed thickly and gently raised the prisoner’s head to reveal more of his face. The lower half was covered by a ragged beard, but he still found his suspicion confirmed: this was the man he had been sent to retrieve.

“Prince Manorian. Do you hear me?” he asked quietly, shaking him by the shoulder and patting his cheek.

The Prince’s head snapped up, and he reared back, open panic on his face. “No! Don’t hurt me, not again, please no!” He tried to scramble away from Cor, but the chains around his wrists didn’t allow for much leeway. When he realized he couldn’t escape, he slumped, his head falling towards his chest, long hair covering his face, all resistance and energy drained out of him.

“I’m not here to hurt you, I’m here to free you,” Cor said as gently as he could. “Come on, we don’t have much time, we need to get out of here.”

No reaction.

Cor sighed. He drew back and stood up, pulling one of the blades from his belt. It flared up, bathing the courtyard in bright light. So much for being stealthy.

He slashed the chains with ease, and Manoian slumped. Cor quickly blinded the blade again but didn't put it away. Someone was bound to have seen that.

Crouching down, he unceremoniously picked the limp body off the ground. The Prince didn't react.

Pec had folded his front legs, allowing Cor to throw him onto his back.

With a bang that echoed across the courtyard, the door to the fortress slammed open, and five husks tumbled out.

Cor fought the urge to squeeze his eyes shut. Blackened, rotting flesh hanging from charred bones, the bodies of former humans and medians, no longer distinguishable, shambled in his direction. The light that burned in their eye sockets and mouths was the same that was charring their insides. In places, it had burned holes into their skin and flesh, laying bare the blackened bones beneath.

With a whinny, Pec pushed himself up to all fours, the sudden jolt almost dislodging the Prince from the saddle.

Cor grabbed the pommel just as Pec turned, using the force of the motion to swing himself into the saddle. The pecdara's wings unfolded in a rush, and he galloped across the courtyard to gather speed.

Shooting a look over his shoulder, Cor caught a glance of three esh'carne stepping out of the door. Their wings glowed green, blue and red as they opened them and jumped into the air in pursuit.

"Fuck." He held on tightly to the pommel with one hand, pressing down on Manoian's back with his arm. In the other, he still held the blade. It flashed to life, enveloping them in bright light. He shot a look over his shoulder. The deathangels kept just outside the sphere of light his blade emitted. He couldn't see their bodies, but their wings stood out against the dark sky as streaks of color. He gritted his teeth. There was no way Pec could outfly them.

"Fuckfuckfuck!" He needed a way to lose them, and quickly. He turned his head straight again and felt something swish past it.

A cry of pain followed a moment later, and he looked back to see the streaks of color hover in the air and fall back instead of following on their heels.

Cor's blade went dark, and he closed his eyes, borrowing Pec's vision. Amidst the gray streaks of the dead landscape stood a group of four silhouettes, burning bright with reds and yellows. He opened his eyes again. Having regained some of his night vision, he could now make out the lonely group with his own eyes. One figure stood apart from the others; it drew two long, thin swords from its back. Cor felt an involuntary grin stretch his mouth wide. Deyr was such a show-off.

Pec went into a rapid sinking flight, aiming straight for the warriors waiting for them. Hooves hitting the ground heavily, they splashed up dirt, and the shock jolted Cor a few centimeters out of the saddle as the pecdara turned flight into gallop seamlessly yet ungently.

Cor jumped off as Pec galloped past Deyr. Pulling the second flareblade from his belt, he

joined the two weapons together at the hilt in one quick motion. They came alive with a rush of light.

Deyr and the group of Marsadian warriors had adapted defensive stances, watching the sky attentively. He gave them a quick nod and joined them, holding the glowing quarterstaff at the ready, facing the oncoming esh'carne. The three flying shapes, still visible only as blurred streaks of light, were hovering at a safe distance from them.

"It's good to see you."

"Someone must have your back." Deyr didn't look at him, still watching the sky warily. "I was in Base on official business when I heard you had gone on a potentially deadly mission. Alone." Despite his melodic accent, the reproach was clear in his voice.

Cor snorted. "You worry too much."

"What are they waiting for?" murmured one of the warriors.

"Backup," Cor replied darkly.

The word had barely left his mouth when a pained gurgle, followed by shouts, had him whirl around. One of the Valiants was clutching her throat, blood spilling from between her fingers. She fell to her knees and collapsed.

"They appeared from thin air!" shouted one of the remaining warriors.

"Calm yourselves," Deyr commanded with an even voice. "Back to back, eyes outwards." He pushed his swords into the dirt in front of him. "And cover me."

Cor stepped in front of him, giving the quarterstaff a threatening whirl. From the corner of his eyes, he saw Deyr reach onto his back for his longbow again.

A shriek of anger from somewhere in the darkness was followed almost immediately by another groan and gasp. A throw-knife was embedded into the exposed neck of the warrior to Deyr's right. He toppled forward and didn't get back up.

The remaining Valiant gripped her sword tighter.

"Hurry is the word of the hour, Deyr," Cor said as calmly as he could. "Or we will be picked off one by one."

He felt the rush of air as first one, then a second arrow shot past his face. Another shriek ripped the silence, and they could see two bundles of glowing streaks fall from the sky. A third arrow was loosened, but didn't find a target.

They waited for a few seconds, ears pricked, but the only noise was the whistling of the wind.

Deyr unstrung his bow and put it away. "Let us hope that was warning enough to them." He went to collect his swords. "But stay alert."

Cor hastily made his way to Pec who was waiting for them a few meters away. The Prince was still slumped across his back. Cor frowned and shook his shoulder but got no response. "Prince Manoian." Still nothing.

"Shit, fuckin' dammit." He threw down his weapon and dragged the Prince off Pec.

The quarterstaff rolled a meter or two before coming to a rest, and Deyr carefully stepped

over it as he approached them. He knelt down next to them.

“Fuck.” Cor softly hit Manoian’s cheeks. The Prince’s head lolled to the side, and he remained unresponsive. He was unhealthily pale.

“Let me.” Deyr laid his hands on the abused chest raising and sinking faintly.

“He wasn’t like that when I found him.” Cor dragged a hand through his hair. “Shit. Shit shit shit.”

“He is very weak,” Deyr said quietly, almost like talking to himself. “He is too cold. Malnourished. Dehydrated.” He blinked rapidly, then looked at Cor. “He will not make it long out here.”

“Fuck!” Cor jumped up and kicked the dirt. “Is there nothing you can do?”

Deyr rose. “Neither of us is a healer.” He looked towards the fortress. “But I know one thing for sure: we need to go.”

“Fuck. Fucking fuck!” Cor laid his head back and stared into the black sky. He closed his eyes in defeat before looking back down and then at Deyr. “Pec can take him to Base. But not all of us.”

“Your steed can easily carry the weight of two people.”

Cor snorted. “If you think I’m leaving you, you’re even thicker than I thought.”

Deyr’s expression was unreadable.

Pec stepped up to Cor and bumped him with his muzzle. He folded his forelegs.

Sighing deeply, Cor grabbed the pecdara by the forward-pointing horns. He pressed his forehead against Pec’s, squeezing his eyes closed. He heard Deyr and the remaining Valiant pick up the Prince and carefully lay him across the saddle.

Opening his eyes again, he reached up to unfasten his cloak. He wrapped it around the Prince so he would have at least a modicum of cloth to protect him from the weather. He took a length of rope from the saddlebag and tied the unconscious Prince to the saddle as best he could.

“We need to go,” Deyr urged. “We have dallied far too long.”

“But my King, what about our fallen?” the Valiant asked.

“We cannot take them with us. May the Trinity give that we can return for them.”

The warrior looked like she was about to contradict but after a moment’s hesitance, she inclined her head in acceptance.

Cor unhooked one of the saddlebags and quickly stuffed in his sleeping mat as well as some supplies. He patted the pecdara’s flank. “Fly fast, ahar eó.”

Pec got back up, nickered, and nodded his head. He danced a few steps back and unfolded his wings. With a last whinny, he turned and galloped to gather speed before jumping into the air and sailing off to the east—and Base.

Cor watched him until his black shape became one with the night.

“Let’s go.” Deyr set out towards the dead forest at a quick pace, his Valiant bodyguard falling in behind him.

Cor took a look back. The two fallen Marsadians had been arranged in a manner that made it look like they were sleeping.

He couldn't hear them over the wind howling in his ears, but he knew the crawlers were not far. He grimaced at the thought. There would be nothing left to come back for.

He gave the two dead Valiants a reverent bow before grabbing his saddlebag and hastening after Deyr.



“Enter, Deathbringer Ashásh.”

“Lord of Eternal Night.” Ashásh walked into the room and bowed.

The chamber was nondescript with plain stone walls, dominated by a big, heavy table in the middle of the room. Behind it, in a high-backed chair, sat her lord, his pure white attire contrasting starkly with his surroundings. It washed out his already pale skin, making his lilac eyes and bluish-purple hair all the more striking and unsettling.

The door closed behind her. She had left her two hunt leaders outside—to be in the presence of the Lord of Eternal Night had to be earned.

“How can I serve you?” she asked. She kept her gaze leveled straight at a point on the wall, next to his head.

“You are one of my most loyal servants,” he began. Ashásh stood a bit straighter, “and I have a special task for you.”

“Whatever you name, my lord.” She kept staring at the point above and to the left of his face, but his praise glowed warmly in her chest.

“This special task demands your silence and absolute loyalty towards me.”

She didn't hesitate. “You have it.”

“I believe you. But believing is not knowing.”

