

The cries that had died briefly rose once more, growing louder and more frantic as the cause of their fear drew nearer. Jikun could see his soldiers running to the side, the clean marching line scattered like dust to the wind. A body sailed high into the air before it vanished into the mass of elves fleeing the carnage.

“*The Beast.*” Jikun’s pale skin grew deathly white, his composure lost. He drew his sword swiftly from its sheath, aware of how naked the troops around him lay. “Captain, get the army north!”

There was no fighting this time.

Jikun turned away and hurried through the ranks of soldiers who were scrambling away in fear and disarray: he ran toward the beast. He could glimpse a shadow of the creature, even as the nearest males vainly attempted to block its path. The beast tore through them like a blade through water, dispersing their bodies to the side. Jikun was painfully aware that the chainmail on his body was more than all the armor his entire army had left.

STEPS OF POWER

THE KINGS

Kings or Pawns

-UPCOMING-

Heroes or Thieves

Gods or Men

Princes or Paupers

STEPS
OF
POWER

KINGS
OR
PAWNS

THE KINGS: BOOK I

JJ SHERWOOD

EDITED BY ALEXANDRA BIRR

Kings or Pawns

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GLOSSARY

a – rack e – wet i – miss o – lock u – fur ee – seen
 ah – far aw – call ey – came ahy – right air – fare uh – up
 oo – soon oh – rope

Note: the “**h**” in all Sel’varian names is pronounced “breathlessly”: fi

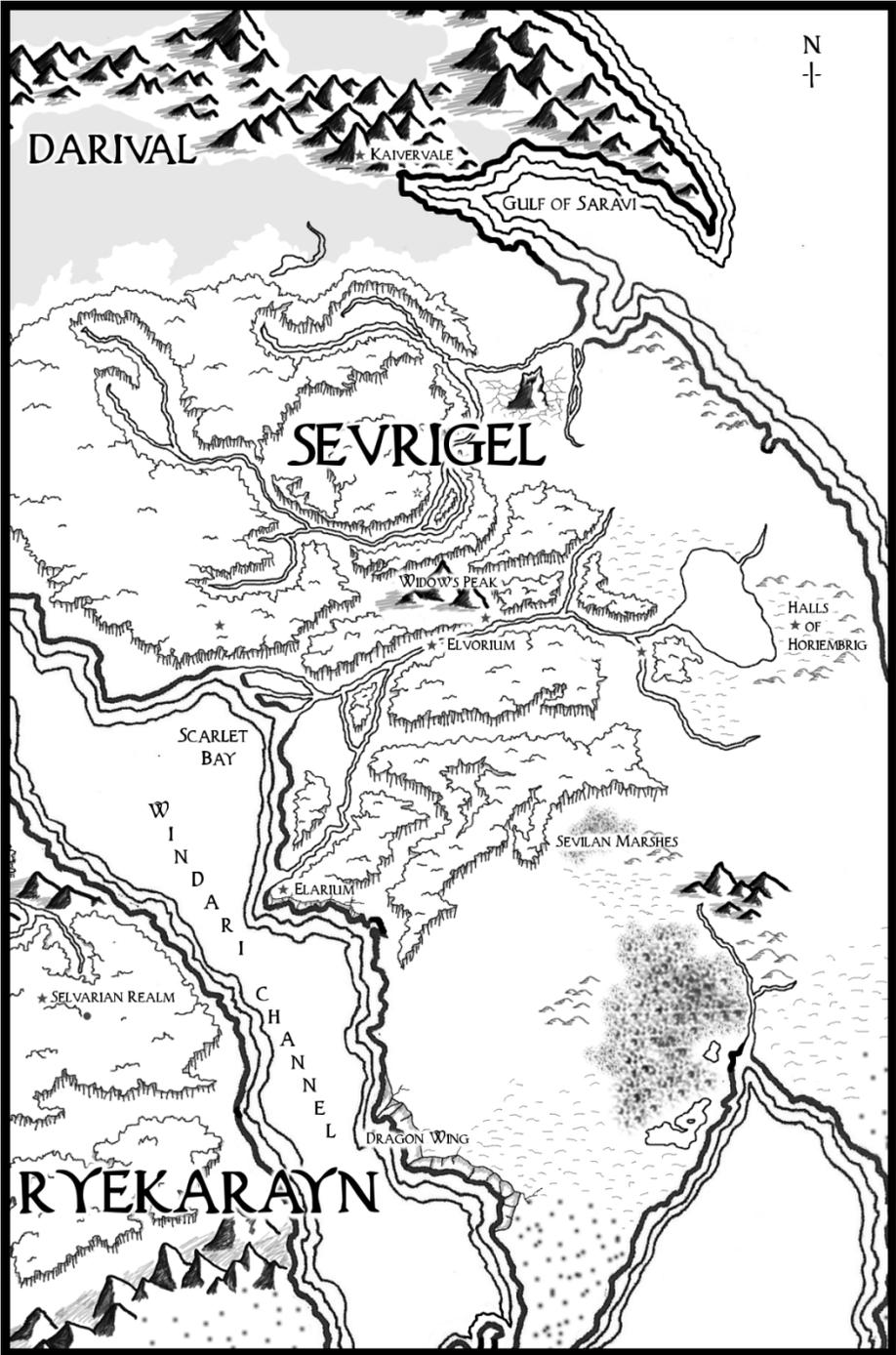
Note: the “**d**” in all Sel’varian is quick and almost “silent”

Note: **ʒ** is pronounced as a rolling J (*jsh*), as in the name “Jacques”

Adonis	A-duh-nis	Liadeltris	lee-uh-DEL-tris
Alvena	al-VEE-nuh	Lithriella	lith-ree-EL-luh
Cahsari	CAH-suh-ree	Madorana	muh-doh-RAH-nah
Catervi	CAH-ter-vahy	Malranus	mal-RAW-nuhs
Daiki	DAHY-kee	Merkan	MEER-kahn
Darcarus	dahr-CAHR-uhs	Mikanum	mee-KAH-nuhm
Darival	DAIR-i-vawl	Mirwen	MEER-wen
El’adorium	el-uh-DOHR-ee-uhm	Mistarel	MIS-tuh-rel
Elarium	el-AHR-ee-uhm	Navon	nuh-VON
Elvorium	el-VOHR-ee-uhm	Noc’olari	no-koh-LAH-ree
Emal’drathar	e-MAL-druh-thahr	Nulaves	noo-LAH-ves
Ephraim	EF-reym	Ralaris	ruh-LAH-ris
Erallus	e-RAWL-luhs	Reivel	rey-VEL
Eraydon	e-REY-duhn	Rulan	ROO-lahn
Esera	EH-sur-uh	Ryekarayn	RAHY-kair-en
Fildor	FIL-dohr	Saebellus	sey-BEL-luhs
Hadoream	fiAH-dawr-uhm	Sairel	SEY-rel
Hairem	fiEY-rem	Secora	se-COH-ruh
Hashauel	HAH-shoo-el	Sel’ari	sel-AH-ree
Heshellon	he-shel-LON	Seladar	SIL-uh-der
Illrae	IL-ruh	Sellemar	SEL-le-mahr
Ilsevel	IL-se-vel	Sevrigel	SEV-ri-gel
Itirel	AHY-ti-rel	Taemrin	TEYM-reen
Jekum	ʒEH-koom	Thakish	THAH-kish
Jikun	ʒEE-koon	Tiras	TAHY-ruhs
Kaivervi	KEY-ver-vahy	Turmazel	TOOR-muh-zel
Kasan	kah-SAHN	Tuserine	too-su-REEN
Kisacaela	ki-suh-CEYL-uh	Valdor	VAL-dohr
Laethile	LEYTH-ahyl		
Laikum	LEY-koom		
Lardol	LAHR-duhl		

RACE GLOSSARY

Darivalian	dair-i-VAWL-ee-en
Eph'ven	EF-ven
Eph'vi	EF-vahy
Faraven	FAIR-uh-ven
Faravi	FAIR-uh-vahy
Galwen	GAHL-wen
Galweni	GAHL-wen-ee
Helvari	hel-VAH-ree
Helven	HEL-ven
Lithri	LITH-ree
Malraven	mal-RAH-ven
Malravi	mal-RAH-vee
Noc'olarian	no-koh-LAH-ree-en
Ruljen	ROOL-jen
Ruljenari	rool-je-NAH-ree
Sel'ven	SEL-ven
Sel'vi	SEL-vahy
Vetri	VE-tree
Vetri'an	ve-TREE-en



Let the history record the truth of our departure from Sevrigel.

What year this corruption began, I cannot say, but my father and his father alike strived with great determination to quell the arrogance of the Council of Elves. Despite all efforts, their wanton destruction will not be ceased. My deepest desire has been to forcefully remove such evil from positions of power; however, elven tradition has long decreed that the people will elect a council to represent their needs, and no ruler may supplant its will.

Lest any elf be tempted to forgo tradition for force as I was, recall that Tradition is the foundation of elven society. Through keeping our traditions laid down by our founders and the goddess Sel'ari herself, the elves have remained above the carnage of the lesser races. It is truly one of the greatest virtues of our people. As such, I will not demolish the elven tradition of these lands by forcefully removing this corruption and usurping the will of the people. To do so would be to introduce tyranny into our land.

So it is with great sorrow that I have reached a similar outcome as my forefathers: failure.

In my last meeting with the Council of Elves, I presented an ultimatum: they may vote for their own resignation, or for my dismissal from this country. As expected, the council remains entrenched in its determination to hold power and thus my consequence has come to pass. I will not subvert the will of the population of Sevrigel.

Nevertheless, I will not permit those subjugated by this corruption to continue to suffer. I shall embark for the Homeland of Ryekarayn, where our kind once dwelled in harmony with the humankind. I shall establish a new Realm and return to our old traditions, and all who wish to begin again will be welcomed with open arms.

Until such time as Sevrigel turns from its path of self-destruction, the Realm of the True Bloods shall have no political association with its Council or its future royal line. May Sel'ari bless and guide us all.

*King Silandrus
4th of the line of Ranwen since the Second Age*

PROLOGUE

A fierce howl of wind tore in from the north, bringing with it a fleeting chill. The rain pelted against the armor of the soldiers scattered across the earth below as thunder cracked and bellowed in Aersadore's evening sky. The two armies stumbled and sank into the muddy ground of the canyon floor, voices and weapons lost in the tumult of the raging storm.

Jikun swung his blade around swiftly and plunged it into the soldier behind him, throwing his weight away to spin back into the teeming mass of enemy troops.

“General, Saebellus is retreating!!”

Jikun rounded toward his captain's shout, seeing the soldier stumble from the fray. His captain lurched to the side, black hair plastered to the sides of his pale face as one hand groped for balance on the face of the canyon wall. The captain tore the clasp from the drenched cloak about his neck, letting it fall to the mud beneath his feet. Relieved of its weight, he pushed free of the canyon's face and shoved Jikun aside, his blade whistling through the air as he swung high to decapitate the soldier behind him.

“I know, damn it!” Jikun shouted in return, eyes narrowing against the onslaught of rain. It bit into his flesh like shards of ice, but in the midst of battle, he was hardly aware of the pain. He stepped forward, willing the meager distance to grant him vision through the torrent of rain. Vision of the enemy that lay ahead. A tremble coursed through the earth as thunder cracked once more. A bolt of lightning lit the towering walls of the surrounding canyon, capturing the deep shadows in the jagged stones and the sunken faces of his weathered troops. “Don't let him escape!” he bellowed to his soldiers, fighting to be heard above the wind, his throat raw. He shoved forward, leaping over the body of a dying soldier, kicking the grasping arm away from him.

He could see *him* now.

Saebellus.

The throng of fleeing enemy troops had parted, just long enough for Jikun to glimpse him twisting through the grey. The warlord shoved his blade through one of Jikun's soldiers, grabbing the elf by the hair and wrenching his blade free as the body slumped to the mud. He glanced up abruptly, as though aware of someone's gaze, and his eyes caught Jikun's in a moment of calm, cold solidarity: an acknowledgement of each of their roles in the war. Then he turned, raising his hand high. The throng of soldiers closed behind him, fighting to defend the backlines as he and his army fled toward the north.

For a moment, the image of those emotionless, black voids had stilled Jikun. Then he found his voice, bursting forth louder and stronger in his anger. "Move! MOVE! Don't let them escape!!" he shouted, a rumble of thunder following his screams with equal fury.