Her eyes darted to his face before staring straight ahead again. He was mustering her, hands stapled in front of him.

“I would never betray you, my lord.”

He nodded. “Again, I believe you. But I need to be sure. Step closer.”

Ashásh walked up to the desk, only a fraction of hesitation in her step.

Her lord stood up. He opened a small coffer that sat on the desk in front of him and retrieved what looked like a ring made of darkness. Like a hole in the fabric of reality it swallowed all light, appearing almost two-dimensional.

Involuntarily, Ashásh held her breath.

He held the object out to her. “Grab it.”

She did. The ring felt cold and smooth, almost like stone.

“You know that the prisoner was freed.”

“Yes.” Her mouth twisted, and her eyes narrowed. It had not been hunters from her own

party that had let him escape, but she felt the shame all the same.

"The *crish* sent after them seem useless. I want you to put together a second party to hunt them down."

"Yes, my lord." A tiny smile pulled her lips upwards again. He trusted her to succeed where others had failed. A hunt to right the wrong. She was looking forward to it.

Making one step to the right, he intercepted her line of sight, forcing her to look at him. He was smiling. "I do not care what you do to his rescuers, but you will **not** hurt the Prince." His smile broadened as her confusion must have shown on her face.

"My lord? I don't think I understand..." Her eyes dropped, and she saw that there were now tendrils of black snaking out from the ring, winding around both her and her lord's forearm. Strangely, she didn't feel anything.

"You don't need to understand. Things have been set in motion that are for me to know and understand. All *you* need to know is that the human Prince is off limits. Touch him, and the consequences will be dire. The others, however" —he waved his free hand dismissively— "are yours to do with as you please." His voice gained an edge of urgency. "The Prince must make for the Hollowlight's palace. Ensure that he does so and that he reaches it unharmed."

Ashásh frowned. "My lord, what would he want at the witch's place?"

He smiled thinly. "You ask a lot of questions, Deathbringer Ashásh. The details must not interest you."

"Yes, my lord." She straightened again at the reprimand, still holding onto the ring.

"Then you know what you have to do. You will not talk to anyone or anything about what transpired here. Should you try to..." He gestured for her to let go of the ring. She did and took a step back. The tendrils of darkness still clung to her forearm. He put the ring back into the coffer and closed the lid. "You will not live to regret it." He raised his head to give her a cold look.

She bowed deeply. "Yes, my lord."

"Dismissed." He waved his hand at her.



Moonlight spilled over the dark rock, making the pieces of sharp stone in front of them glint menacingly. It was only a second, but a brief glimpse of what the sky looked like in less hostile regions, but it was enough to clearly silhouette the winged creature between the walls of stone towering around them.

In one fluent motion, Deyr pulled an arrow from the quiver at his hip, nocked and shot.

A strangled cry cut through the whistling of the wind just as the clouds swallowed up the light of the moon again. The red glow of wings disappeared behind the crest of the hill they had just climbed.

"Hit anything?" Cor asked jokingly, but before Deyr could answer, streaks of light appeared

from the darkness, moving quickly and erratically, making it impossible to tell what was going on. Shouts of surprise mixed with cries of pain, but before anyone could react, they'd disappeared again.

Cor unsheathed his flareblade to give them some light. He was about to ask whether everyone was alright, but the words died in his throat. Lying crumpled on the ground between them was the last of Deyr's bodyguards.

"A distraction," Deyr commented bitterly. He arranged the warrior's hands on her chest, so they held on to her sword. "May Marsad welcome you with blaring horns. We will plant your tree, Valiant Mern." Getting up, he pulled on thick leather gloves. "We need to go on. We cannot make a stand here."

Cor nodded, extinguishing the flareblade. Plates snaked across his skin as he activated his armor, and when his night-vision had returned, he set out onto the treacherous terrain that had been aptly named *the Knives*. His foot sank into the pile of obsidian splinters, sending them tumbling downhill.

Over the distance of about two hundred meters, the slopes of the Black Maw mountain range were covered in razor-sharp pieces of obsidian. Thick armor or a healthy amount of luck as well as an extraordinarily good sense of balance were mandatory for every journey across the Knives. Cor knew more than one person who had ventured into the Knives without proper protection. The scars were not pretty to look at.

Out of the dark, a heap of white appeared to his left, but his next step sent more stones tumbling down, hiding the bones from view. Not all were lucky enough to survive a fall in the Knives.

He averted his eyes, concentrating on reaching the other end of the obsidian field as quickly as possible. His armor protected him well, and while it reduced the danger of a potential fall to a minimum, it was still an annoyingly slow process to move across the sliding stones.

"Do you think they'll follow us?" Cor called out to the wind.

"Yes," came the curt answer from behind him, almost swallowed by the clacking and crunching of the stones.

Cor chewed on his lower lip. He had hoped their pursuers would take the longer way around the Black Maw, considering that they would not have any kind of protection for the Knives. But he had long learned to trust Deyr's instincts.

"How long, then, do you think till they dare follow us?"

"Not long. We're making as much noise as a young dragon, they will know it is safe to follow. In here, we are easy prey."

As if on cue, the clamor of sliding stones arose behind them.

Cor grimaced. He should have known better than to think the Nightshade's servants cared about losses. He tried to move faster but only succeeded in sliding down a few meters and almost falling.

Cursing, he shot a quick look over his shoulder. He could not see the tell-tale glow of an

esh'carn's wings, but the sounds of tumbling stones were even less reassuring. Judging by the noise, they were being pursued by at least a dozen creatures.

He pulled himself free from where the small avalanche of stones had buried his legs and waded through the last few meters of obsidian. Behind him, rough cries were mixing into the sounds of sliding stones and whistling winds.

Deyr had reached the end of the Knives a few meters above him and was shooting into the darkness behind them.

Cor squinted the way they had come. "How can you see what you're shooting at?"

Deyr lowered his bow. "I can't." He raised an eyebrow at him. "But I have ears."

Cor snorted and turned. "Let's go while we still have a head-start."

They hurried along the narrow path that led through the spires of black stone rising to dizzying heights around them. Regarded as a natural anomaly, the mountain range of the Black Maw jutted out of the ground like a great beast's lower jaw, splitting the Green Mountains. A series of jagged spires, high and thin, the Black Maw breached land and sky, its peaks lost in the clouds.

There was no way over the spires by foot—thanks to Pec, Cor was the only one who had ever set foot onto the ground inside the Maw, and he remembered it all too well. Standing there had been a rather surreal and decidedly uncomfortable experience. The ground was pure obsidian, just like the mountains themselves, and every time he moved, the light reflections made it look like something moved below the ground with him. There had been no sound other than his breathing and Pec's nervous steps echoing across the barren stone. No animals, not even insects. The Maw had been devoid of any sign of life. There had been only him, Pec and the purplish black, menacing spires around them, curving inward, reinforcing the impression that they were standing inside a long-forgotten beast's jaw.

They had only stayed for a few minutes. Not even Cor's curiosity had stood a chance against the primal fear that had crept up on him inside those teeth-like mountains. Whatever secret the Maw might have been harboring, it could keep it.

"Down!"

Cor reacted to Deyr's command without thinking and let himself fall to the ground. He felt the dull impact of something heavy hitting his back, his armor absorbing most of the force. He jumped up and whirled around.

Two angels had laid in wait for them, letting them walk a good ways into the narrow pathway before swooping down. Thanks to Deyr's warning, their initial attack had missed, and their momentum had carried them too far to retaliate immediately.

Cor activated both of his flareblades and darkness fled to reveal the two esh'carne struggling to gain ground against the violent gusts of wind howling through the defile.

"Deyr!" he shouted, no idea whether he was heard or not, but it turned out it was not needed—before the word had even left his lips, an arrowed zoomed past him and hit one of the angels in the shoulder.

With a screech that was almost lost to the wind, they catapulted themselves upwards and back towards the Knives, the other one following suit, now using the wind to their advantage.

“Let’s go! Quick!” Deyr turned and ran.

Cor didn’t need to be told twice. The light of the flareblade vanished, and he sprinted after Deyr.

They ran and skittered along a winding path that had been hewn into the side of one of the broader spires. It was littered with pebbles of obsidian and slick with rain, and Cor found himself chanting a mantra of *don’tfall don’tfall don’tfall* as they raced towards the plain below.

“The watch tower?” he asked Deyr at one of the switchbacks.

His friend gave a short nod. They did not have another choice. The ruined watch tower was the only shelter for kilometers around. Facing the Nightshade’s creatures on open field would be stupidity, so the tower was their only option.

Cor feared that the deathangels knew that as well.



Ashásh paced up and down the courtyard, ignoring the ruckus around her. La’dann hunters were herding husks and gleamers together, as per her orders. The two hunt leaders under her command stood a few meters away, watching her, waiting for an order.

She couldn’t bring them on this mission. They were good at what they did. Good was not what she needed. What she needed was someone who didn’t ask questions. Someone who would just be happy to be on a hunt and would follow her every order unquestioningly, no matter how absurd it might be. Someone dispensable.

Mid-pace, she stopped. A smile stretched across her face as she looked up at the clouds hiding one full moon and a half-moon. She knew just where to get what she needed.

“Malkir, Ishrik!”

The two hunt leaders stood at attention.

“You are dismissed.”

They looked at each other.

“Yrszdea, what is the reason for this?” Ishrik asked, frowning. “Surely, we have served you well?”

She gave him a dark look. “It is sufficient for you to know that you are not needed. Dismissed,” she repeated, a clear warning in her voice.

They saluted. The irony of the gesture—distinctly non-la’dann—was not lost on Ashásh. At another time she might have disciplined them for it. Right now, she had more important things on her mind. Her lord relied on her. She would not disappoint him.

She spread her wings, the yellow glow lighting up the courtyard for a moment, and took off.



Water splashed up and into their faces as they crossed the ford at running speed. It was cold, but Cor welcomed it. They had not been followed on their long way from the pass to the river, and that was suspicious. The cold water that leaked into his armor and soaked his clothes made sure he was uncomfortable enough to remain alert.

A few dead trees stood between them and the tower; not quite a forest but enough to obstruct their view. They slowed down.

“Ran’kish or cat?” Cor asked as they moved from tree to tree.

“Cat,” Deyr replied, “until we see if we’re being awaited or not. If there is a welcoming committee, I think ‘kish is what we’re going for.”

“Excellent.” Cor grinned to himself. He pulled out the two blades, fingers caressing the cool metal-stone liaison of the hilts.

Deyr had an arrow nocked, bowstring drawn halfway, ready to shoot at anything that moved.

Ever so quietly, they sneaked forward through the muddy terrain, keeping to the trees as good as they could. They stopped when only a few meters of open ground separated them from the tower’s entrance.

Pressed to the wet bark of a tree’s dead trunk, Cor looked at Deyr. Everything was quiet. He peeked around the tree. Nothing.

“I’m gonna dash,” he murmured. “You cover me.”

Deyr nodded.

Taking a deep breath, Cor pushed himself off the tree, making a run for the door, leaping over the roots breaking through the ground. From the corner of his eyes, he could see Deyr leave the cover of the tree and pull the bowstring back to his ear.

It took him only a few seconds to cross the open space to the tower. He reached for the handle of the thick wooden door.

“Above you!” Deyr yelled.

Cor looked up and right into the snarling face of an angel falling towards him, wings unfurled. What he had thought of as another ruined part of the tower, protruding from its original walls, had been an esh’carn, clinging to the tower upside down, the backside of their wings hiding their glow.

Cor fell to his back with a shout, throwing up his right hand, the blade flaring up. For a moment, he had no idea what was happening. All he saw was the blue glow of the angel’s wings and their wide-open mouth, riddled with fangs. There was a screech before the angel made impact, and he squeezed his eyes shut, turning his head to the side to protect himself. The angel landed on top of him heavily, and he pulled up his knees to push them off, rolled to the side and jumped up, swords at the ready. No attack came.

He blinked. The world was grayish green and devoid of details, making him curse. The theory behind self-activating armor was sound and had saved him several times. But with the night-vision of the visor broken, what protection it offered was counterbalanced by the fact that

he was essentially rendered half-blind.

He willed the armor to give his face free. It peeled back, and the nondescript heap in front of his feet turned out to be the angel that had attacked him.

Squelching sounds made him whirl around in defensive stance.

Deyr was approaching slowly, bow and arrow at the ready, eyes searching the dark sky.

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah." Cor lowered the sword. "Must have basically impaled myself on the sword."

"There is a second one." Deyr walked backwards towards the tower, bow and arrow pointing at the trees. "I think I wounded them, but they escaped."

Cor raised his weapons again, activating the second blade, eyes narrowed at their surroundings. Every stone, every gnarly tree could potentially hide the esh'carn. "I give you cover."

Deyr approach the door slowly and carefully. Rattling sounds followed, and something metallic clunked onto stone. The subsequent creak of the wooden door was loud and ominous.

"You go first. Light the way," Deyr said quietly.

Cor walked backwards towards the door, not taking his eyes off the trees. From the corner of his eyes, he saw that Deyr had stowed away his bow, instead holding his twin swords, the long, sleek blades burning with a cold, green glow.

Taking a deep breath, Cor jumped into the tower, blades poised to strike at anything that moved.

The entrance was empty. To the far side of the room, an old fireplace was littered with broken glass; an overturned table and broken chairs were scattered about. His steps caused clouds of dust, and a few spiders scurried into hiding from the light of his blades.

"It's safe!" he called out and slowly moved towards the stairs.

Deyr joined him inside the tower and threw the now handle-less door closed.

"The bar lies over there," Cor pointed out, step by step ascending the stairs towards the upper floors, listening for anything that might indicate unwelcome presences awaiting them.

He heard Deyr wedge the bar into the brackets. It would not stop the Nightshade's creatures, but it would at least slow them down.

Cor quickened his pace once he felt Deyr's presence join him on the stairs, and they made their way up the winding staircase until they came to an opening in the ceiling. Beyond it lay darkness. He shot a look over his shoulder. Deyr nodded.

The armor closed over his face, and there was a moment where his vision was a jumble of mechanics before the visor cleared. Letters, numbers, and shapes flickered across the glass-like surface, analyzing his surroundings. Cor had learned to ignore them. With the exception of the distance measurer, they had stopped working reliably some decades ago.

He took the last steps running, a strong jump catapulting him through the opening and into the room beyond. As soon as he'd landed, he turned on the spot, one blade outstretched to illuminate the room, the other ready to strike.

The passing light revealed rusty metal and decomposing wood: chairs, tables, even a bed in one corner. Everything as ransacked as the ground level.

“Safe!” he called over his shoulder.

Deyr entered the room, swords sliding into their sheaths. He closed the trapdoor with a loud bang, and a dust plume exploded from the floor. He turned away, grimacing in dismay.

Cor grinned at him. “Where’s your servants when you need them?”

Deyr rolled his eyes. He approached the torches on the wall and inspected them. “Still good.” He pulled a firestone from a satchel at his hip. It took him a few seconds to coax the old torch into catching fire, but once it did, the shadows fled to pool in the corners and flicker on the floor.

“Check on that door,” Deyr pointed behind Cor.

“You want to go farther up?” Cor asked, astonished. All the same, he walked to the other side of the room.

“No, but I would like to know whether or not there is still a way in here from that end.”

Cor took a hold of the handle and pulled. The handle came free. He looked at it for a second, then turned and held it up. “If you really want to find out, you’ll have to kick down the door.”

Deyr hesitated visibly, the jerking flames of the torch accentuating his already hard features.

“We saw the ruin of the tower’s top,” Cor pointed out. “Let us assume that it means there is no way down here.”

“That assumption could possibly end in a two-front fight.”

Cor shrugged. “In that case we’ll find out soon enough.”

Heavy thumps from below made them both go silent. A moment later, the violent sounds of splintering wood reached their ears. It was followed by shuffling and scratching of claws on stone.

“Looks like the decision was made for us.” Deyr unhooked his bow and knocked an arrow, withdrawing to the far side of the room. “Get them when they enter the room.”

Nodding, Cor screwed his blades together and gave the resulting quarterstaff a whirl. He positioned himself behind the trapdoor. They hadn’t locked it. No point in drawing out the inevitable.

The heavy wooden slab rose a few centimeters before falling back closed. A testing bump. Cor tensed.

The trapdoor slammed open, and the quarterstaff came down in a bright arch, slashing a hindleg off one of the two huge cats that shot through the opening.

“What the fuck?!” Cor backed away, holding the staff out in front of himself defensively. The cats were huge, their heads level with his chest.

Two arrows hit the wounded beast in the side in quick succession. It growled and turned to face Deyr. The other turned towards Cor. Its eyes were completely white, and like bulging veins, snake-like patterns of light were writhing across its black-furred body. Cor side-stepped, bringing the trapdoor between himself and the cat.

It growled deeply and ducked, preparing for a jump.

A husk reared its head through the trapdoor, and Cor didn't hesitate. He jumped, letting himself fall into a crouch to slide towards the trapdoor, using the emerging body of the husk as a shield.

It didn't notice him until the quarterstaff burned a hole through its chest. Cor grabbed its shoulder and dragged it up, holding it against his chest. The sickening smell of burning flesh filled his nose, making his stomach churn.

The cat had circled the trapdoor, its fur bristling. Cor moved with it, trying to keep his distance, the husk's body pressed against himself with one hand, the other gripping the quarterstaff tightly.

Judging by the yowls that were now coming from behind him, Deyr was making shorter work of his enemy than Cor.

The cat ducked again. Cor shoved the husk at it and launched himself into the air with a powerful jump. Instinctively, the cat snapped at the husk, the jaws closing around its midsection. It realized it had been tricked too late; it didn't even manage to look up before Cor rammed the quarterstaff through its head, landing with a thump that cracked the stone beneath his feet.

Freeing the quarterstaff, he fell into a defensive stance, facing the trapdoor and Deyr. Deyr's twin swords were sticking out of the mighty body of the cat lying at his feet. He was nocking an arrow.

Another husk was rearing its head through the trapdoor. Cor freed it from its body.

"Is that all?" he asked loudly and mockingly. "That is all the might the great Nightshade has to show?"

"It is not."

Red light filled the chamber as a deathangel's upper body appeared in the trapdoor. Deyr shot.

The arrow met an invisible barrier and zinged away.

The angel laughed, low and raspy.

Cor gave a shout and swung at him, but the quarterstaff impacted with the same invisible shield, sending tremors up his arms. He jumped back, eyes narrowed. The armor closed around his neck and head, leaving only his face free.

The angel grinned, revealing sharp, thin teeth. Scars on their cheek glowed with the same pulsing red light as their wings. "Come, come, don't be shy."

Another person entered the room. They walked jerkily, as if moved against their will. Pale skin, broken in places and covered in patches of dried blood, hair matted, they were clad in tatters of what had once been the elegant uniform of a marchwarden.

A Teran.

"They do make very handy pets," the deathangel gloated, observing the Teran with both arrogance and hunger.

“What have you done to him?” Deyr asked, voice clipped and strained.