There came another rumble, resounding almost immediately after the last. It had come too soon.

Jikun paused, jerking his head upwards along the walls of the canyon, searching the length of sky for the source of the unnatural sound. There was another flash of light from ahead, but this one came red and hot, erupting from the midst of Saebellus' army. It struck the canyon wall with a ferocious crack that sent a tremor through the earth about them.

Jikun's eyes widened in horror. "AVALANCHE!!!" he roared. He stumbled backward, raising an arm above his head. A thick dome of water swept upward from the mud at his feet, freezing as it grew, forming at once into a thick shield of ice that protected him and his surrounding soldiers.

He could hear the crashing of stones as they plummeted down the mountain face, smashing through the troops and horses before him, plowing through the line of soldiers behind him. They slammed into the side of his icy barricade, hurling him backwards into the far wall.

And then there was silence.

Jikun looked up, raising a hand against the ice to let it fall once more to mere water about his body.

Saebellus and his army were gone.

CHAPTER ONE

Seven hundred forty-five hard fought days and seven hundred forty-four miserable nights they had borne to return to this place. Now the sun that arose from the horizon was more vivid and welcoming than any sunrise Jikun had seen on any day before. The sky was golden, radiating a warmth of color that cut through the cold spring morning fog like a blade. The ancient trees that lined the wide dirt road and covered the surrounding landscape shook off little drops of water as a fragrant breeze gently wove toward the elves' greatest city on Sevrigel: Elvorium, the seat of the Council of Elves.

"Forgive my cliché, but isn't that a sight for sore eyes?" grinned his captain. "The gods certainly know how to remind you of what you are fighting for, do they not, General?"

"That they do, Navon," Jikun inhaled deeply. Even the stench of blood and rotting leather from one hundred fifty thousand soldiers could not conceal the pleasant aromas twisting their way toward him from across the canyon: at long last, through the final trees skirting the edge of the forest behind him, Jikun's eyes could see the breadth of the Sel'varian city, plainly visible in the center of the cliff side that jutted out into a "V" shape over the canyon. At the end of the precipice, settled between two rivers that cascaded over the edge of the cliff, was the palace of the king.

A roar of relief and excitement arose from behind the general and his captain. Several helmets dared sail past the two, ringing as they bounced off the stone bridge before them to drop like stones into the canyon below.

"Hold onto your possessions!" General Jikun roared, turning in his saddle. "The next elf who acts like a god damn human will be stripped naked and paraded through the streets with the horses!"

The clamor quieted and Jikun turned back to Navon with a thin smile etched across his lips.

Although it was a far cry from home, he had to admit that he too was glad to return to the capital.

“Don’t make indecent threats lightly; the troops take you quite seriously,” his captain rebuked him with all the airs of a typical Sel’ven. Jikun considered it ill-suited, as the captain had not a drop of Sel’varian blood in his body. Which was a relief for him amongst his troops.

“I was entirely serious, Navon.”

Jikun nudged his horse forward across the stone bridge that stretched over the vast ravine. The structure was a marvel of Sel’varian engineering, architecture, and magic, hardly comparable to the other elven races’ ability to design. Extending at a great expanse, the bridge was held in place by curved stone pillars mounted to the cliff side and supported by magic. The columned archway and railing across the bridge were intricately detailed, but more than being merely an adornment, they helped to shield travelers from the sudden canyon gusts that could catch a passerby off-guard.

Jikun had, on more than one occasion, imagined himself lurching over the side to an inescapable death and now found himself wondering if the archway and railing had been part of the original concept, or if they had been added later after some visiting merchant had met his doom. But of course, the Sel’vi would never admit to such a design mistake. Perhaps this was why a score of houses still spotted the canyon face below the palace where they would one day, inevitably, fall away beneath the erosion of the stone and send their poor, but foolish, inhabitants several leagues downward. During which they would hopefully have sufficient time to contemplate their poor life choices.

Jikun stiffened and edged his horse to the center of the bridge. This bridge, like the one on the opposite end of the canyon, led into the south and north ends of the city respectively. With the east end of the city banked by an enormous lake, the bridges were the primary entry points into the city. And all the elven magic in Aersadore could not comfort him when marching several hundred thousand bodies across its lengthy structure.

The horses whinnied faintly as though sharing mutually in Jikun’s dislike for this final stretch of their journey. He reached forward, patting his mare softly on the neck. Perhaps even she recognized the sight up ahead. At the bend in the bridge just before them, he could see the city’s gateway swung open wide and hear a roar of triumph and praise erupt from the guards at their posts. The salutary trumpet blasts seemed to have already been announced and Jikun imagined the waiting elves had let them loose when the watch had first

seen his army rising across the west bank's hillsides. Jikun pulled to the center of the bridge as Navon respectfully withdrew behind him.

'What I wouldn't give to skip this drivel of politics and charades and take a damn hot bath,' Jikun muttered to himself as the bridge seemed to lengthen around the bend. He glanced once over the marble side—it had been over two years since he had last seen its depths; it still made his stomach drop like a stone. Far below them was a large forest, heavily shrouded in the center by the thick rolls of mist running off from the waterfalls pouring toward a lake below. From this lake, a thin river, banked on either side by a narrow field, wound its way into the distance, away to the Noc'olari or Ruljen ethnicities in the northeast.

Jikun's head snapped back up in unease and he directed his attention instead to the first male at the gate.

"Congratulations, General, on yet another victory!" the captain of the city guard greeted as Jikun passed underneath the archway and onto the safety of the cobbled streets of the city. "His Majesty awaits you at the palace."

Jikun nodded his head once toward the guard and pressed onward, eyes sweeping the streets of Elvorium. The gold-slatted rooftops glistened in the light of dawn and the long shadows across Mehuim Way crept up the cream faces of the buildings tinted with an orange glow. All along the street sides and hanging from windows were countless elves tossing flowers, shouting praise, and glowing with smiles. Despite having been awoken before the dawn by the welcoming trumpet calls that had saluted his troops' approach, the Sel'vi were beaming with neatly braided hair and broadening smiles, as though they had long been awaiting this day.

But Jikun imagined they didn't even remember what he was fighting for. It was simply the "victory" itself that had driven them to patriotism.

The street curved gently toward the entrance of the palace. Even as Jikun was lavished with shouts of praise and welcome, it seemed but a short march down its way before he and his soldiers passed beneath a flower-laden archway and stepped into the presence of several scores of elves.

Here, the mood shifted palpably. The elves waiting before the palace were taciturn and silent, bestowing no salute or praise onto the defenders of Sevrigel. Their lack of response was contagious, spreading like the Cadorian Plague through the troops and into the city beyond. Jikun's face grew stoic, the joyous welcome forgotten. Even the naivety of praise and victory was preferred over the stiff bastards that delayed his hot bath now.

These males before him were guards, council members, and a large portion of the nobility. However, despite the conspicuous splendor of the surrounding elves, the most prominent figure stood at the forefront: Hairem, Prince of Elvorum and the Sel'vi, second of non-royal blood since the Royal Schism.

As the army fanned out behind Jikun, the crowd before him, with the exception of the prince, went down to one knee.

This gesture was a long-established practice, and Jikun doubted that he and his army would have been shown the same respect were not the Sel'vi pedants for tradition. Pedant was, without a doubt, the most accurate and all-encompassing word he could ascribe to that breed of elves. The council members were pridefully stiff in their bows, eyes never fully lowering to the earth. Their guards, though more sincere in their respect, were nonetheless all too quick to their feet.

'I'd like to see you leave your homes to lead a war. Then we'd see how your respect rises,' Jikun reflected sourly in response, though his expression remained carefully detached.

He was not a Sel'ven and it was perhaps this fact that led him to regard their actions with an extra tinge of cynicism. He was from the far north—the frozen lands of Darival, land of the Lithri and Darivalians. Though his army was diverse in the race of elves it had deployed, now in Elvorum he felt out of place, as his appearance clearly spoke that he was a foreigner. His hair was a blue tinted silver, like the mountains that framed Darival. His skin was a grey-white, like shadows banking the snow. And although he was tall and slender like his Sel'varian brethren, his facial features were stronger and sharper—like a sculpture chiseled from ice.

Jikun knew there was one other of his kind amongst the group before him, but he could not spot the council member's presence amongst the crowd. He wove his hand once into the air and heard his fellow riders obediently dismount to the smooth cobbled stones. He swung himself lightly from the saddle and dropped the reins at his side.

There was a sudden eruption of murmuring from the council members. When he twisted from his horse to look, surprise rooted him in place. Hairem, prince of the Sel'vi, knelt on one knee before the army, his symbolic sword scraping carelessly across the ground beside him as though he was blind to all but the triumphant troops.

Non-royal blood or not, the gesture caught Jikun by surprise as well. Though he had not lived amongst the Sel'vi for long, he imagined that in the

history of their proud nation, no ruler had gone on bended knee before any male or female of lower rank. And for all purposes of tradition, as far as the elves were concerned, Hairem was as royal as the True Bloods of The Royal Schism three centuries before. Attesting to this were the wide-eyed council members, mouths agape between murmurs as they stared in shock toward the scandalous behavior.

'Now what am I supposed to do?' Jikun regarded Hairem with a knit brow and slightly parted lips, then glanced in the direction of his Helvarian captain, hoping Navon would have a notion of the most appropriate response.

His captain responded with an equally bewildered look and glanced about himself, seeming to hope the answer would materialize from the crowd.

'He has no idea...'

Yet Navon's eyes flicked back to the prince and he seemed to gather himself enough to move; he slowly went down to a knee before the male. In a wave, the army followed.

Jikun placed a hand to his breast and bowed low, eyes never leaving Hairem. He had been on his knees for the prince's father for two and a half years: a bow was more than sufficient.

It was only when the army had returned the gesture of respect did the prince stand, raising his head sharply and drawing himself up before the army. He was young, but his blue eyes were cold and hard. His long, golden hair was loosely braided back and thin strands buffeted his face in the sharp gusts of wind coming in from the east. Raising his hands in welcome, Prince Hairem spoke formally, "Sevrigel owes you her gratitude for yet another successful war against Saebellus. Without doubt, you and your army are road weary, but I must detain you for a moment longer. Come, General, we have matters to discuss." And with that, he turned in a sweeping motion, his golden cape billowing out and catching the wind, and stepped away to the palace beyond the crowd.

Jikun heaved an inward sigh, though a report to the king was expected. *'Gods I just want a damn bath.'* He handed the reins of his horse to Navon and his captain passed him as subtle a rebuke as he could manage.

Was his impatience that apparent?

No, Navon just knew him too well.

Jikun left his army behind as he followed Hairem through the parting cluster of council members and guards. He could see their lips move slightly as they leaned in to one another, losing no time to gossip about what had taken place. Jikun focused back ahead in time to catch the end of the prince's cape

vanishing around the corner. He quickened his pace and strode free of the crowd, mindfully aware of the seething mass of hypocritical politicians he had just stepped through. At least it was to King Liadeltris that he reported.

“Keep up, General Taemrin,” the prince beckoned as he swept around another bend and stepped in through a side door of the palace.

Jikun glanced once behind him and his brow knit. Was this the usual way toward the king? It had been a few years since he had set foot inside the palace. They moved down a steeply sloped, mildly ornate hallway to a large, arched doorway.

Here the prince stopped, propping the door open with his foot, and leaned in toward a nearby shelf.

It took Jikun a moment to gather his surroundings: soft blue light from the orb bobbing near the ceiling, gleaming rows of mildly dusty glass, wooden racks that tucked their contents snugly in carefully carved bowels. He looked about the cellar in bewilderment. Surely the prince was not above calling upon servants to do these tasks.

“Your Highness, would you like—” Jikun began.

“No, almost have it,” the prince grunted. “Ah, there we go. Is Eastern Glades a satisfactory vintage? Well, I certainly hope so as it appears to be the best bottle in here.” He patted the dust from the side with a cough.

Jikun held the door open as the prince tucked the bottle beneath his arm in order to pick up and examine two glasses. Appearing satisfied, he passed the Darivalian without so much as a glance and staunchly strode back up the way they had come. And further still, up a staircase divided by many levels of open rooms, all of which were empty and lit only for the sake of appearance. Here, the palace’s grandeur reached the obscene—it was as though all the gold and jewels of the kingdom had been inlaid into every facet of every surface. The highest room, and one of two private council chambers of the king, was their final destination.