Cor had moved to stand beside him.

“My lord can be very... persuasive.” The angel sneered. “Any last words before I command it to crush you?” He motioned to the Teran.

The Teran’s eyes were wide open, and his mouth was quivering, the muscles in his neck taunt. It was obvious that he was fighting whatever power forced him to be here.

“I am sorry,” Deyr said quietly.

Cor slanted a look at him. His lips were pressed together so hard they formed a thin line, and his hands were gripping the obsidian blades tightly. The green glow of their edges intensified. All Deyr needed was an opening.

Screaming as loud as he could, Cor threw himself forward, the visor closing over his eyes. Aided by the armor, the power of his leap propelled him across the room, taking the esh’carn by surprise. The quarterstaff met the invisible barrier with a flash of rainbow colors.

He met the ground and leaped again, quarterstaff outstretched in front of him. It speared the angel’s body, Cor’s momentum carrying them both several meters backwards, slamming the angel into the wall.

“H-how?” the deathangel sputtered, dark blood dripping from his mouth to his chest. The arrogance had given way to confusion, shock, and pain.

Cor looked to the side, and the esh’carn followed his gaze.

Deyr was kneeling on the floor, holding the dying Teran in his arms. One of his swords was still embedded in his chest, glowing a faint green.

“You should have crushed us,” Cor whispered. He withdrew the quarterstaff. The angel slid to the ground, wheezing and sputtering. “But unlike your kind, I do not find joy in suffering.” The quarterstaff came down again, severing the angel’s head.

As the headless corpse slowly slumped to the side, Cor had already moved over to Deyr and the Teran. He cast a quick glance down the trapdoor. Everything looked quiet.

“We cannot linger,” he murmured as he knelt next to his friend. The armor receded to reveal his face. “There will be backup.”

The Teran sputtered, blood staining his lower lip red. “I was the last one.” He coughed violently, “No more w-weavers or f-filth.” He gave them a weak smile.

Deyr pressed a hand to his chest. “What is your name?”

“A-Aranaël-noën.”

“We will tell your Queen and your family of your honorable last deed.”

The Teran smiled again. “Thank you.” The pain that had tormented his features vanished and gave way to peace. He went still.

Deyr murmured something under his breath, his hand still pressed to the now motionless chest.

“I’m downstairs,” Cor said quietly, “making sure there’s no surprises waiting for us.” He rose and squeezed Deyr’s shoulder before heading down through the trapdoor, unscrewing the

quarterstaff as he went.

The two flareblades cast bright light onto the stairs and walls, illuminating the entrance room, revealing a bunch of husks lurking around on the ground level. The angel had seemingly not had the patience to send all of his creatures against them before facing them himself.

The husks growled and yelped as they saw him, shuffling to storm the stairs, each pushing and snarling at the others to try and reach him first.

Cor felt a pang of guilt at the unfairness of the situation as his sword beheaded the first of them. The only threat these tormented creatures posed was their numbers, and that advantage they lost on the stairs. Whirling the swords in front of him, he mowed down the charging husks with ease. None of them came even close to harming him.

“Clear!” he shouted upstairs as the last of the husks toppled over the side of the stairs, its head and one of its legs missing.

The entrance door had been blown off its hinges by great force, its sad remains lying against the far side of the room. Clearly the work of the weaver. *Aranaël*, Cor corrected himself mentally, *not ‘the weaver’*. *Aranaël*.

He pressed himself against the wall and peered outside, scanning what he could see of the tower’s surroundings. Everything was quiet.

He jumped outside with the blades raised defensively towards the dead trees. A quick turn-around on the spot didn’t reveal anyone. No angel hanging in wait to gore him this time.

He backed up until he was pressed flat against the wall of the tower, easing some of the tension from his body. One of the blades went dark, and he rested it on the ground. The other he kept alight, lazily pointed towards the dead trees. A gust of wind shook the branches; a drizzle of rain was riding on it, and Cor looked up at the sky in dismay. A raindrop hit him square on the forehead. Instinctively, he pressed his eyes shut and bunched up his shoulders, muttering under his breath: “Stupid weather.”

Movement from the corner of his eyes made him turn his head. Deyr had stepped out of the tower, carrying the body of *Aranaël* in his arms.

Cor pushed himself off and joined him. “We don’t have the time to bury him,” he said, trying to make his voice compassionate.

“My own people I had to leave to the elements and scavengers. Marchwarden *Aranaël-noën* will be given a proper burial.”

“We are still being hunted. We need to move.” Cor didn’t look at the *Teran*’s body.

Deyr turned to face him. The wind whipped his long hair around his face. His expression was dark. “We will burn him.” His tone made it clear that there would be no further discussion.

For a moment, Cor entertained the idea of contradicting. But Deyr’s face was forbidding, his stance offensive. Cor knew him well enough to be positive that he would lose that argument. And regret it.

“Alright,” he conceded. “But we need to hurry. It’s starting to rain again.”

As if to prove his words true, heavy raindrops began to hit the ground around them.

Deyr gave a curt nod. He gently laid down Aranaël's body on the clearing in front of the tower. Without a word, he disappeared between the trees. The sounds of snapping wood reached Cor's ears not a minute later. He sighed. Casting a glance at the lifeless body, he joined Deyr.

Their blades made short work of the branches, and it didn't take them too long to gather enough wood. Not a real pyre, but enough to bed Aranaël on a thin layer of branches and cover him.

Cor rammed one of the flareblades into the wet ground handle-first to serve as a beacon. Then he went to retrieve a small flask from his backpack and sprinkled some oil onto the wet wood.

He stepped away and respectfully clasped his hands in front of him.

Deyr pulled out the firestone and knelt in front of the heap of wood. He put a hand over his heart and touched his forehead and lips with the other, bowing his head. "Aranaël-noën, honorable marchwarden till the end. Your sacrifice will not be forgotten."

He inserted one of the oil-slick twigs into the oblong ruby, and it sprang into flames. The fire licked at the branches, but despite the oil, the wet wood took a long time to catch. Cor felt himself become fidgety. He kept glancing at the trees.

Just as he was about to convince him to leave it be, Deyr stood up and took a step back. The makeshift pyre was fuming badly, but the flames were catching on, casting jerking shadows across their faces.

Deyr inclined his head. "Marsad will welcome you with open arms. You deserve a place among the very brave."

Cor's heart clenched. He wished he could believe his friend's words.

They stood in silence for a few minutes, the only sounds the crackling of the fire and the spattering of raindrops around them.

Deyr bent down and grabbed a handful of dirt. He threw it into the fire. "May Tera guide you to your eternal resting place, son of Sirdethēna." He turned and walked away.

Cor remained staring at the dancing fire for a moment longer. Had Aranaël fought in the First Battle? Was that what had brought him here? Had he endured captivity for over a hundred years just to ultimately sacrifice himself for people he didn't even know? He screwed his eyes shut and exhaled sharply.

Forcing himself into action, he went to grab his blade and hastened after Deyr, crossing the open space between the tower and the dead forest quickly. As the darkness of the trees enveloped him, the scent of wet wood and earth swallowed the stench of burning flesh. His hand wandered to search through his backpack until his fingers wrapped around the cold, flat shape of a metal flask.

The movement was quick; trained and efficient.

When he joined Deyr a few seconds later, the flask was already resting in his backpack again, kosh warming his throat and stomach, fighting the coldness that was reaching for his

heart with icy fingers.



Korzna was in a good mood. He was confident he would finally receive his scars this time.

“You look so sure of yourself,” Sherzna observed.

Korzna sent his friend a toothy grin. “I have trained quite hard. Also...” He made a dramatic pause. “Fifth time the Five smile upon you, aye?” His grin broadened.

“I hope you’re right.” Sherzna sounded subdued.

“Oh, come on.” Korzna bumped into him. “You’ve trained hard, too. I’ve seen you! Your drop maneuvers are incredible! You’re gonna do great.”

Sherzna smiled hesitantly. “I hope you’re right.”

“Sure I am. Look,”—he pointed to the night sky—“even the moons grace us with their light.”

Sherzna snorted. “Don’t get poetic.”

Korzna acted scandalized at the insinuation of following such wingless endeavors, and they were laughing as they left the guild hall’s grounds. They sobered up as they stepped through the last of the gates and fell silent. Becoming a scar-bearer was an undertaking most serious in nature, and the way to the proving was supposed to be spent in silent contemplation.

Their tacit journey led them down the sloping path from their guild hall to Hunt’s Round. There they were to ask the aspects for guidance before setting out to the Scar Givers—the northernmost cliff face of the island.

The night was indeed beautiful, and at least Light was smiling upon them, giving them a clear sky with one full moon and a half-moon.

A gust picked up Korzna’s yet unbraided hair and whipped it around his head. Wind, too, seemed to be on their side. He smiled. Tonight was going to be a good night. A successful night.

The closer they came to Hunt’s Round, the more scarless they saw wandering towards the monument from the other guild halls. It would be a long night with so many to be tested.

They had reached the monument’s perimeter, and Sherzna stopped, bowing his head. Korzna followed his example.

Reverently, they stepped onto the smoothed, rounded skulls that paved the area around Hunt’s monument. Fallen hunters.

Korzna’s naked feet felt every bump of the bones beneath his soles. The closer to the monument they came, the smoother they became, polished and worn-down by countless feet. He hoped that one day, the same honor would be bestowed upon him.

Sherzna jabbed an elbow into his side without warning.

Hissing, Korzna turned his head. *What was that for?* his look said.

Sherzna motioned to the monument with his head.