This room, unlike many of the others, was designed to give the appearance of a vast and heavily used study, but the dust about the room was almost tangible—as though the place had not been touched since the Royal Schism.

Prince Hairem set the glasses and bottle casually in the center of the desk, striding toward the king’s chair.

“Will His Majesty be joining us this morning?” Jikun inquired as he gave the lavish room a quick, distasteful glance. He heard the guards outside close the door softly behind them. Jikun’s brow knit as he eyed the wine that the prince uncorked.

“Your failure to receive our dove makes me wonder who did.” Hairem paused a moment, staring briefly—blankly—at the glass bottle. “My father passed away thirteen days ago of an illness.”

Jikun’s eyes met those of the prince in shock. His lips parted, but he knew not what words he sought. *‘Liadeltris is dead...?’*

As though reading his mind, the prince waved a slight hand as he pulled his heavy chair back with his free hand. “I need no words of your deepest sorrows to remind me of mine. I have seen one elf die in the last century and you have undoubtedly seen the passing of thousands in the last few weeks alone. To which of us goes the greater sorrow, I have no doubt. I have had the consolation of my city. I instead offer you my deepest condolences on your recent battles.” As he waited for Jikun to sit, the general could feel the king’s eyes searching his face for emotion.

He gave him none: neither for the late king nor his soldiers. He had indeed seen thousands die in the last weeks alone. And thousands before that. There was a certain numbness that was necessary to survive in times of war—Jikun had long since acquired it. “Thank you for your condolences. I shall pass your words along to my army.”

“And how *are* your soldiers?” the king inquired, taking a glass and filling it. He leaned forward and offered it to the general.

“...Thank you.” Jikun accepted it, swirling it with a gentle twist of his wrist. “My army is gratified to be serving its king,” he replied, trying to infuse some semblance of emotion into his voice. But that too had gotten lost beneath his mask.

The corners of Hairem’s lips twitched. “Jikun, I am not—may the gods grant him safe passage—my father. I intend to run this kingdom differently. First and foremost, I would request that, in matters of conversation, you treat me as your equal. It benefits neither of us to bear your polite cynicism.”

Jikun leaned back, taking a long sip of wine. He had to admit—he was intrigued by Hairem’s approach. That was twice today that the king had suggested that he was not like other nobility. “As you wish, Your Majesty,” he spoke after a moment’s hesitation, noting that Hairem shifted slightly at the retained title. “We are fatigued, but their spirits are high. Saebellus is a fierce opponent; his army fights with conviction and skill. Our victories have been hard fought and we have paid steeply. I return home with fifty thousand fewer soldiers than I set out with. Saebellus’ forces are wounded, but hardly defeated. And while we spill our blood for the sake of the kingdom, we hear

rumors of unrest amongst the politicians... Some say that a peace treaty draws near.”

Hairem tilted his fair head back and laughed once, loudly and almost mockingly at the content of Jikun’s words. “A *peace* treaty? Let those that suggest it be branded as traitors. I assure you that the kingdom will never settle terms with Saebellus, General. You do not bleed in vain.” He stroked the corner of the desk, eyes hardening as though reflecting on his resolve.

Jikun wondered how strong it was. “Every battle we’ve engaged in has been in Saebellus’ favor. He knows we have the upper hand in numbers and so territory has been his strategy. He never allows us to engage him unless he has a way to flee after a defeat—and when he flees, he and his army simply vanish. And it’s not teleportation magic—no portals at all. Such magic leaves behind a distinct residue and none of my mages have ever found such a trace. Neither, would it seem, is Saebellus capable of using the magic to appear—I would imagine such an ability would have been used countless times for surprise attacks or motions to surround us in. We’re simply grabbing the lizard’s tail for now. But let me assure you, Your Majesty, that Saebellus will be defeated. Even the advantage of territory has won him no battles.”

Hairem nodded his admiration and gave a faint smile. With a slight raise of his glass, he spoke as though still attempting to reassure Jikun of the city’s tenacity. “You are an excellent general, Jikun. No doubt you and your army shall put an end to this war soon enough. Many in the city other than myself believe this as well.”

Jikun nodded his head, knowing it was with overconfidence that the elves placed their trust in Elvorum’s army. Yes, Saebellus had won no battles, but he was by no means defeated. “Saebellus still retains control of the Beast...” he trailed off, grimacing at the shadow that loomed just outside his mind. These were the hardest words yet. Simply in speaking them, he felt he trod on the darker matters, taunting them to reveal themselves. Even after so many battles, its shape felt faint and distant—surreal in the midst of war. But how real it *was*. “We have had several battles with the creature and no magic or weapon seems capable of taking its life.”

Jikun saw Hairem’s lips purse into a hard, thin line as his fingers interlocked, but his eyes wavered. Perhaps it was fear that moved them.

As it should.

“Is there anything I can offer you that my father had not already given?” Hairem spoke after a moment’s deliberation.

Jikun exhaled. “Nothing that myself, my captain, or my lieutenants cannot conjure up on our own. I will let you know if matters change. We intend to stay in the city until we hear of Saebellus’ movement again. Those that have homes within the city shall go to them. The rest shall make an encampment outside the city to the north. The soldiers need to refresh their bodies as well as their minds. As for myself,” Jikun continued, leaning back into his chair, “I intend to return to Darival.”

Jikun could see Hairem’s lips part in hesitation, and then his eyes softened. He nodded his head once toward him. “I imagine it is about time you see your home again.”

“It’s been three years,” Jikun replied with a faint smile. “I would imagine so.”

Hairem set his glass down and absentmindedly straightened a stack of unruly papers beside his elbow. Jikun could judge, by the dates smudged along the upper corners, that they were far past their creators’ expected response time. “I was not privy to the extensive military campaign you have led against the rebel warlord. Your last battle was...?”

“Fifteen leagues north of Widows’ Peak. Saebellus fled into the mountains. He has several sorcerers in his ranks—one of which sent an avalanche behind him. We spent two weeks digging out our dead. I do not know where he plans to go from there. ...I’m afraid there is little to tell. No cities have been conquered or besieged. Just dead elves and dead horses.” He raised his glass and again swirled the wine inside, ignoring the piece of dust floating at the top. He took a sip. “I assume under your reign my campaign against Saebellus may continue unchanged?”

Hairem nodded. “Yes, General. With, I hope, more fortune in the future.” He paused briefly. “What is your goal, General?”

Jikun blinked, his rigid composure thrown by the question. “My goal...? To fight the war. To *win* the war, of course.”

Hairem shook his head. “No, I meant after the war, when Saebellus is defeated—what is your ambition?”

Jikun felt the barriers inside himself rise; his face returned to its frigid countenance as memories of disconnected battles scattered the edges of his vision. He scowled inwardly, finding Hairem’s presumption offensively naïve. “You are assuming I live through it.”

Hairem opened his mouth and closed it, clearly discomforted by Jikun’s straightforward, if pessimistic, approach. “I am certain Sel’ari shall protect you for your loyalty and devotion to her people.”

Jikun raised his glass. “Indeed,” was the only monotonous response he could trust himself to offer. He took another sip before transitioning to the next “necessary” words in their political game. “What has taken place in the city while we were gone?” The words rolled off his tongue rather forcefully. It was difficult to put whatever bickering or vices the city suffered at any level of concern in his mind when placed in the perspective of his wars. But he nevertheless lowered his glass and met the eyes of the king with respectful attention.

“At home the council is scattering. When my father assumed kingship after the Royal Schism, it was due to his previous position as El’adorium that granted him the power and hold over the council. I, of course, have had no such experience. My father’s death has left them grasping for new loyalties and I’m afraid I will not be keeping all of them. I may need your help in the coming months.”

Jikun’s expression blanked for a moment even as his gut unsettled. “Help with what...?”

“I need to know that I have the support and protection of our military. It is not easy to pick up where my father left off and not expect things to change. I will have to upset the balance.”

Jikun felt uneasy at the suggestion, but he replied with no semblance of hesitation. “Of course, Your Majesty. The military’s first duty is to the king.”

“Thank you, General.” Hairem paused for a moment, face growing grim. “One of my most loyal council... Just three days before your arrival, the assassin struck within the city again...”

“Who was taken?” Jikun asked, leaning forward with unfiltered intrigue, his leather armor creaking softly in the heavy silence that had suddenly settled over the room.

“Lord Leisum Na’Hemel of Nostoran. Stabbed repeatedly in his bed while he slept. Only the maggots knew for the first two days.”

Jikun’s stomach lurched. Both hands tightened on the arms of his chair. Not at the thought of the mangled body or the feast of insects upon it, but at the thought of the Beast that reawakened at the back of his mind. *Hairem had seen nothing of death. Of true slaughter.* “How is this assassin being dealt with?” Jikun forced his mind back to the topic at hand. “City Guard? Night’s Watch? Mercenaries?”

“All of the above,” Hairem heaved a sigh. “It is the same killer—he leaves his victims’ arms crossed across their chests, like the worshipers of Asmodius

do. Perhaps they are cultist killings...” He trailed off and Jikun scoffed to himself.

Cultist killings that only targeted council members? No. And he had no doubt the king knew better.

“But let us put this matter aside,” Hairem’s voice rose forcefully, snapping his attention to Jikun. “A great victory has been won against the rebel. You are a hero yet again, Jikun Taemrin. May Sel’ari and all the gods bless you in all of your future battles. For now, drink and rest.”

Jikun raised his glass in a due gesture of formality. “All glory and honor to your greatness.”

*

“Navon, my reins,” Jikun demanded as he neared his captain, the last figure that lingered by the palace’s side gates. He grabbed the saddle of his mare and hoisted himself up, jerking his horse around stiffly. “The king is dead, Navon.”

He knew the words would unsettle Navon as much as they unsettled himself and he could see the flicker of concern cross his captain’s face. “How?”

Jikun hesitated. Hairem had said it had been an illness, but in light of the recent string of assassinations he was not as ready to sentence the king to such a swift and sudden conclusion. And yet he buried his suspicions and replied, “Illness. It must have come rather suddenly.” His voice was stoic, but he knew Navon could read beneath his apathy.

Liadeltris had been a fierce king and opponent to Saebellus. It was common knowledge that Saebellus had been dishonorably discharged while serving as captain in the last war with the sirens, but no one knew why. Jikun had long since let the prodding curiosity subside when even Liadeltris had refused to shed light on the matter. But whatever the reason, it hardly mattered now. Saebellus had taken those loyal to him and turned on the elves’ empire.

Navon seemed to share his concern, but his tone revealed little else. “And the prince... king... what are your thoughts on him?”

“What?” Jikun looked up, still managing to catch the skepticism across the male’s face through his distraction. “I believe what he said. There will be no peace terms with Saebellus. In fact, I believe his eyes are open to the corruption of the council. And I think he has the stupidity to oppose it.”

“...but you are still concerned.”

Jikun's brow knit. "Hairem is young. For all Liadeltris'—"

"May the gods grant him peace—"

"—experience, he still bent to the council's pressure. Three hundred years as king, a dozen centuries as the El'adorium before that, and Liadeltris could not resist them. Once Hairem learns how the damn politics in this country go, I wonder just how strong he will remain."

Navon gave a nod of reluctant agreement, eyes staring stoically ahead.

"Here is more news from home whilst we were away—"

"Something in your tone brings me to believe that I am not going to like what you are about to say..." Navon frowned, eyes flicking toward the general attentively.

"You remember the murders before we left? Another council member was assassinated."

Navon's eyes flashed in recognition, but the rest of his face remained apathetic. "He struck again?" He gave a heavy sigh, as though the capital should have done better to prevent such an atrocity. "No doubt the Night's Watch will be far more numerous for some time now. It is unprecedented that an assassin has committed so many murders on high officials—within an elven capital, especially." He paused to give a slight smile, churning out optimism from the news as he usually did. "I suppose there are some benefits to being out of the comfort of this city." His eyes shifted across the nearest alley as he spoke, almost with a certain daring curiosity.

Jikun watched Navon for a moment and then cleared his throat loudly. "Gods, I could use a drink!" he barked. "How about a good drink and a fine woman to share it with?"

The darkness in Navon's eyes faded and he surveyed his general in a reprimanding fashion. "General." He pulled his horse to a stop, interrupting Jikun before he could continue. "Let us pause this conversation. Sel'ari's temple. We should stop and thank the gods before we retire for the evening."

In Jikun's absorption with his news, he had somehow missed the building's slithering approach. His eyes lifted to the golden dome rising up toward the heavens, the white doves nestled at her base, and the pillars that made the elves below seem small and insignificant—as they undoubtedly were. He could hear the echoes of soft singing in the distant marble halls and the pure chime of bells, calling the elves to worship. He turned his head and laughed. "I'll thank the gods when I see the gods at work. When we are in the right and Saebellus in the wrong, I can only spit on their names every time they let one of my soldiers die for Saebellus' damn cause. We sleep in shit and

spill our blood so some damn elf can rise in the morning to sing praise to their righteous asses. We are just their pawns. No. No, gods for me today, Navon. Give me a good drink and a fine woman—those are all the gods *I* need.”

Navon gave Jikun another distasteful and reprimanding glare before he stiffly dismounted, the offense apparently affecting his gait. “Then can you keep a hold of these for me, General?” he asked tartly, tossing Jikun the reins to his bay horse. “*Someone* has to give Sel’ari thanks that you are still breathing.”

Jikun leaned to the side sharply in order to catch the reins. His horse whinnied in protest and the general quickly righted himself. “When I was a boy in Darival, a priest of Sel’ari came through. A group of youths beat him dead for the single coin in his pocket. I don’t think Sel’ari cares about any of us, Navon, more than she’d care about one of her priests. And if she did not see fit to save him, then we’re all going to the grave, god or no god.”

Navon leaned forward, squinting in a reflective manner. “They are not absent from us, Jikun. And I have a story to counter your own. Years ago on my way to Sevrigel, I saw a stowaway cry out in Sel’ari’s name for protection. Everyone who tried to lay a hand on him perished in an instant. Sel’ari always has her reasons, Jikun,” Navon replied with a simple smile. “Sometimes they just do not fit into our expectations. Religion is a virtue ...and one of the only reasons Sel’ari hasn’t sent this country to Ramul.” He turned toward the temple, as though his words were a monument of inspiration and the general should immediately reflect upon their wisdom.

Jikun shook his head distastefully. “While you are in there, put in a good word for me for lovely company tonight,” he called after with a smirk. “The more ‘virtuous,’ the better. I’d take a cleric!”

Navon gave only a dismissive wave of resigned acknowledgement.

Jikun’s smirk broadened in amusement and he leaned back idly in the saddle. He watched the lean, dark male vanish through one of the double golden doors. For just a moment he glimpsed the white marble interior, gleaming from the countless candles within. And the face of Sel’ari. He felt himself recoil slightly, perhaps more out of shame than disgust. Even in the form of a statue, the goddess’ eyes were coldly perceptive, piercing through his veil of disbelief like a dagger. He nudged his horse lightly in the flank, urging it away from the doors and further along the street until he came to the shade of a low balcony.

Away from the temple, he found himself once more at ease. He leaned an arm against his horse’s neck, watching the bustle of elves moving about

through the sunny street. They acknowledged him with polite nods of their heads or wide smiles, but Jikun found little reason to smile in return. Why should he? What had they done today to equal his last two years of warring for their sake? Ate and danced and pleased themselves. He knew not all males could serve in the army. And yet, that did not stop his resentment at every able bodied male he saw enjoying himself in the comfort of the city's walls while Saebellus waged war outside.

Perhaps his inner thoughts had revealed themselves on his expression as he noted several responding elves regard him with unease and confusion. He wiped his face of expression and instead let his eyes trail up along the towering buildings with their many windows, pillars, and gleaming rooftops, still further up the hill of the street and into the distance. Elvorium was not his home, but even so, it was better than any place he had been since he had left Darival.

Except, perhaps, for the whore houses of Roshenhyde.

"That was pleasant to see her again," Navon's voice came from behind him.

Jikun straightened and turned, eyeing the peaceful smile stamped across his captain's lips. He tossed him the reins, watching Navon leap with some faint form of grace onto his horse.

"So, where to, General?" Navon queried. His voice had livened from his perceived notion of Sel'ari's mewling praise, afforded to him by his recent prayers. "To the camp?"

Jikun laughed, pulling his horse away from the egress of the city. "No, let the soldiers relax without your reprimanding eyes. They deserve a little freedom and rashness. To my estate, Navon. And we will stop along the way to pick up some gods of my own."

CHAPTER TWO

The morning rays filtered through the cracks in the sheer curtains, mixing with the thin layer of smoke that still clung to the air of the bedroom. Jikun groaned and pulled his pillow over his face.

Two years since he had had such comfort and now the sun dared wake him.

He grumbled to himself, his mind resisting his body's urge to sleep longer. He reached out a hand, but the woman who had lain with him was gone. He sighed disappointedly, sitting up with a grunt and drawing forward a knee on which to rest his head. The sweet taste of Elvorium wine still hung on his lips. Or was that the woman?

There was a bellow of laughter several floors below him, startling him from where he had begun to doze. He determinedly swung his legs out of bed, running his tongue along his lower lip, and picked up his shirt from the glassy marble floor.

"How do you manage?" he muttered to himself as her undergarments fell from its folds. The women around Elvorium almost seemed to do it with deliberate frequency. He picked them up and tossed them casually into the smoldering fire. It flicked to life, lustfully spreading its flames over the silken red fabric.

Jikun pulled his shirt on, stretching his arms above his head and twisting his waist. He inhaled heavily. The thick aroma of flowers that slowly became apparent to his senses was pleasantly calming—such a stark difference to the usual stench of wet leather and the forest floor.

The marble was cool against his feet as he padded to the open chest beneath the window. He reached up, pulling the curtains back sharply and flinching slightly at the light that burst into the room. It was shortly after dawn

and the glare of the sun reflecting off the gold-slatted rooftops of the city below him was not unlike armor in a midmorning's march. He possessed a certain level of disdain and affection for that. He held a hand out against the glare and cast his eyes across the city.

He was mildly disappointed to find his first morning in Elvorium as he expected: peaceful, serene, and wholly uneventful; he could see Elvorium's citizens far below him, walking along the cobbled streets of the city, milling through the market he could just glimpse between the towers of a nearby mansion. The Sel'vi were often up with the sun, their day beginning and ending with its cycle. How difficult it had been to get them to march in the evening! A throng of them gathered beneath the long shadow of a nearby pavilion, eating breakfast in the fresh spring air. Their music was far too cheerful for that time of day. He withdrew into the smoky room behind him to crouch at the chest at his feet.

'Home to Darival...' he thought to himself with a faint smile as the bright light and bustling city faded. It had been three years since he had seen his home. The Sel'vi's warm, sickly polite facade had quite worn on him. He reached down and lifted free his chainmail, clean and unmarred, from the stack. The repairs had been perfect.

However, the rest of his gear was not as fortunate. He frowned as he lifted up his breastplate and leather. Gods, why hadn't he thrown that away? He dropped the leather at his feet carelessly as he ran a hand meticulously across the dented surface of his armor. His fingers stopped upon reaching the deep gashes set into the side. Elven craftsmanship and armor: no doubt second only to the mountain dwarves on Ryekarayn. And yet the Beast had torn right through them. The sheer strength of his arm had crushed it inward. He flinched as he remembered the blow, the wind around his ears, the force of his body colliding with the earth.

There was a dull knock against the white frame of the open door and Jikun started.

"You're not going to wear that home, are you?" Navon berated him as he stepped into the room, eyeing the breastplate with an amused shake of his head. "Sevrigel's general should be a *little* better dressed during his homecoming than *that* twisted heap of metal." He raised a hand in an afterthought of greeting.

Jikun dropped the breastplate into the chest, giving it a hard kick. The lid fell down and bounced once in a tetchy protest. "Of course not," he replied

with a scoff. He picked up the leather and tossed it to his captain. “Take care of it. Why do I still have that? Gods, am I sick of that smell.”

Navon lifted it to his face and recoiled with a gag. “Too many wet spring days and nights, I suspect. I’ll have a replacement in hand for when you return.”

Jikun pulled his chainmail over his undershirt and his shirt over that. “Don’t bother. I’ll pick up something in Darival. I’m tired of this damn cow hide.”

Navon gave an agreeable nod and paused. “When *do* you return?” he questioned. Jikun could see him eyeing the trunk of armor thoughtfully, his azure eyes flicking across the metal bolt. It was moments like this that Jikun felt the wild Helvarian blood in the captain stir.

He *knew* what his captain was thinking. His eyes flashed. “Navon, I expect that I can return home without worry that you will meddle in affairs you *should not touch*.” He threw his cloak over his shoulders, fastening his general’s emblem to his chest. “Whatever this beast is, it’s the libraries for you and nothing else. Do you understand me?”

He could see Navon’s eyes roll in protest, his thin lips purse. How swiftly Navon’s behavior changed off the battlefield in the privacy of each other’s company. Sometimes, Jikun found that tolerating Navon’s cavalier responses was difficult even after their years of companionship on the field. He watched Navon sweep a hand through his long, raven hair, silent to his general’s rebuke.

“I will be gone for six weeks, I imagine. Elvorum’s portal will emerge in a destination about two weeks outside of Kaivervale,” Jikun carried on in response, grabbing his sack from the floor beside his chest. He looked in with a frown. “Did you clean this out?”

Navon shrugged, waving a slender hand dismissively. “I don’t remember. Maybe? Sometimes I feel like a squire rather than a captain. Anyways, I already prepared one for you downstairs. Food and water. And your horse is equipped as well. You just need spare clothes and you will be ready.” He paused, a sly smile crossing his lips. “*Oh*. And *this*.” He held up a finger as he reached for his back pocket. “I never took you for one to keep a journal.”

Jikun stiffened as his eyes landed on the familiar and tattered object clutched triumphantly in the male’s hands. It was old, over-used, and had seen too many wet springs. Nor had matters been helped when a groggy, bleary-eyed soldier had, in a sad attempt to find a stump, pissed on his leather-bound sack late one night last winter. His gaze narrowed. “Navon, give that back.”

His captain held the leather-bound book behind him, keeping it safely out of his general's furious reach. "The latter stuff was boring—after you joined the military. War, war, war. But the *early* stuff..."

"Navon!"

"The *early* stuff is downright delightful. Take this: 23 Felserine 8682:— That's before the True Bloods left, isn't it? Anyways—"

"Navon, give that back," Jikun growled sternly.

Navon retreated another step for additional safety before clearing his throat. He then continued his tirade in a voice pitched high and feminine,

"As clear as ice
And white with glow
Her complexion like the tundra's snow
Flowing, twisting, silks and furs
From southern markets ripe with heat—"

"Navon, I'm warning you one more time."

"—She moves across the frozen land
On silent or whispering hurried feet.
The walls cannot stop her;
The wind carries her
Over and into the city of ice—"

"My patience is waning, *Captain.*"

"Ever oblivious the watchtower sits,
To the rise of the White Queen,
In Tuserine's presence."

Jikun flushed, feeling the heat rising to his cheeks in discomfiture. "Are you quite done?" He attempted to appear somewhat collected—his rise about the journal could only make the mocking worse.

Navon clicked his tongue as he flicked a yellowed page. "No, there are countless treasures in here. Give me a moment, I think I lost the folded corner to the next piece of—"

Jikun darted forward suddenly but the Helven twisted away once more, suddenly and superiorly agile. '*You prying bastard...!*'

“Ah, here it is. I like this one. *Ahem.*”

“A soldier’s life

Working

Sleeping

Eating

Working.

Hands raw

Bodies burned.

Drinking until it doesn’t hurt.”

Jikun stepped swiftly aside the trunk, making a straight dash for the captain. He caught the end of Navon’s sleeve, but the Helven simply snapped his arm free and escaped to the empty center of the room.

“No, no, I want to read you another one—”

Jikun scrambled after the male, snagging the end of his sleeve and jerking his arm toward him. “I don’t need you to read them to me, you bastard. I know what they say.”

“Wait, I have to— You *have* to hear this next gem—”

“Tch!” Jikun clenched his teeth, patience finally reaching the end of its abilities; it was replaced with a far more final method of dealing with the insistent child before him. He swept his hand downward, fixing his attention on the ground behind Navon’s evasive feet. A small sheet of ice covered the marble floor, and as Navon retreated one step farther, his foot met the icy trap, slipping out beneath him. Jikun lunged forward and caught Navon by the arm, wrestling the journal out of the Helven’s clenched fingers. Then he shoved him away, straightening in an attempt to regain some dignity. “Are we done here?” he spoke sternly.