Frowning, Korzna followed his gaze. Someone was standing beneath the statue of Water, clearly not asking for Hunt’s guidance: they were facing outward, mask hiding their face. Their

stance bespoke a seasoned hunter, so did the fact that her hair was shaved. Unexpectedly, she opened her wings and purple light spilled over Hunt's Round.

Korzna's frown deepened, irritated. It was disrespectful to show one's colors on Hunt's Round. He cast a quick glance at the monument. The aspects of Water and Earth stared down at them, judgmental.

The unknown hunter approached him, and he noticed she was clad in the armor of those who served the Lord of Eternal Night. Strong hands landed on his shoulder, turning him around and forcefully walking him off Hunt's Round. Her grip was tight, but Korzna had no intention to struggle. Not while his feet caressed the remains of those who had given their lives on a hunt.

As soon as they touched earth again, however, he swatted off the hands and spun around, bristling.

Sherzna had followed them and was anxiously watching the unknown figure. He had adapted a defensive stance, ready to jump to Korzna's side.

"Who—" Korzna was about to demand when the unknown la'dann reached up and removed her mask.

"Yrszdea!" Sherzna unfolded his wings in a rush and dropped down to one knee.

Eyes widening in realization at the sight of the scars on the revealed face, Korzna followed suit. "How can we serve you?" he asked the ground.

"At ease," the deathbringer commanded. "I am looking for someone to accompany me on a hunt."

They rose and shot each other a confused look.

"Please forgive us, Yrszdea, but we have not yet earned our scars," Sherzna said. "You must be mistaking us," he added, careful to make his tone meek.

"I can see that." The deathbringer glared at him. "But I am not mistaking you. I have my reasons to approach you."

Sherzna bowed deeply again. "Forgive our doubts," he mumbled.

"If you could but wait a few hours, we'll surely pass the proving, and then we'll..." Korzna trailed off as the deathbringer redirected the full force of her glare to him.

"You will accompany me this instant, anensiw." A cruel smile twisted her mouth. "Don't worry, you'll have more than enough chances to prove yourself on this hunt."

She put her mask back on, spread her wings and took off without looking back.

Korzna and Sherzna exchanged a look. They knew they didn't have a choice. Not if they didn't want to lose their face and any chance at ever gaining their scars.

"What do you think the Lord of Eternal Night wants with us?" Sherzna asked, wings testing the air.

Korzna stared after the purple streak. "I have no clue." He shot a look at Hunt's monument. The other scarless were watching them.

Sherzna had followed his gaze. "May the Aspects guide us forever in Hunt's favor," he

whispered. Two strong beats of his wings brought him up into the air to follow the vanishing light of the deathbringer.

Features twisting in disdain but not finding it within himself to refuse a direct order, Korzna lifted himself into the air. He couldn't shake the feeling that hunt was not at all in favor of their endeavor.



The horizon was lost to the liquid heat hovering above red stones.

Cor stepped out of the shade, and although he didn't feel it, he knew that the heat was assaulting him like a hungry dragon.

Hills rose in front of him; higher and ever higher they towered, until they culminated in the serrated peaks of the Dead Mountains, somewhere beyond the shimmering, deadly air.

Rankosh, the desert land of dragons, was no habitable place, and Cor only knew it from afar. Only the Marsadians were daring enough to enter it, and even by their standards, it was a foolish quest to attempt and go past the Dead Mountains.

Only a handful, the bravest, smartest, and strongest of their people, had ever returned from beyond those black giants. And only one of them was still alive today.

Tremors shook the ground, causing small stones and pebbles to jump and dance around his feet. Slowly, the terrible, fearsome shape of a fully grown varn-dragon rose from behind the hill in front of him.

Instinctively, he took a step back.

The dragon didn't pay him any attention, long neck bowed back, revealing the deep-red glow of its underside, head swiveling to and fro as if it was tasting the air.

The claws, each as big as Cor himself, splintered the rock and buried themselves in the ocher earth when the majestic creature pulled itself up to its full height. It let out an ear-deafening roar that stopped abruptly.

The dragon lowered its head to the ground, giving an all in all subdued impression.

Cor frowned. He'd never seen a dragon act this demurely, not even one of the lesser ones.

The creature moved its head to the side, and Cor pulled in a sharp breath through his teeth. It was carrying someone.

The rider turned her head to face him. Sitting proudly astride the dragon's back, her crown catching the smoldering sun in a halo of fire, was the Hollowlight.

He took a step forward in disbelief only to stop in his tracks when the Hollowlight looked at him. Not through him like people in his visions always did. No, she looked right at him, and her lips stretched into an arrogant smirk. Her mouth moved, but Cor couldn't hear what she said. She twisted in her seat, and he caught a look of a second rider sitting behind her. Recognition hit him like a blow to the stomach.

The dragon jerked its head back up, taking a few steps to the side, reducing stone to rubble

in the process. It spread its wings, and they raised up a storm of red sand when the mighty beast took off. Cor instinctively shielded his eyes even though the dream-sand couldn't bother him. The dragon sped off, and he awoke with a start.

"Dream?" asked the disembodied voice of Deyr from the darkness. He sounded wide-awake.

Cor shook his head. "Vision." He shivered as the sweat dried on his skin. He realized he was trembling, and he rubbed his arms; more to give himself something to do than to warm them.

A light flared up, revealing Deyr kneeling next to their makeshift fire pit.

They had sought shelter in the ruined fort of abandoned T'lialal and chosen one of the uppermost rooms as their resting place. It was still intact, with slitted windows too small for an *esh'carn*, and a thick, steel-plated door that could be barred from the inside. If somebody tried to break in, they would have ample warning.

Thus, they had taken the chance to light a fire to dry their rain-soaked clothes. Deyr had laid out his leather travel armor around the fire pit and had stripped to his undershirt and pants.

He sat down cross-legged opposite the fire. "Tell me."

Cor hesitated.

His friend tilted his head to the side. "Cor?"

"It... I saw Liranai."

"Liranai?" Deyr's eyebrows rose in surprise. "I thought you said he was dead?"

Cor pressed his lips together and nodded jerkily. "I thought so, too. I mean, I saw him being dragged off by one of her floating guards." He looked at the dancing flames. "I didn't expect her to let him live."

"So it was a contemporary vision?"

Cor's eyebrows bunched up as he reflected on his vision. They could show him past, future, or present. The past one's were always true, even if he saw something he hadn't lived through himself. The present ones were almost always true, but a vision showing the future had equal chances to come to pass as not.

"I don't know," he eventually admitted. "But I don't think so." His gaze traveled up again until it came to rest on Deyr's face. The Marsadian's strong features were accentuated by the fire. As always, his face betrayed none of his thoughts. The reddish light glistened off the long, black hair and what scales Cor could make out that were adorning his collarbone. He was beautiful, in a respect-inducing, dangerous way.

He inhaled deeply. "The Hollowlight. She was riding a dragon."

It was a testament to the shock Deyr must have felt that Cor could see his eyes widen and his lips part slightly. It was over as quickly as it had come, his features settling into the stony expression he knew all too well.

"That is not possible."

Cor sighed and shifted. "I hope so." A heavy silence settled over them. Cor broke it eventually by saying what he couldn't keep to himself: "But if it were... Liranai would still be

alive then." His eyes never left Deyr's face as he said the words.

"Yes."

Cor sighed again, finding his suspicion confirmed. "Deyr. We have talked about this." His friend averted his eyes, studying the fire. The flames reflected in his eyes, the silver specks sparkling like tiny jewels. "You know it doesn't mean anything."

"You are bonded." Deyr's voice was devoid of all emotion. "It is the most sacred of oaths to take." He looked back at Cor, but again his face betrayed none of his thoughts. "It means everything, Cor-noën."

Cor dropped his gaze. "I would break it if I could, you know that," he murmured.

"But you can't."

Cor shook his head. "I am sure there is a way."

Deyr didn't answer. Instead, he said: "Let's go back to sleep. We have a strenuous day ahead."

Pressing his lips together in a bitter smile, Cor agreed: "Yes. I don't think they'll give up that easily." There was no point in trying to argue a matter Deyr didn't want to talk about. He laid back down with his back to him.

Deyr didn't move for what felt like painfully long minutes before settling down. Soon after, regular breathing could be heard over the quiet crackling of the flames. Cor kept staring at the dance of light and shadow the flames cast onto the wall. Sleep took long to come to him again, but eventually, he fell into an exhausted slumber; a welcome escape from the thoughts chasing each other in his head, and the recurring images of Liranai looking at him with disappointment while Deyr turned away from him.

SANDS OF THE ENNNEAGON

"Are we there yet?"

"Be quiet."

"But you've been saying that for days! We have a right to know where we're going!"

"You should learn to follow orders. You will run into troubles otherwise."

"I do not! Mom said we're all the same and everyone is worth the same."

"Listen here, little aberration. We have order to deliver you all unharmed. But a few bruises wouldn't raise suspicion. She fell, the poor little girl. She's a clumsy one. Got it?"

"... yes."

Liranai looked up from the book he was reading when he registered the clacking of boots on stone.

Dust was dancing in the rays of light filtering in through the high windows of the library, and it swirled up when the Lightclad strode through, ever so slowly falling back into its original slow waltz behind her. The early sunlight created a halo around her head and stretched her shadow long in front of her.

The library was vast; a huge dome filled with shelf upon shelf, ladders standing here and there to grant access to the volumes on top. They dwarfed her approaching form.

Liranai pushed back his chair and stood, hands clasped in front of him, head bowed respectfully. "Lightclad."

"Good morning, Liranai." She crossed the last few meters that separated them. "I see you are taking your studies seriously."