“Yes,” Navon replied casually, seeming unfazed by his defeat. “Well actually, I do have just one question...”

Jikun narrowed his eyes in warning.

“Are these poems... rough drafts? Because by the *gods* are they awf—”

Jikun lashed out his arm, cuffing Navon squarely in the ear with the palm of his hand. Navon choked off the rest of his words, raising a hand to his ear in indignation. He appeared ready to protest the violence, but a threatening glare from Jikun ended that notion as well. He instead stiffly smoothed down the front of his shirt, but Jikun could see the internal laughter raging behind those unabashedly curious azure eyes.

Jikun placed all the menace of Sevrigel's general into his tone before speaking. "Don't empty my sack again." He stepped away, patting himself down subconsciously. "Ah, my sword," he muttered, turning from his captain and back to the chest. He raised the lid, which gave a joyful squeak to once more breathe a fresh breath of air, and paused, eyes falling again to the torn breastplate and the blow that had smashed the chest inward. He knew those azure eyes were following him intensely now. And just as intrusively.

He paused. "...This creature could be demonic, Navon." He pushed the torn metal aside, knowing his words fell on deaf ears. Navon already knew that the creature could be demonic. It was that fact that drove his curiosity. He reached down to the sword lying below, its hilt carved as though from Darival's ice and embellished with the mountains' countless gems. He pulled it out and fastened it to the belt at his side.

Navon was ready immediately with a counterargument. "Suppose it is demonic, Jikun. What old traditions are of value anymore? This country has been changing since Eraydon's time. Necromancy is just a step further down this road of progress. We discussed this the last time we spoke of the beast." Navon did not need to remind him—Jikun remembered every time the word necromancy had been breathed. And yet, his captain's tone seemed to prod Jikun further along as though, by the general's words, he had opened the conversation. "And I have been thinking... reading, as it were. Demonic entities will not fall to our magic or weapons and—"

Jikun turned sharply before his captain could continue further. Gods, why did he insist on provoking him?! "NO." His voice was raised and sharp, echoing across the stone walls around them and vanishing into the vaulted ceiling above.

Navon fell silent once more, his teeth snapping back together with an audible *clack*. Jikun could see the muscles tense along the jaw line, incensed once more from the rebuke.

Jikun walked briskly past him, brushing against his captain's shoulder as he made no move to step out of the way. "Let's try this again," he breathed slowly. "Demonic entities..." He paused, waiting for his captain to continue their oft-repeated conversation.

"*May* be susceptible to obsidian. But the only elves on Sevrigel who possess that material are the Malravi. And obsidian is simply not a practical weapon in battle against those wielding steel or elsteral blades... or armor. If Eraydon let *Tiras*—"

“You are not Tiras and I am not Eraydon. Libraries *only* for you,” Jikun replied firmly, straightening from his boots and feeling that he had given him more than a fair chance to express his stance. “Do you understand me? If you dare touch...” he hesitated, forcing the word out with almost fear-filled venom, “*necromancy*, so help me Navon...”

Navon protested, turning back toward him. “This is the *problem* with this damn country, Jikun! Tradition upheld in one realm is wholly dismissed in another. The lines are just a blur now, even in you! The Sel’vi are notorious for upholding virtue when they fear progress and abandoning those same customs when it benefits them. Banning necromancy is just another one of their conjured ‘traditions’—it holds no historical weight! More importantly, it’s our best chance at fighting a demonic entity!”

“If tradition is a virtue and the lines are too blurred now, I’d rather err on the side of the Sel’vi on this one,” Jikun replied stiffly. This was the *one* area he could agree with those arrogantly naïve bastards. The elves of the mountains had been dabbling in the dark magics with terrifying consequences long enough for tradition to mark *that* with due negativity.

Yet Navon persisted. “History defines what traditions *are* virtuous: it separates the old traditions from these new *frivolous* ones. The ban on necromancy is just some new ‘tradition’ created out of fear, *not* an old tradition that upheld the framework of the just society under Sel’ari where—”

“Well, soon this history will create the ‘virtuous tradition’ of banning necromancy as well. We’ll find another way to fight this ‘demonic entity.’ *If* that is what it is,” Jikun replied calmly.

“*Very likely that it is.*”

“Possibly.”

“Probably.”

“No.” Jikun spun back suddenly and grabbed Navon sharply by the front of his shirt, his anger rising, his icy eyes meeting the Helven’s coldly. “You keep your eyes open while I’m gone and you do not *touch*... that cursed magic. Do I make myself clear? This is general’s orders... *not* just the law of Sevrigel.”

He saw Navon cast his eyes to the side, the stubbornness fading even beneath the resentment at the command. Gods could Navon be a fool! A stubborn, *persistent* fool! “Yes, General,” he muttered stiffly.

Jikun dropped his hand and smoothed down the ruffled fabric. He gave Navon a hard smack on the chest, forcing himself to smile. “Now, I’ll be back in a few weeks. Relax. Enjoy yourself. Bed a woman. Dream of Sel’ari.

Whatever it is you do in your free time.” He tucked a few spare clothes beneath his arm and journal. “I’m off for home.”

He saw Navon smile despite himself, his eyes flicking pointedly to the leather-bound book. “Just go. And stop your worrying. Somehow I’ll manage without your overbearing eyes for a few weeks.” His smile broadened. “But no more than that.”

CHAPTER THREE

Hairem slouched in his seat, groaning, his arms hanging limply over the sides of the chair. “Why must the gods hate me so?” he moaned.

The girl brushing his hair folded her hands against her abdomen patiently as his hair disappeared beneath the back of the chair, not bothering to hide her exaggerated eye roll. He was *such* a sloucher. His father had been one, too. Even now, over the din of her own thoughts and Hairem’s complaints, the handmaid could hear the late king’s hypocritical rebuke toward his son. “Sit up straight. Shoulders back. You’re a prince, not a pauper.”

She eyed the ceiling, attention flicking from the chipping gold paint to the webbed center of the dome. She would need a very tall ladder to reach that one. Perhaps there was one in the cellar. She glanced once more toward the king, who seemed to have slipped further down the chair.

“I will tell you that this is the worst. The worst—no, no, I take that back... that damn council is the worst... but *this* is damn close. You understand how these things work, do you not?” He tipped his head back and she saw his brow knit as he found the web at the center of the dome. “Ah... forgive my language, Alvena... You are not a male, you are a gir—a lady.” He gripped the sides of the chair and pulled himself straight, flicking his hair behind his head again. “Carry on.”

His fit paused, the girl raised the brush again and worked it through the now static ends of his hair. A *lady*. Ha! If she was a *lady* she would not be a handmaid. She pulled a little on his hair absentmindedly. She had just begun to bleed two years ago and that, in the eyes of the elves, hardly made her more than a child and certainly not a lady... but she liked when he used that word. She stood a little taller.

“I will have to sit there with a sweetly sickening smile the entirety of the time,” he suddenly groaned. He turned his head, hair yanking from her hand, the brush still caught in the ends. “Does this smile look false to you?”

The girl nodded.

“Maybe I shall simply *not* smile.”

She shrugged.

The king slumped back into the chair and she pried the brush from his hair. He had a lot of hair. Not as much as his father, but it was so frizzy now!

“I know... It is just that... Nilanis has the greatest influence over the council. If I sit through a dinner with him, perhaps I can create a more amiable atmosphere at the council... which is something I desperately need if those meetings are to go anywhere at all.” He was quiet a moment. “Are you almost done? It certainly is taking you a while this morning.”

* * * * *

The carriage ride to the estate of the El’adorium was long, rolling gently along the winding roads of the city. When Hairem’s mood was agreeable, he would call it scenic—when his patience ran thin, it was superfluous. Nilanis’ home was located on the west side of the city, along the bank of the lake, which was located in the exact opposite direction of the palace. Yes, this ride was superfluous.

‘And,’ Hairem mused, *‘what an ironic reflection of the supposed close relationship that the El’adorium holds with the king.’*

For all the expectations that the El’adorium was supposed to work closely with the king, Hairem actually knew very little about Nilanis’ life. Personally, that was. Economically, it was impossible to *not* know the male. Nilanis seemed to own the Port of Targados and the lake itself: it was usually his ships and his trade that came in to port. The male had acquired most of his fortune off of the trade that both came *and* left the capital, and subsequently his power derived from the wealth and control of the majority of Elvorum’s commerce. Stripped of his powers as the El’adorium, Nilanis would *still* hold a potent influence. His reach could be felt as far north as Darival and as far south as even the coastline of Dragon Wing. Even before he had become the El’adorium three centuries before, a lord of his status and economic influence had been in no short supply of power.

Even the True Blood King Silandrus had struggled with the non-royal regime...

The carriage bounced suddenly and Hairem's face smacked against the side of the carriage wall, drawing him sharply from his thoughts. *'Ouch! What in Ramul are you doing out there?'* he muttered internally as he rubbed his brow. *'Excellent. That's a mark.'*

The carriage drew to a stop and the door swung open, an apologetic carriage driver leaning sheepishly to the side.

"What did we do, hit someone?" Hairem jested, though he half expected something to be lying behind on the road after that jolt. He stepped out onto the cobbled steps of the estate grounds, eyeing the street behind them.

"No, Your Majesty!" the carriage driver quickly exclaimed. "Just a toy some children threw into the road. Erallus has reprimanded them—"

"And warned them of the dangers, I hope," Hairem interrupted. "Lucky it was their toy and not one of them." *'And now I sound like my father... Gods know how many times I played in the streets...'*

He saw a tall, heavily armed male wrap around from the back of the carriage, on queue to respond. He drew up stiffly to the king's side and offered a half-bow. "Of course, Your Majesty. They have been warned and sent away. Is there anything else you require? Or shall we wait for you here?"

Hairem's eyes abandoned the sparsely occupied road and flicked to the estate grounds where the cobbled path led to a set of intricately-carved mahogany doors. "Here will do," he replied slowly to his personal guard, letting the carriage door swing closed. "And pray that this dinner goes quickly," he added with a mutter below his breath.

"What was that, My Lord?"

Hairem patted the guard affectionately on the shoulder. "I will see you shortly, Erallus," he dismissed before taking several brisk steps up toward the estate. Before he had progressed farther than that, the doors swung wide and two thin servants pressed back against them, as though trying to make themselves invisible.

And it was hardly a difficult task, for there between them, framed in the opulent doorway, was Nilanis.

"Good evening, Your Majesty," the Voice of the Elves greeted boisterously, sweeping his elegant bow low before the king. Nilanis straightened beneath the glowing light of a lantern swaying gently above him. "No escort this evening?"

Hairem offered a soft smile and nodded his head in greeting, wondering if the evening light around them was enough to render the mark on his head visible. "Good evening, Nilanis," he replied as he reached the top of the steps.

He glanced back once, longingly, to the comfort of the carriage. “I do not need an escort to see a dear friend,” he spoke as he faced his host, lips twitching into a practiced smile.

Nilanis smiled in return, broader and far better versed in deceit than Hairem could ever hope to manage. “Welcome to my humble home. I hope we can serve you most adequately this evening.” The elf turned and led him into the estate, his long, gold-hemmed robes dragging across the polished wood. His clothing seemed all too warm to be worn in the mid spring, but Hairem imagined that it was a gesture of his wealth and status to be so heavily—and luxuriously—clad in the silks, velvet, and gold of the offshore elven cities.

Hairem found himself looking rather drab beside him. He subconsciously ran his hand down his chest to smooth his shirt.

“Our dining room is just over this way,” Nilanis was saying. He must have said something prior to this statement, but Hairem found himself now overly focused on the strange statue of a naked female arched back against a large tree. With one hand on her inner thigh, she taunted males to stare. Hairem felt it was in rather poor taste, especially for a Sel’ven of Nilanis’ class.

Nilanis paused his steps to glance at the statue. “My wife—may she be at peace—was rather fond of that work. It was one of the surviving pieces found in the Farvian Realms after the Cataclysm. I feel it defines quite well the risqué nature of their elven people... But I cannot bear to remove such a nostalgic symbol of her memory.” He sighed briefly, almost, Hairem thought, longingly.

He grimaced slightly as the carved female took on a more personal tone.

“And that chandelier is from Eraydon City—a new design, actually. Exquisite, is it not? No doubt you have a dozen such chandeliers in your palace.”

Hairem turned, his grimace growing. He, in fact, had none. Not simply because he knew nothing about such décor, but because it would inevitably look gaudy in any elven room. As it did here. He stopped beside where Nilanis had paused, looking up at the golden chandelier dangling from the ceiling of the dining hall, light from the candles reflecting off of its countless crystals. “Exquisite,” Hairem replied, attempting to weave interest into his tone. Fearing he had failed, he flashed a sickly sweet smile.

A servant hurried forward from the shadows at their right, bowed low, and drew out the head chair for the king.

Hairem sat, giving his thanks as Nilanis carried on about some specially carved maiden etched into the chair in which he now sat. He only stopped to beckon the servant away after being seated himself.

“*How* are you, as of late?” Hairem interrupted before Nilanis could continue.

The elf tapped the table and a servant hurriedly returned. “There has been minor pillaging of ships bound for my ports by southern human pirate scum... but I knew this was inevitable, what with the news of the famine spreading across Ryekarayn... This winter will be brutal for them. They’re lucky to have such generous allies as ourselves or no doubt they would never survive.” He sniffed and stroked the rim of his golden goblet.

Hairem muffled a snort. *‘Generous? I would never go so far as to call you generous...’*

Nilanis seemed not to notice and merely raised his empty wine glass to eye it reproachfully, as though it ought to fill itself. “And a male has begun residence in the estate to my left. He has two children as wild as Faravi who have unfortunately been cluttering the street outside with their toys. They like to lay siege to the wall around my estate, it seems. Ah, but I can’t complain. No, I can’t complain. His wife is gone to the same illness that took my wife and your mother. Pity on the poor males who must raise their offspring without the guidance of their wiser half.”

Hairem’s brow knit faintly. He liked to think he had turned out fair even without his mother’s assistance.

Nilanis paused, briefly studying Hairem’s face as though attempting to gather his nonverbal response. When Hairem offered nothing, he reluctantly abandoned his search. “So overall, quite well, Your Majesty. Fortunately, a male of my trade profits even in times of war. I certainly am not suited to the life of a pauper.” He gave a private laugh and then spoke quietly to the servant. “I apologize, My Lord, for my daughter’s late arrival.”

Hairem’s brows rose in confusion and for the briefest moment, he wondered if he had missed something earlier. “Your daughter...?”

Once again there was a flurry of movement as a servant rushed from the room, his departure then heralding the entrance of a dozen males bearing large silver platters of delicate foods and wines. For a moment, Hairem’s bemusement overshadowed his confusion at Nilanis’ comment, and he wondered if the El’adorium realized that his servants’ frenzied activity conveyed more agitation than grace.

“Yes, my daugh—ah, finally!” No sooner had the table been laden with luxurious foods than the door was once more thrown open, and Hairem had to repress a sigh as he turned to greet the new arrival.

In the doorway stood a lady, her dress shimmering softly in the candlelight as each delicate strand of silk vied for attention on her lean form. And to Hairem’s surprise he found his tension ebbing as his muscles relaxed, the bustle of the servants all but fading from his mind.

All elves were fair. This, no person could argue. But even amongst elves, this female was enchantingly beautiful. She entered timidly, as her class found proper, with hands folded in front of her. Hairem had never met Nilanis’ wife, but given his daughter’s radiance, it seemed at least, to Hairem, that she certainly did not take after her father. Most pleasantly, her demeanor exhibited all the elegance and unobtrusive grace that the rest of the household lacked.

“Your Majesty, this is my daughter, Ilsevel,” Nilanis spoke, taking her hand and passing it to the king.

Hairem stood, aware of his unblinking stare, and yet, he couldn’t manage to take his eyes off of her. He watched as her lean form bent into a graceful curtsy and he raised her pale hand, kissing her smooth and unmarred skin. “My lady,” he spoke with a faint smile, nodding his head in acknowledgement.

She looked up shyly, green eyes flashing with a flicker of interest. “Your Majesty.”

Hairem released her hand, reseating himself and watching as she took the seat at his left. She jostled her thick, golden hair slightly from her shoulders, adjusted the sleeves of her almost shamefully-flattering dress, and picked up her fork. Hairem glanced at Nilanis as though to be certain that the lady before him was in fact related to the weather-beaten face of the councilmember. And the king’s smile abruptly faded.

Nilanis was looking *quite* satisfied with his level of interest.

‘Of course *that is what he wants*,’ Hairem thought irritably, picking up his fork and quickly resubmitting his smile of polite company. He forced his eyes to return to the grandiose meal—as though it could hold any interest after her appearance—and reprimanded himself for his shameless gawking. Even worse, her presence closed off the topic of politics.

And so it was, as Hairem expected, a long dinner. There was mostly the clanking of the silverware, the flickering of far too many candles, and the pitter patter of the constant comings and goings of servants at Nilanis’ beckoning. He made sure to use them at every opportunity, as though to demonstrate his authority and wealth.

“How is the kingship treating you, Your Majesty?” Nilanis inquired as he reached for a thin slice of venison. “I can only imagine your father’s sudden death thrust upon you quite the burden.”

Hairem’s expression remained resolute as his eyes met with the El’adorium’s. “Indeed it has been quite the change,” he agreed. “But I watched my father closely for years. And I had my close associations with the True Blood princes to learn from... No male was better suited than my father and so I had no better male to learn from.”

The left corner of Nilanis’ thin lips raised slightly before he replied, with some form of a twisted and almost unsettling smile, “Only three centuries to learn the politics of kings, but your father was a brilliant male.”

“Yes, he was. I have had both his triumphs... and his mistakes... to learn from.” Hairem looked up and smiled in return—a slow, pointed smile.

Nilanis’ ease faltered. Hairem liked the way the El’adorium pondered the possibility of a personal touch in the response. “And what mistakes might those be, Your Majesty?”

Hairem raised his wine glass in a dismissive manner. “I don’t believe that this is a topic worthy of such lovely company.” He nodded his head toward Ilsevel with a faint, apologetic twitch of his lips that he hoped resembled a smile. “I would certainly not wish to depart on such a weighty topic without the proper time to fully defend my late father’s decisions. Perhaps another time?”

Nilanis smoothed over his tensed jaw line in a swift, broad smile. He seemed to operate on a standard of shifting and carefully controlled expressions. “Why of *course*, Your Majesty.” He paused a moment to take a sip of his wine and to allow a proper break in the conversation before changing topics. “You had your first meeting with the general the other day, did you not? How did you take to him?”

As much as Hairem had liked to see Nilanis momentarily discomfited, he groaned inwardly at the change. *‘I suppose the general is not technically politics...’* He slid his fork across his plate absentmindedly as he recalled the Darivalian male’s rigid composure and apathetic mannerisms. “He was... very difficult to connect with. A bit abrasive and distant. Cold, I suppose I’d describe him as.” He shrugged offhandedly. “*Honest*, at least.” He had truly not given the general much thought since their meeting. In a way, Jikun Taemrin still seemed like his late father’s business, even after his passing: a Darivalian male with whom he had artificial authority over and even less in

common. And furthermore, with the general's stoic and cold approach, he had been remarkably easy to forget.

A self-satisfied smile spread across Nilanis' lips and Hairem felt his mood sour further. No doubt the El'adorium would savor displaying the knowledge he possessed—the knowledge of a topic that extended long before Hairem's reign. Indeed, Nilanis seemed to relish in his superiority for a moment, drawing out a long pause before he responded with all the airs of familiarity on the matter, “Ah, I expected as much,” he breathed with a faint tsk. “It's the Darivalians in general. They are such a *difficult* people to find amicable. Entirely unambiguous, really. They say exactly what it is they are thinking and possess not a bit of character or depth below the surface. Emotionally, I'd say, what you see is exactly how they feel. It is, of course, why they make such excellent soldiers. They couldn't engage in subterfuge if their lives were entirely dependent on it. It is why we appointed him, especially after that unspeakable mess with Saebellus. Get a dog to do a dog's work.”

Hairem pursed his lips in distaste. “Surely the general has a commanding mind of his own.”

Nilanis laughed once. “I certainly hope not!” He raised his glass and took a sip, chuckling to himself again as he set it down. “But let us speak no more of the general or the war. The council meetings are a more appropriate time for such trivialities.” He continued even as Hairem's eyes widened in disbelief. “I have something of, no doubt, *far* more interest to your exquisite tastes. *Ilsevel* was the most accomplished student of her tutor in art and poetry,” Nilanis offered as he cut the remainder of his meat.

Ilsevel pushed her food across her plate and laughed. “Oh, Father.”

‘...*Far more interest to my exquisite tastes...? Gods, if ever there was a stretch for a topical transition.*’ It was difficult for Hairem to even *feign* interest in this political game. “That is... wonderful. You must be proud.” He could hear his voice coming out flat, but he was past the point of bothering to change it now.

Nilanis gave a nod. He didn't seem to notice. “And Ilsevel plays the lyre most beautifully, a talent she no doubt received from her mother. If Your Majesty wishes to hear her play...” he added, trailing off as he scraped the last contents from his plate.

Ilsevel smiled and looked down, her cheeks growing pink. “I am certain King Hairem has heard far better from his palace musicians.”

Hairem gave an internal sigh. Every part of him fled inwardly toward the door, but he smiled nonetheless and politely requested, “Why, I must hear you play, Ilsevel.” This, at least, came out with a *little* more tonal variety.

She nodded sheepishly and stood, as though his words had been a direct command, and left her chair behind for the servant to push in. “My lyre is in the Great Room, if you will just follow me.” She gave no emotion behind her words, but merely glanced back once to see if he was following. Then she turned her pretty face away and vanished into the hallway.

Hairem regrettably left his wine and paused at the edge of the room. He sent Nilanis a quizzical glance when the lord made no attempt to pursue. “Will you be joining us...?”

“Oh, go on ahead,” the lord encouraged in a tone fit for the reply to a merely rhetorical question. “I have some dessert preparations to discuss with the servants.”

With resignation, Hairem contemplated the situation as Ilsevel glided on ahead of him.

“I suppose you have many Great Rooms,” Ilsevel began slowly as she led him into a vast, marble-tiled room. The wall directly ahead of them was made of painted glass, but the night was too dark to allow more than the faintest colors through. The lady moved to a round seat beside the fireplace and picked up the gold-plated lyre, stroking it once as color fell across her fair skin from the windows behind her. She waited patiently for Hairem to sit across from her.

Whether Nilanis had ever heard his daughter play was doubtful. Much like a sword on stone, she grated through two pieces of musical genius that at once became barely recognizable. Her redeeming quality, however, was her voice. Enchantingly soft, she wove the lyrics over the music until the king almost forgot where he was—and what he was listening to.

“Truly, you are quite gifted,” Hairem complimented her as she finished. He could not deny that her voice had impressed him far more than any musicians at court. Her body language while playing had been quite enticing as well—fluid and elegant, despite her inability to pluck a single tune.

Yet for that reason alone, he’d have strongly recommended she never pick up the instrument again.

Ilsevel set the lyre beside her and brushed her golden hair behind her shoulders. “Surely you jest, My Lord,” she blushed timidly.

Hairem stood, returning no further comment on the matter. Lying, even politely, did not sit overly well with him. “Your father has probably finished.

Let us rejoin him.” He held out his arm and the lady took it in her small, fragile hand.

The absence of Nilanis was immediately noted as Hairem reentered the dining hall. Before he could speak, a servant bowed low before him. “Nilanis has been called away on urgent business. He understands how greatly this disrupts your evening. He sends his deepest apologies and hopes you will forgive him.”

Hairem forced a thin smile. He should have expected as much. “Of course.”

“He wishes that you do not leave without enjoying the dessert he had prepared for you.”

The king glanced toward the mahogany doors, praying inwardly that some “urgent” business would arise for him as well and he could escape back to the comfort of his rooms.

“I am certain that His Majesty has more pressing matters to attend to than to stay here,” came Ilsevel’s voice suddenly from beside him. “I apologize for my father’s absence.” She bowed her head and stepped aside, folding her hands before her abdomen.

After a brief moment of surprise, Hairem quickly donned a smile, partially genuine this time. He was relieved that she avoided her father’s games. “Since your father is no longer here, I am afraid that there are other matters that warrant my attention. Good evening, my lady. I wish your father well, in whatever business matters have arisen. I hope that he and I shall soon be able to meet again under such agreeable circumstances.”