Liranai looked at the books on the table. "Yes. I finished *The Nature of Weaving* last night, so I wanted to look for follow-up literature." He hesitated. "Trei told me where the library was, and the door was open, so I—"

The Lightclad held up a hand. "If I did not want you here, you would not be here."

He inclined his head in understanding.

“What are you reading now, then?” she asked, stepping closer to the table he’d been sitting at to get a better look at the faded words on the paper.

Liranai tried to ignore the wave of her scent, reminding him of the woodlands of his home after a heavy rainfall. He reached down and closed the book to show her the title.

“*The Transcendence of Reality?*” She looked at him and raised an eyebrow. “Quite a jump from *The Nature of Weaving*. Do you understand it?”

Liranai wagged his head. “Yes and no. I am only three chapters in so far, and it was indeed a challenge to follow Diel’s thoughts and arguments, but I think I’ve managed for the most part.” To reassure her that he had indeed understood what he’d read, he added: “I am especially fascinated by his claim that, since the world only exists through our perception, changing it might result in changing reality.”

The Lightclad’s eyes lit up. “It is one of Diel’s central claims, always recurring in his works. He bases his whole philosophy on that hypothesis, as well as his science. He has a very interesting approach to weaving, as you might imagine.”

She gently stroked the gilded title on the book’s cover. “I am surprised you have so little trouble with Diel’s work. Most people find him equal parts boring and complicated.”

Long forgotten pride reared its head, and Liranai said quietly: “I did enjoy a very good education—in certain areas.”

The Lightclad nodded thoughtfully. “A shame that it is non-existent in others.” She waved a hand, declaring the conversation over. “But I have not come to remind you of your shortcomings. Follow me, we have things to talk about.”

She turned on her heels and made for the door. Liranai hastened to fall in beside her, making sure to walk one step behind.

After a few moments of silence, the Lightclad remarked: “I can feel that you want to ask something. Speak.” She didn’t break her stride.

Liranai felt his cheeks heat up. Had he been that obvious? As always when in the presence of the Lightclad, his head was clamoring with questions. He settled for the easiest: “Have you collected all those books by yourself?” He glanced at one of the huge bookshelves they were passing by.

“I have.”

“That must have taken decades,” he stated the obvious, feeling the heat in his cheeks intensify. She was quite right to doubt his ability to understand Tre Diel, given the fool he was making of himself in almost every conversation with her.

The Lightclad sent him a bemused look over her shoulder. “It took me about a century, yes.” They left the library and headed right towards the entrance hall. “It was time well spent. Unlike others, my library does not discriminate. You will find here scholarly writings from Nerur, Allear and Base, stories and diaries of the Drōnulecdei, incident notebooks of the Teran border guard, even some of the treasured books from Galion. Copies, of course.” She led him down the long, main hallway and up the staircase to the open level; here, she steered him to one of the

table arrangements scattered around the large, open space that dominated this level. She continued: "I have all kinds of children's books and... amusement lecture. Volumes from authors you have never heard of... and, of course, I am the only non-winged owner of a few select books from Arcetem." She gracefully sat down on a huge cushion in front of a low table.

Liranai stared at her. "Arcetem? As in the esh'carne's infamous island?"

"Yes, indeed." She gestured for him to sit. The table was laden with different foods and drinks for a wholesome breakfast. "Trei informed me that you have not been eating well," she abruptly changed the subject.

Clearing his throat, Liranai sat down opposite her. "I have not been feeling hungry," he mumbled.

"You realize I know when you are lying?" the Lightclad asked calmly. She reached for a round-bellied pot and poured two cups of steaming canár, giving him a chance to study her furtively. She was wearing a dress in blood red, and her hair was black today, flowing down her back openly, held back by a silver headband that centered on a ruby above her forehead. Her skin was pale, and elegant brows were complemented by high, sharp cheekbones. She looked regal, and powerful, but also strangely ethereal.

She looked up and caught him studying her. The early morning sun made her clear, brown irises glow like amber. There wasn't a speck of silver in them.

A smirk pulled the corners of her mouth upwards. She handed him his cup, not breaking eye-contact.

Liranai took it and used the thank-you nod to cast his eyes down.

"So." She settled back onto her cushion, hands cradling the cup. Steam rose from it in slow swirls. "Why have you not eaten? Your studies and exercises will be taxing, and I demand your full potential. Food is essential for that." She regarded him solemnly, searchingly.

Liranai stared at the cup in his hands, at the blue liquid, almost purple from the heat, and refused to meet her eyes.

"You are afraid of me still." It was a statement, her voice not letting on what she was thinking. A sigh made Liranai look up. "I suppose my behavior has not been... conducive to building up more than a modicum of trust," she said slowly. He pressed his lips together and gave a short nod. "Are you still willing to learn from me?"

Cold fear made his stomach drop. "Yes!" The hasty answer tumbled out of his mouth. "Yes, of course I still want to learn!"

The Lightclad tilted her head the side. "A student forced will be no student of mine. Consider yourself free of the threat of death. Is this truly what you want?"

He looked her straight in the eyes, willing his own to show every sliver of his determination. He couldn't lose this. Couldn't lose the first hope he'd had in decades. Solemnly, he repeated: "Yes. I came here seeking knowledge, and you have shown me the generosity of indulging me. I want to learn whatever you see fit to teach me, Radiant Lightclad." He lowered his eyes in a semblance of a bow and added in a whisper: "I would do anything to learn."

Silence followed, and Liranai raised his eyes again to her face when he couldn't take it anymore. She was studying him intently, lips pursed. Eventually, she nodded, seemingly satisfied. "Then let us begin anew. My name is Teiarin." She touched her heart, her other hand coming up to graze her forehead and mouth in quick succession, and she inclined her head.

Liranai's eyes widened, and he mimicked the traditional greeting hastily. It was an ancient greeting ritual, only used in relation to persons of high honor: kings, queens or people who had otherwise earned the highest of respects. It confused him to be on the receiving end of it. He didn't remember the last time anyone had greeted him like this. "Liranai A— No. Liranai. Just Liranai."

The Lightclad narrowed her eyes, the corners of her mouth pulled back slightly. "I know why I gave you one name only. Is your family truly deserving of the scorn you place upon them?"

Liranai took a sip from his cup. The slightly bitter taste of the canár was welcome. He had never understood those who destroyed the natural taste of the drink by adding honey. "Yes." He looked up from his cup again.

The Lightclad reached for the table and put some fruits on her plate before settling back again, the plate resting on her knees. "Then let us take this as our new starting point." She smiled. For once, it reached her eyes. "Inside these walls, I am Teiarin, and you are only Liranai. My student. You will treat me with the respect a teacher deserves, and I shall treat you with the respect due to a student of the art."

Liranai returned her smile, though it was slightly cautious. Despite the generous and courteous behavior, he had not forgotten who she was, nor had he forgotten the day one of her servants had dragged him up from the dungeons and before her throne. He had not forgotten her cold demeanor then, nor the question that had decided his fate: *Do you have anything to say before I kill you?*

"You were trespassing," her voice cut into his thoughts. Liranai blinked. The smile on her face was still there, though it appeared frozen and no longer lit up her eyes. "And you were trying to break into my home. I do not take kindly to either of these things." Cold and hard, bare of emotion—despite the warmth from the sun and the canár in his hands, a shiver ran down his spine at her tone. "But knowing now your motivation, it was brave. And I honor that." Some warmth had crept back into her voice, and she inclined her head to him. "Why have you not eaten?" she came back to her initial question.

Taken aback, he opened his mouth to answer but closed it again when his brain caught up with the change of topic. He couldn't bring himself to say it out loud. It was ridiculous.

The Lightclad shook her head, visibly dismayed. "I had hoped you would take heart. But maybe I am expecting too much too soon." Her gaze turned speculative. "All the same, I demand honesty. I will have the answer I am owed." She visibly stopped herself from saying more, and when she did go on after a second's hesitation, her voice was a tad softer: "If you cannot voice it, think it."

He blinked rapidly. This was not at all what he had expected, but... he realized it was a kindness. He nodded tersely and did as asked, hands tightening around his cup. He refused to look at her.

"As you know yourself, those are quite some stupid thoughts." He could feel a bitter smile curl his lips upwards. "But we cannot always control our thoughts." He glanced at her, curiously. He had not expected sympathy. On her face he read understanding. "Let us discuss the next steps of your training."



Ealaida stepped up to the small, barred window. She wrapped her fingers around one of the rusty bars languidly. The Queen's box was empty.

"Where are you?" she breathed. "Why don't you come?"

Her gaze traveled over the ranks of the enneagon. Only half full. Miserable, considering it was the early evening spectacle.

"Firebreather, get ready."

Ealaida remained unmoved, studying the audience until she felt the tip of a spear press into her back.

"Now, fighter."

She raised an eyebrow to herself and turned around slowly.

The guard was young—his ridiculously patchy excuse for a beard told her that it was likely his first position out of training.

Time to have some fun.

"Remember who you're talking to," she said coldly, putting every ounce of Sapphire citizen arrogance into it.

The spear's tip trembled ever so slightly.

"The Neverfall is still just a fighter." An overseer walked up behind the young guard. He kept his spear at his side but watched her attentively. "You are to listen to us."

"You are free to try and make me." She smiled, back to her normal, warm, and well-articulated voice. "If you dare," she added before strutting past the two guards and towards the nearest gate.

Gheid was already awaiting her. He raised one of his axes in greeting. His pale skin, typical for neth-ladan, appeared to glow in the darkness of the cells, contested only by the purple glow of the decorative scars on his cheeks and neck.