* * * * *

Hairem returned to the palace scarcely a few short hours after his departure. Alvena was surprised to see such a quick return—his late father had spent many an hour deep into the evening on political matters, especially with figures as wealthy and notable as Nilanis. *‘I wonder if things went poorly...’*

She leaned against the railing of the wide marble staircase as the king shook the rain from his strong shoulders. She forgot her duty for a moment, simply captivated by watching the sheen of the candlelight dancing off his golden hair. Hairem had taken after his mother in appearance, she had long since determined. His father’s sharp and harsh features were captured in his eyes, but the gentle curve of his cheekbones and jaw—those were his late mother’s. *‘So handsome...’* She ogled him shamelessly.

“You are drenched, Your Majesty. Let me get you something to drink,” Delaewen was saying, fussing over the way the king’s shirt had plastered to his chest.

‘And so strong...’ The girl watched the older elf unfasten the cloak from his shoulders and drape it over one of her spindly arms.

She quickly snapped to. *‘The king is wet! Pay attention, Alvena!’* She hurried down the stairs, noting for the first time the distant rolls of thunder.

“Oh, I will be fine. It is just a little rain,” the king insisted, waving the fussing servant away. “If you do not mind drying the floor so someone does not—”

And quite to her embarrassment, Alvena caught the edge of the puddle forming at his feet and went sailing past him to land hard on her rump.

“...slip...” Hairem finished slowly. “You just wanted to capture the moment, didn’t you?” he chuckled as he extended his hand toward her. “Are you alright?”

The handmaid subconsciously took his hand, letting the king pull her to her feet. Then she quickly recoiled, shaking her head in speechless apology.

“What? Oh, come now,” Hairem rebuked. “Let me tease you.”

Alvena gave a quick curtsy and tiptoed carefully around the water before dashing up the stairs in horror.

‘How embarrassing!’ Gods! And then she had let the king help her? She sighed, reprimanding herself. *‘Oh well! Hairem won’t really remember it. He has been so absentminded as of late.’* She felt a little bad even as she thought it. No doubt the war and his father’s death were taking their toll. At least she would make certain he had some dry clothes set out and a hot bath going. She knocked on Lardol’s door and shifted impatiently from foot to foot as she heard the male inside scurrying for the door.

“Oh. It is just you,” the male frowned, crossing his arms. He eyed her reproachfully. “This had better be about His Grace and not another thing like the *sap* in your hair.”

She glared at him. That had been important! She couldn’t walk about the castle with her hair all clumped together with sap! And if he had just put the bird back in the nest like she had asked, she would not have had to get all—

“Well? Get on with it,” he barked.

The girl pointed out his window, gesturing to the rain, and then gestured to her head and shivered.

“The king is wet and cold? I will get a hot bath going for him,” Lardol replied, beckoning for her to leave. “And I will find him warm clothes. You

should just stay out of his way. Go retrieve something for him to eat and leave it outside the door.”

The girl glared and hurried off. *Stay out of his way.* She scowled at the wall statue outside the kitchen for good measure. *‘Boot-licking Lardol always having to do everything himself!’*

“Oh, Sel’ari bless you,” Madorana, the nicest of the palace’s cooks, sighed in greeting as soon as the girl entered the room. “You would think the king is on his death bed with the way we are all running this way and that to tend to him. His Majesty does so hate being fussed over.” She raised the spoon from his soup to her lips and gave it a noisy sip. “Prince Hadoream was the same way. Whenever he would come in late—and gods know if he came in late he was with his brother—Darcarus it was, not Sairel—Sairel was ever the studious one and he was never late. Darcarus was the trouble maker. Oh gods he was a trouble maker. You would think he had a streak of gnome in him. Ever getting into our hair and causing mischief. But oh, he was such a charmer...” She blushed and paused briefly, as though she had forgotten where her thoughts had been leading her. “Oh yes, Prince Hadoream was just like Hairem: we would all gather around him and he would try his best to escape.” She laughed. “Oh, Lardol remembers those days. He used to curse the old princes off, you know. The mouth on that male!” She pushed a tray into the girl’s arms, and she was relieved that Madorana’s tangent was significantly shorter than usual. “Take this to His Grace. I certainly do not want to be the one responsible for him catching ill!”

The girl sighed and turned right back around. Madorana was right—Hairem *did* hate being fussed over and that was *exactly* what everyone was doing. No doubt he would go lock himself up in his room to cease their constant worrying. Perhaps it was because of the recent death of his well-beloved father that endeared the servants, at least partially, to the male. And yet, she had heard many stories, even as a youth, of Hairem’s kindness toward them. Just a few years ago he had been caught sneaking off with a handful of servants. She always wondered what sort of mischief the young prince had been up to, but she had long been told he had acquired his cavalier ways from his close association with the True Blood princes. But they were across the ocean now. It was just Hairem left.

The girl stopped outside the king’s door and set the tray to the right. She could hear Lardol’s muffled speech from inside and she leaned a little closer in an attempt to catch what he was saying.

“Well, I am certainly in no hurry, Lardol. But thank you for your concern,” she caught Hairem’s reply.

“I simply do not wish to see the kingdom without an heir should—and gods forbid—anything happen to you, My Lord,” the male servant replied reproachfully. The girl was surprised with the frankness with which he spoke with the king, but then, Lardol had been serving Hairem’s family line for three hundred years and the True Bloods before that. She supposed there was a certain familiarity that came to breed such candor with that length of service. “Marriage to Lady Ilsevel would ensure you the loyalty of her father and his substantial financial support. The crown will soon bend beneath the weight of Saebellus’ war and the recent schism. When Silandrus left with his sons, he took thirty thousand subjects and enough wealth to pay for a full transition to Ryekarayn. Now his eldest son rules his thirty thousand elves with more wealth and control than you do *yours*, I’m afraid. Your enemies know this. They also know of King Sairel’s influence, even from a continent away. You have neither his wealth nor power.”

She heard only silence for a minute. When Hairem replied, his voice sounded heavy. “I know you mean well, Lardol, but I do not want to follow in the footsteps of the kings before me. I would like to marry a lady for more reasons than the gold that lines her father’s pockets. Maybe that is half the reason our kingdom is the way it is.”

“And what way is that, My Lord?”

“Corrupt... Manipulative... Using others for wealth and control...”

“I believe that the reason the kingdom is in its current state is due to rich and powerful males like Nilanis *not* being under the control of good males like you. And if his daughter is the key to political stability, then perhaps—”

“I know... I just... You are probably right, Lardol,” she heard Hairem interrupt the old elf. “You have been around for many centuries. You have seen what has gone on in these halls far longer than I have. I suppose it is wishful thinking to imagine that I might genuinely *love* the lady I marry.”

Alvena could sense a level of bitterness in the king’s last words, and imagined Lardol had caught on to the same resentment. “You have every right to wish it as well as demand it, Your Grace. You are the king, after all. I simply ask that you consider the political weight of your decisions. No doubt if Silandrus had remained on Sevrigel with his sons, Sairel would have been betrothed to Ilsevel instead. You will not find a better political position than with Ilsevel by your side.” There was a brief silence before Lardol continued.

“Enjoy your bath. If there is anything else you need, do not hesitate to call for me.”

The girl leapt back, surprised with how quickly Lardol had reached the door. She scurried off down the hallway before he could catch her eavesdropping. Hairem might not punish her, but that foul-tempered boot-licker certainly would!

* * * * *

Hairem sank into the warm water as his door closed, exhaling in a long, deep sigh. He could still hear the servants bustling about outside his door as though he would—as though he had *ever*—summon them while he was trying to relax. Lardol’s insistent approach toward marriage had not helped to unwind him, either. He rubbed his face, leaning his head against the rim of the tub. All this fuss for an heir! But then... if the line broke a second time...

He had heard stories of the chaos that had ensued after The Royal Schism, but he had not understood the full weight of what had happened politically those centuries before. A great deal of this was owed to his father, who had swiftly shielded him from the questions and anger aimed at him due to his friendship with the princes. If the line ended with him merely three centuries after the True Bloods’ departure, he imagined that the elven nation would once again struggle through a significant political upheaval and, inwardly, he felt the darker tug of a greater concern: if Saebellus was not defeated by then, perhaps their government would not survive.

And somehow, Nilanis had the audacity to call the war trivial.

He dunked himself under the warm water for a moment. When he raised his head, he let out a soft smile as a peaceful sound came to his ears; somewhere in the courtyard he could hear the cheerful and dramatic, yet soft, melody of the palace musicians, playing in the rain as though they hadn’t a care in all of Aersadore. He briefly recalled Ilsevel’s feeble attempts and a soft chuckle broke loose.

Yes, there was yet time for marriage and heirs.

He closed his eyes, tapping his fingers softly along the side of the tub.

Sel’ari would design his fate. There was plenty of time.

The music twisted its way upward, guided by the breeze to weave outside the window behind him. It was familiar by the first few notes and he found himself singing the lyrics quietly to himself, concerns washed away by sentimental familiarity.

“Why count your blessings when men before
Have lost what they thought they had?
Or number your allies in times prewar,
When loyalties are not yet bled?
Know that the man who stands at your side,
Costs more than the score to be,
And the count of trials one man provides,
Are more than the waves of a sea.

Once, the ancient man walked with his kin,
The owl from Noctem’s shore;
The golden lion from the dreamer’s spin,
The raven from Æntara’s core.
The Earth, she gave her one elven son,
Beside him did walk the moon,
And behind them slithered the darker one,
The serpent of forest’s ruin.

With blood they fought the trials north,
And with blood they fought to flee,
'Til all the dust had settled forth,
And seven were left to be.

“Onward!” Did beckon the ancient man
And through mountains they did climb;
After black waters from the raven’s clan,
Toledoth did drown them in less time.
In dark they fought Malranus’ pride,
The light new allies did ring,
But home had the head of lion’s love died,
And the dreamer was made the king.

With blood they fought the trials west,
And with blood they fought to flee,
'Til meaning of their trial’s quest,
The seven were left to see.

“To the horsemen of the eastern shore!”
 The ancient man tried in vain,
 Though there Malranus cried defeat’s first roar,
 When the Pride’s mighty kin was slain.
 One by one the items, they were lost,
 Through the mountain, plain, and tree,
 While serpent paid a paradoxal cost,
 A clever wicked one was he.

With blood they fought the trials east,
 And with blood they fought to flee,
 ’Til vanquished all bad man and beast,
 The seven victorious free.

“Here comes the end,” the ancient man cried,
 “With this one last war to fight!”
 At dark, the serpent forced the moon to hide,
 And put the Earth’s elf son alight.
 The lion roared and owl took wing,
 The blind raven fought to see,
 But it was ancient man that took their place,
 And gave to them victory.

With blood they fought the trials south,
 And with blood they fought to flee,
 ’Til silence came from every mouth,
 For but spared from death were three.”

The ancient words were familiar from his youngest years—the great *Ballad of the Seven*. He chuckled to himself: Hadoream was *always* singing that tune, to the great annoyance of both of his older brothers: Darcarus, who was not particularly fond of history, and Sairel, who had never been particularly fond of “fun.”

Yet, Hairem found its familiarity comforting. Heroes. A Golden Age. The thwarting of the revival of Malranus and his dragon horde...! ‘*Sel’ari, the world sounded so much better back then...*’ Or perhaps in the face of familiarity, the tale had lost some of its darker meaning.

Yet Hairem smiled to himself. He liked to think that perhaps, in the ballad of Saebellus' defeat one day, maybe he would get a mention or two. Certainly not like *Eraydon*, but an Ephraim or Riphath status would do.

Additionally, he would prefer to take after the hero's companions and live *through* the war.

He chuckled to himself again, flicking a little mountain of bubbles over the side of the marble walls of his tub.

It was perhaps childish and somewhat prideful to imagine such a notion, but already Silandrus had acquired a *score* of songs from his actions in the Royal Schism. If he could survive a few more dinners with Nilanis, even *he* would have the fortitude to accomplish anything. A Golden Age? After suffering Nilanis, that would be child's play.

Hairem felt his muscles loosen and he closed his eyes to the drifting sounds of the palace musicians.