She shrugged in answer to his greeting. "Not many people here."

"Not worth putting on a show then." Gheid nodded.

The deep boom of the seashell vibrated through the enneagon, signaling the opening of the fight. The portcullis in front of them rattled up slowly.

Gheid wrapped his long braid around his neck and secured it with a pin so it would not

come lose during the fight.

They entered the sand to the depressingly low applause of the audience.

“Our defenders!” the announcer proclaimed. “Pale Axe!”

Gheid raised his arms and shook his axes. Applause came, but sparingly. He didn’t seem to mind, grinning from ear to ear.

“You enjoy this charade too much,” Ealaida murmured from the corner of her mouth.

He flashed her a grin. “You know what a fight in the ‘gon does to me.”

The announcer cut into their banter: “And the Neverfall: Firebreather!”

Rolling her eyes in Gheid’s direction, Ealaida raised one of her hands, the setting sun glinting off the steel bracers.

She received audibly more applause than Gheid but couldn’t care less. The box was still empty. The Queen wasn’t here. And she was the only one who counted.

“And here we have the challengers! Two beauties fresh from the islands!” The lewd tone made Ealaida glare up at the announcer’s box. Not that he could see it, but it made her feel better. She hated that man with all her heart. That he was seated right next to the empty box did not make things better. *She* had probably not come because she couldn’t bear sitting next to that pitiful excuse of a man. Ealaida could understand that.

Gheid snorted. “Oh, this is too easy.”

She turned her attention back to the sand. Her heart sank.

The two women who hesitantly walked out into the arena were obviously no fighters. Their hands were gripping their spears like lifelines, and they were clad in little to no armor, with dangling bits of chainmail covering their breasts, and short pants that barely covered their butts. The exposed skin of the women’s legs, arms and stomach was smeared with blue and red paint to complement their dyed hair: the perfect example of what the citizens of the capital expected island folk to look like. Ealaida had seen some of the island people before, in the holding cells of the ‘gon. Some of them had had dyed hair, yes, but they hadn’t looked like the stereotypical savages these two women were made up to portray.

Not that it mattered. The crowd wanted a spectacle, and obviously it would be an easy and quick one. That way, they could please the small audience, and there would be enough time left for a second round.

That made Ealaida hope that maybe the Queen would arrive for the finale.

“Let the fight begin!” the announcer all but screamed into the tin flare that magnified his voice. “Until the sands run red!”

“I take the one on the left,” Gheid called to her.

She nodded and watched him fall into a trot towards the visibly frightened pair of women.

Until the sands run red. She had hoped—but not expected—it to be a first-fall fight.

Following Gheid at a slower pace, she reached for one of the phials fastened to the two pieces of leather slung over her shoulders and crossing over her chest.

Looking at the two women pointing their trembling spears at them, she stopped herself.

She would not need to use fire on these ones.

Gheid had reached them and had begun to circle around them slowly. He would play with them, give the people the show they craved. It was one of the few things she disliked about him.

She stopped advancing and watched Gheid for a moment. While she did not like his cat-like tendency to play with opponents much weaker than him, she enjoyed watching him fight immensely. The way the light reflected off his oiled muscles. The calculating sparkle in his eyes as he observed his adversary's every move.

As if he could read her thoughts, Gheid chose that moment to leap forward with the reflexes of a viper, striking at one of the spears with his axe.

The woman, not prepared for the sudden assault, lost her grip on the weapon, and it was knocked from her hands.

She screamed and hid behind her friend, sob-crying something Ealaida didn't understand.

Or were they friends? she wondered idly. They could be lovers. They could be sisters. They could not know each other at all apart from having to fight for their lives together.

Gheid picked up the spear and threw it back to the frightened pair.

"Come on! At least *try* to fight back!" he taunted to the laughter of the audience.

"I don't think they understand you," Ealaida drawled.

The eastern archipelago was home to many different tribes, and most of them spoke in tongues unknown to her. She sighed heavily. At least she could make it quick for the poor soul. She hit the heels of her boots together. Small blades snapped into place, protruding from the metallic sabaton, giving her feet the semblance of claws. They had been masterfully crafted by her father's blacksmith so they wouldn't hinder her movement but would cut through flesh easily, deeply, and ugly.

Grabbing onto her forearms, she slid down a mesh of metallic plates. The construct slid down over her hands where five claws unfolded and clipped onto her fingers.

She stretched, eyes never leaving the women.

Their eyes were wide open, and they were talking to each other, their tone high and clipped.

Gheid was still circling the pair, but was now watching her, a hungry expression on his face.

Ealaida ignored him, focusing completely on the woman to her right. She stood in front of her friend protectively and had her spear pointed at her. Instinctively, she had chosen a wide stance that would make it slightly harder to make her fall.

Ealaida walked up to her, almost casually. The closer she came, the more details she could make out.

The woman was sweating, the paint slowly dissolving on her slick skin. Her hair, naturally light brown, was dyed in what might have once been beautiful patterns of red, blue and blond.

"I am sorry," Ealaida said when the tip of the trembling spear was only a few centimeters from her chest. Knocking the weapon out of the way with her right arm, she turned and kicked the woman in the chest with her left foot.

The woman let out a small, choked gasp, then toppled backwards, hitting the sand hard. Ealaida bent down and picked up the spear. The sabaton had left large gashes across the woman's abdomen, and blood was spurting out, dyeing the sand red. She was still alive, breathing harshly, tears streaming down her face.

"I am sorry," Ealaida repeated before she buried the head of the spear in her chest. It was better than letting her suffer.

The woman's body went slack, and her eyes lost focus to stare at the sky, unseeing.

Ealaida blinked rapidly at the unexpected clenching in her chest. She shook her head as the other woman began to scream. High-pitched and raw. Another stab to her chest.

"Gheid..." She looked over to him. "Please..."

She screwed her eyes shut when blood sprayed onto her.

The body crumpled to reveal a grinning, equally bloodied Gheid. "Your wish is my command, Neverfall."

Ealaida shook her head, wiping the blood from her eyes.

"And the victors are Firebreather and Pale Axe!"

Ealaida ground her teeth at the annoying voice echoing through the enneagon.

Gheid bowed to the clapping and whistling audience.

Ealaida turned and slowly walked back to one of the gates. The cool shade of the stone vaults, normally a welcome sensation after a heavy fight, made her shiver.

She marched down the corridor with purpose, past the holding cells—empty at the moment. Patchy-Beard and an equally young guard were sitting near the stairs ascending to the entrance of the cell tracts, talking quietly together. They looked up when they heard her approach, and their eyes widened. Ealaida sent them a toothy grin as she passed them by, enjoying their shocked looks at her appearance. She was headed straight for the bath, eager to wash off the blood.

She pushed open the heavy wooden door and strode into the changing room. Lifting the leather straps over her head, she carefully slung them over a clothing hook. The other hooks were empty. No incessant blabbering, then. Good. She carefully unhooked the claws from her fingers, and they retracted into the bracer.

The door closed with a bang, and a slow smile curled her lips upwards. She bent down to carefully push the claws on her feet back into the sabatons.

"That door took an awfully long time to close," she commented casually, straightening again.

Calloused hands grabbed her shoulders and spun her around.

"Tease," Gheid hissed before pulling her close and kissing her roughly, strong fingers weaving into her blood-matted hair and bending her head back. His excitement pressed into her pelvis.

"What are you waiting for?" she murmured against his mouth, biting his lower lip.

Violet eyes darkened as his pupils dilated. His left hand closed around her neck, and he

forced her backwards until her back smashed into the wall. The cold of the stone against her heated skin was a shock, and she hissed.

Gheid silenced her with another kiss.

Ealaida dragged her tongue over his sharp teeth and moaned into the kiss as the metallic taste of her own blood filled her mouth. She drew in a ragged breath, and the scent of blood and sweat, warm sand and arousal made her hum appreciatively.

Pulling back slightly, Gheid murmured against her lips: "Whatever shall it be, Neverfall?"

"Don't drag it out," she murmured back, bringing one of her hands up to cover Gheid's where it laid around her neck.

He tightened his grip. "Your wish is my command."

As her vision narrowed and blurred, Gheid pushed two fingers into her, and a broken moan escaped her bloody lips.

He kissed her again, sucking the air from her lungs, and hooked his fingers, wringing more choked moans from her constricted throat. Dizzy, she threw her head back, a low whine dropping from her lips when the fingers unexpectedly left her.

"Don't worry," her eyes flew open just to squeeze shut again when Gheid pushed into her in one fluid motion, "I would never leave you wanting." He kissed the corner of her mouth, mockingly gentle, before he began moving, not holding back. Every thrust pushed her into the wall, his pants mingling with her own moans and gasps.

The sudden, intimate touch of a coarse thumb, rubbing her in time with his thrusts, turned her moans into keening noises of desperation. The blood rushed in her ears, and the lack of air was making her limbs buzz and tingle.

She opened her eyes. Gheid was grinning at her, sweat running down his face; his pale skin was blood-smearred, and his fang-like teeth were buried in his lower lip, drawing blood.

The image awoke something primal and dark inside of her. Her eyes fell shut as pleasure rippled through her and out of her throat in a series of strangled croaks. The pressure around her neck vanished, and she sucked in a series of gasped breaths. Her body went slack, and she moaned quietly.

For some moments, all she did was breathe, chest heaving, hips still twitching periodically.

She opened her eyes when she felt Gheid bury his head in her neck, hips stilling. His hands rested on her waist limply.

"Thank you." She smiled weakly, exhausted. "I really needed that."

Gheid laughed quietly against her skin.



Deep in thoughts, Liranai nipped at his cup of canár. It was cold, the taste now almost sweet, with just a hint of salt.

The Lightclad had left an hour ago, saying she had an important matter to attend to.

Liranai had remained behind. He had no illusions: despite the Lightclad's generous offer and her courteous behavior, he was still under scrutiny, was still a prisoner.

Bracing his arm against the invisible wall, he looked eastward. He could just so make out the green, blurry spot that was the Starforest. His home.

He snorted at the nostalgic expression his brain had provided and took another sip. Sirdethēna was no longer his home.

He tapped a finger against the stone he could feel but not see and wondered if he'd ever be capable of doing something like it. Probably not. He could never hope to come even close to the Lightclad in either power or skill.

He took another sip of canár. He was beginning to believe the rumors that she was a chréa. Liranai had never seen a chréa, but like every Teran child, he'd been told the stories. Named after their looks, the chréai were regarded as aberrations of nature. They were said to be the embodiment of one or two of the main strands of light and dangerously powerful. They were also supposed to no longer exist. Strangely, despite the numerous sources that claimed and proved their ceased existence, the rumors that the Lightclad was one of them refused to die.

But she did not look like Liranai's image of a chréa. In fact, she did not look special in any way, save for the faintly glowing skin markings that wound around her arms.

He shook his head. He mustn't let her looks deceive him. She had met him in at least a dozen different skins since he'd been dragged up from the dungeons. She could obviously change her looks however she wanted, and that alone was unheard of.

"Sir?" With a small start, Liranai turned. Trei was hovering in the middle of the open space. "I have come to remind you that your first combat session is about to start. And my lady does not condone tardiness." As always, the spectral's faceless metal head made it hard to read anything else than pure information from the statement.

"Of course." Liranai emptied the cup in one big gulp. "I will go to the exercise room right away."

"Combat will not take place in the same room as your current exercises." Trei inclined their head, clasping their crudely formed hands in front of them. "Clothes are provided for you in your room. I will await you on the first level," they said, then vanished.

"Thank you," Liranai said to the empty air. He'd given up being offended by Trei's curt behavior towards him some days ago.

The spectrals were strange. They were vaguely medianoid but lacked legs. Instead, their torsos ended in a conic piece of silver and obsidian, surrounded by distorted air and flickering colors, indicating the many webbings bound to them that allowed them to hover and do all the things they did—like appear without warning.

He didn't quite trust them. They were the Lightclad's servants, and he had the distinct feeling that they didn't like him.

A seagull flew by, interrupting his thoughts and evoking an involuntary smile. The open level was one of his favorite places in the Lightclad's palace. Its walls and ceiling were

transparent, giving him the feeling he was standing on a platform some hundred meters in the air with unobstructed view in all directions.

To his left, the Redgrass Sea took up the horizon, while to his right, the dense woods of the Darkwater Forest dipped their roots into the eastern waters of the long, narrow Mirrorlake. The morning sun flooded the landscape with golden light, turning the lake into a metallicly glistening plane. To the south of it, colorful slopes ascended ever higher until a snow-capped mountain range rose into the sky, its peaks lost in the clouds.

As he set out towards his room on the far side of the open level, he banished his musings on the spectrals to the back of his mind, instead concentrating on the beautiful day. It was a shame he couldn't feel the wind that was stirring up the sea. He had always loved the wind, and it was one of the things he had been missing the most since his capture. Maybe, if he proved himself to be trustworthy, the Lightclad would let him leave the palace someday soon.

With that hopeful thought on his mind, he entered his room to find the promised change of clothes lying on the bed: dark gray trousers, and a high-collared, sleeveless top. They were light but sturdy, with leather padding in some strategic areas. On someone in better shape, they would have been rather flattering.

Ignoring the self-deprecating voice and trying to fight the nervousness that made his stomach lurch, he went to meet with Trei who led him to the ground-floor and down the main corridor. The palace was built around one central, long, and broad corridor on every level, with halls and chambers adjacent to it. It made orientation fairly easy, for which Liranai was grateful.

Trei led him past closed doors until they reached an open arch.

"Through here." The spectral stopped next to the opening.

"Thank you," Liranai said pointedly. He walked past them and entered a wide, high-ceilinged hall, flooded by light.

The floor was teal-veined, white marble, and to his left, glass-less windows allowed in a fresh breeze that carried the scent of blooming flowers and growth. Liranai closed his eyes and took a deep breath. The scent of spring. He couldn't have fought the smile that stretched his lips even if he'd wanted.

His eyes snapped open as he felt cold steel press against his throat.

"You should never let down your guard." The Lightclad stood before him, the point of a spear to his neck. One of her eyebrows was arched up, but her eyes were crinkled with the smile that tugged at her lips.

"I... was not under the impression that I am in enemy territory."

Cocking her head slightly, she drew back the spear. "You are a strange man, Liranai."

"Thank you." He inclined his head. "I learned from the best."

The Lightclad gave him a quizzical look.

"Cor."

She raised an eyebrow again. "Interesting choice of companionship."

Liranai snorted. "It wasn't exactly a choice."

The Lightclad studied him for a moment with an unreadable expression. "I do hope he at least taught you something. Let us spar." She tossed the spear to him.

Caught off guard, Liranai just so managed to snatch the weapon out of the air.

He looked from the dark wooden shaft in his hands back to the Lightclad and opened his mouth to protest. He had never before fought with a spear.

"We will spar." Her tone brooked no argument, and she turned to walk farther into the hall.

Setting his jaw, he followed her. The spear was surprisingly light, the head made from obsidian that glittered in the sun, the shaft from dark Oloshon wood. It was elegant, and judging by the four-sided, sharp head, just as deadly.

Slowly, he approached the Lightclad. She wore the same clothes as him: dark gray trousers made from a material unknown to him, leather boots, and a high-collared, silver top that left her arms bare, revealing the skin markings snaking around them. They glowed a subtle blue color, complimenting the rest of the outfit.

Her long hair, done up in a tight bun, matched her outfit in color. Her eyes, watching him attentively, were blue now.

With his frazzled brown hair that he had pulled up in a simple tail, he felt out of place... like one of Base's street people. The ones who didn't have homes and lived their lives outside in every weather.

"So... you will spar with me?" he asked to confirm the obvious.

She nodded. "I have said so. I want to see where your talents lie myself."

Liranai pressed his lips together. "I fear you will be heavily disappointed. I have no talent with any weapon. Save for the bow, maybe."

"Let me be the judge of that." Her voice was not unkind. She held out her hand, and a spear materialized in it—twin to Liranai's. She gave it a whirl. "Defend yourself."

That was all the warning he received before the tip of her spear shot out towards him. It was sheer luck that made him raise his own in response and divert it away from his chest. He stared at her wide-eyed, his breath caught in his throat. She held onto the far end of the spear with her right hand, her expression one of concentration and determination. She meant it.

He grabbed his own spear with both hands, but before he could think of any attack forms, the Lightclad leaped forward, grasping her spear in two hands to swing the blunt end towards his neck. He blocked it again, just to see the sharp end come at his head in an arch. He screwed his eyes shut.

Nothing happened.

He cracked one eye open. The deadly edge of obsidian glittered a mere centimeter from his eyes. Between it and him, a barrier of green tinted the air. "What?" he managed.

The Lightclad took a step back, resting the spear on the ground with a loud clank. "Did you think I would kill you? The only person to ever dare approach me and ask to learn?"

He couldn't answer, his heart racing as he fought his flight instinct.

"Our clothes have shields woven into them. You need not be afraid of obtaining more than maybe a bruise." She raised the spear again, sharp end pointed towards him. "And now attack."

He blinked at her for a few seconds. Tentatively, he raised his own weapon, trying to imitate the way she held hers. It felt forced.

Aiming for the element of surprise, he jumped forward suddenly, stabbing at her. She turned out of the way, whirled around, and his shield flared up where her spear would have sliced into his neck without it.

He looked to the side and stared into her eyes. She looked back at him, unblinking.

"Dead twice over," she declared and stepped away, much to his relief. "The spear is clearly not your forte."

He shook my head. "No, I have never fought with a spear before."

"I could tell." Her expression was serious. "Then let us go on to axes."

They cycled through a diversity of weapons: swords, daggers, double-bladed polearms, staffs, scimitars, javelins, and bows, among others. It always ended the same way, no matter the weapon. Liranai was clearly out of shape and far less skilled than the Lightclad.

By the time she declared them done, he was sweat soaked but happy to see that the same was true for the Lightclad.

"So." She lowered the sword she had tried to behead him with just a moment ago, resting its tip against the stone. "You are passable with sword-like weapons. And good with the bow."

Liranai smiled exhaustedly.

"We will start with the sword tomorrow."

"If you say so," he acquiesced tiredly. He could not say he was looking forward to having his ass handed to him.

"I do say." She held out her hand, and Liranai handed her his blade. "For today, we have done enough and deserve to relax our muscles for a bit." The weapons disappeared from her hands and reappeared on the weapons' rack behind her. "I would like for you to join me for dinner later."

Taken by surprise at the cordial request, he nodded. "If that is your wish."

Exasperated, she cast a glance at the ceiling. "It is my wish. Else I would not have asked." Liranai could feel his cheeks heat up. "I will see you in a few hours. Trei will collect you."

He stared after her as she passed him by on her way to the exit, taking in the way the clothes stuck to her sweaty body. When he became aware of what he was doing, he shook his head violently.

He needed a bath.



Ealaida and Gheid stepped out into the enneagon again an hour after nightfall. Beacons had been lit, bathing the sand as well as the spectators in flickering, reddish light.