CHAPTER FOUR

The wind howled through the frozen tundra of Darival, entrapping Jikun's cloak in the thick white swirls of snow sweeping up from the earth around him. The general watched them with affection as they twisted into the air and then showered in small flurries back across the now-still earth. His fist tightened on the base of his hood, drawing the thick white fur closer about his face. His strides were long in the thick layer of icy snow, his feet leaving no trace of his passage; driftwalking, as the northerners called it, was the only reason they had been able to thrive on such difficult terrain.

He smiled as he cast his eyes to the left where he could see a few faint, familiar, gentle slopes—so different from the towering hillsides of the south. His gaze trailed up into the sky behind them. When the sun emerged from her heavy blanket of clouds, the landscape would return the glare with brilliance, but for now, the shadows across the snow were a comfortable and familiar grey-white.

He inhaled heavily, holding his breath to savor the scent of the frozen world.

Still, as much as Jikun cherished the north, he was not entirely immune to its bite. His head turned down sharply as another wind swept viciously across the tundra, carrying with it the little frozen shards of snow from as far east as the Merktine Peaks. When it once more paused to rest, he raised his head to survey the landscape before him: the heavy gusts of snow had cleared somewhat, leaving the expanse before him crisp and clear.

The world had not changed since he had been there last. Before him stood the Turmazel Mountains, so named for the blue, green, and purple crystals found in abundance throughout the region. During the millennia, the mountains themselves had become renowned for the size of the crystals they had birthed; in all his travels, Jikun had never encountered another place like

it. Even the Kisacaela gemstones glittering from Elvorium's canyon walls paled in comparison.

And another, albeit less noted, positive was that the humans were far too cautious and weak to dare to mine the northern landscape.

And so it was that only two races occupied the vast expanse of the north: the Lithri, who bore no noteworthy mention, and Jikun's own kind: the Darivalians.

The city of the Darivalians had once stood at the base of those mountains, but it had long since moved into the safety of their fold. Their city was Kaivervale, and it stood as a guardian to the mountain's riches, unmatched in strength, abounding with the unique powers of the Darivalian people. He narrowed his eyes against the pockets of shadows spreading across the mountain's surface, but the flurry of snow had hidden the city's icy walls from view.

However, even in the cloudy mid-afternoon, the vast chasm to the left of his gaze gleamed like a beacon in the night—even now, a blue glow emanated from its depths to color the face of the surrounding mountain. From the unseen heart of the fissure in the mountain stone, a steady stream of cerulean light flowed out, its rays fading and vanishing far into the sky. The birthplace of Darivalian magic, legend had it. He remembered being led out of the city and down the narrow, steep staircase by his parents, behind a train of priests and family. He had hardly lived past his seventh year of life when he had stood at the edge of that great chasm for the first time. His fist had clenched in anxiety and his stomach had dropped as he had gazed down into the endless blue abyss at his feet. He had stretched both hands out into the light as Lithriella's priests chanted stridently.

He had teetered on the edge of the supernatural.

Days later, late at night when the elders had retired and the guards on watch had slumbered away at their posts, he had crept from the city and travelled once again to that otherworldly breach. He had stood there in that chilling presence, whispering into the dark, conversing with Lithriella as though he and she had formed an inseparable bond at that religious ritual days before. He had whispered his fears of failure, his dreams of glory, his aspirations of success—all the vague things a Darivalian child of his age would clutch deep within himself: the paths of the Darivalian elves were limited. Hunter? Weaponsmith? Miner?—Surely the gods had destined him for something much greater.

And in the midst of his fervent prayers, just for a moment, he had thought he heard a keening sound deep below, a faint echo in that cerulean light. Perhaps that had been what had held his religious fervor for longer than rationality should have allowed.

Even now, hundreds of years later, the significance of the moment had not left his mind—it was as crisp and fresh in his memory as the icy wind that, once more, buffeted his bare flesh. Tuserine, they called it: the Heart of the Goddess. And even with Kaivervale before him, he could not help but pause briefly in awe.

He did not stop again until he had reached the base of the mountain and the slick sheet of ice that sloped steadily up its face. In the distance, the gate of the city, now visible, stood closed. Jikun raised his left hand and swept it upward, watching with satisfaction as the ice before him turned to water, cascading down the side of the stairs revealed underneath. With his right hand he raised the water upward, freezing it into a thin railing, which he then used to steady himself against the gusts of tundra wind as he climbed.

Even this dangerous trek up the mountain face was infinitely preferable to the Sel'varian bridges that spanned Elvorium's canyon.

To his right was a mass of boulders and a small ridge of the mountain where an ancient watchtower stood as one with the stone underneath it—as though it had formed from the stone itself. Thin sheets of ice served as panels of glass in the windows, glowing a faint blue from the light emanating within. It was more stunning than any watchtower designed in the south—simplistic, sturdy, and yet breathtakingly beautiful. And it was not his sentiment forming this opinion: any objective elf would have to admit the same.

What a stark contrast to Elvorium. In the city of the Sel'vi, the first building one could see from any direction was the palace—its elegance and comfort. Its assurance of safety—all the while glittering on the edge of a cliff. Here, in the north, the watchtower was a stark reminder of how his people had a far firmer grasp on reality.

But the building he sought lay behind the tower. He strained his eyes, but his position below the ridge allowed him no glimpse of even its rooftop.

He looked instead to the tower's right, his eyes lingering on the massive, frozen waterfall pressed against the face of the mountain. Its icy falls twisted across the surface and split over a great stone. Both branches fell away on either side, one significantly smaller than the other, but both shimmered with equal intensity, gleaming with thick, white icicles. And they both vanished in stillness beneath the snow at the mountains' base.

At one time, it would have formed a river for Jikun's ancestors of the valley. But he and his kin could only remember the frozen age of Darival.

He ascended the first slope of the path and paused briefly to adjust the hood of his cloak before advancing once more. Ahead of him, the city walls stood in magnificent welcoming. The gate of the city was made of a solid sheet of thick ice, smooth and unmarred, simplistic compared to the elegant carvings and ornate work of the Sel'vi. There were no hinges, no handles or holes. The gate could not open, inward or outward, by any traditional means. On either side of the enormous door, the ice-made walls of the city flowed into the mountainside, colossal jagged spikes jutting from the spine in an unsystematic manner. Where the walls met the stone of the mountain on the right, the watchtower rose higher still. Jikun stopped before the doors, finding himself a small mark compared to the vast expanse of the city defenses. Perhaps others would see the cold simplicity as shunning, but to Jikun, three years away had only enhanced its allure and his breast swelled in respect at the unchanged grandeur.

Only two ornate, towering statues broke the simplistic realism and sturdy design of the wall: on the right side off the gate was Koriun, founder of the Darivalian city; to his left was the goddess of the Darivalians, Lithriella. Their arms extended over Jikun high above, and where their hands clasped, blue-white flecks swirled like ice and snow, shimmering in an unseen source of light.

He scoffed, reminded of his disappointment that even his people still clung to their mythic roots like the Sel'vi he had just shaken from his back.

He tore his eyes away in aversion and approached the gate.

"Hail, traveler," one of two guards greeted in a voice struggling to rise above the howling wind. He raised his spear in a firm salute, though he made no attempt to open the gate. He was thin, lanky, and held a faintly chiseled face. He looked like an unfortunate ice-sculpture—one misshapen and battered by wind and ice.

Jikun lowered his head, drawing his face so deep within the fur of the hood that he all but vanished. "Hail," Jikun replied, tucking his arm against the general's medallion on his chest. "I seek rest within Kaivervale for a few days."

He could see the feet of the second soldier shift, perhaps in thought. The boots were ill-kept—the kind that a southern soldier would berate the male harshly for. "What is your name and origin? What brings you to Kaivervale?" the second soldier inquired in a husky voice.

Jikun glanced up slightly, enough to glimpse the soldier's inquisitive gaze. "Elstirel from Elvorum. On business for the general."

Jikun heard the first soldier shift as well. The two males were silent a moment before the first soldier stepped forward, the heavy furs of his cloak dragging across the damp ground behind him. *We don't get many visitors*, he expected him to carry on cautiously, but the male instead halted a short ways before Jikun and narrowed his eyes. He was searching within the darkness of his hood for some semblance of familiarity to ease his caution.

And to Jikun's dismay, even the shadows could not protect him at that proximity.

"By Lithriella...! Captain Jikun—er that's General Jikun now, is it not?! Rulan, it's—!"

Jikun lifted his head, raising a hand quickly. "Daiki, Rulan," he cut the soldiers off as they exchanged broad smiles of recognition—almost a look of triumph as though they had solved a grand mystery. "I only have a short time to visit before I must return to Elvorum. No ruckus. No big celebration. I have been on the road for years and I only wish to—"

"Oh, of *course* not," Rulan piped up before Jikun could finish, his smile growing even broader. It was wide, crooked, and only mildly reassuring. "Let the tundra only hear my silence!"

"Gods know any male who spends three years from home deserves a quiet family reunion," Daiki continued in swift agreement, giving a brief flick of his silvery blue mane of hair; it only helped to emphasize the gangly-ness of the host below.

Jikun drew his face back into his hood, giving each a firm and commanding glare. When they fashioned him only understanding smiles in return, he gestured at the gates. "...So may I?"

"Of course, General," Daiki spoke, spinning around and returning to his position of watch. "Enter, our wayward Lord of the South."

Jikun ignored Daiki's quip and strode between them to the doors, placing his hand against the smooth, cold surface. "Not a word," he cautioned them as a small, door-sized hole formed in its surface. He stepped through, straightening as the refreezing crackle of ice sounded behind him and the excited murmurs of the two soldiers vanished behind the thick wall at his back.

Before him, the wind had died away, unable to find its way from its low berth to climb over the rocks and ice that surrounded Kaivervale. Snow covered the rooftops and ground, nestling on the sills of windows and balancing on the edges of the petals of flowers.

Here, everything was resilient. Here, everything had learned to survive.

He stepped forward, his first footstep deliberately firm, forcing a mark into the icy snow at his feet.

He was truly home.

His eyes immediately swept across the city, hungry for the familiarity. The garrison rose up on his right—octagonal in shape—and the barracks opposite it towered on his left while its southwestern corner molded into the mountain wall itself. Behind the barracks he could hear the soft barks and howls of the winter wolves, the Darivalians' primary hunting force.

He passed between the military front of the city and advanced into the street. "Street" was a loose term, not at all meant to testify to the land where he walked, but rather the use of it. There was no cart-driven road, no cobbled path. The buildings of Kaivervale were not set in neat little rows with flowers sprouting between their walls and vast, tree-filled orchards for idleness; rather, the buildings were spotted across the snowy, sloping landscape in an unsystematic fashion, creating gaps and walkways between them. The widest of these led from the gate, curved right into the large expanse of a snowy field where Jikun had spent many a day training, and then back onto a narrow trail between houses. Its final stretch extended up the slope of the mountain to the open grounds before the palace.

Like each race of elves, the Darivalians had not given up their own royal line. He imagined it was some semblance of caution in the event that the Sel'varian rule finally ruined itself. And in Darival, like so many other elven places, most Sel'varian customs and laws were quietly disregarded. Even the Darivalians' own council member pretended not to know of his race's insolence toward the capital—although Jikun had been lectured extensively in private upon his appointment.

But he had not come to reflect on them. He instead took the widest path, glancing once at the long banquet hall beyond the field where he had eaten his last meal in Kaivervale. He looked away just in time, narrowly dodging the corner of a building in his distracted state. *'At least rows of houses prevent that.'*

He turned to his right then, away from the main street, and wove his way through the snowy pathways between houses. He remained just on the edge of the business portion of the city where half the city's populace made their livelihood. Jikun could not help but compare it to his recent time in Elvorum: Darival was so unlike the city of the Sel'vi, bustling with their foreign merchants and countless city-dwellers. For being the main economic force of

the city, the business district here was quiet and calm, and even as Jikun glanced down between the buildings, he saw only a handful of elves drifting between the shops.

He was grateful for this as he turned down the street, his hood still drawn well over his face. Before he went home, before the city knew he had arrived, there was someone he had to see.

At the end of the path he had taken, a jagged staircase cut into the stone of a mountain ridge, leading up to where the watchtower sat. This was the path he desired and his destination lay just beyond the peak. He pressed his hand against the stone, forming another makeshift railing to steady himself against the icy rock.

At the crest, nestled into the stone behind the watchtower, was a small cottage.

Jikun hesitated there. He could scarcely recall Murios' face, and yet, there was a sense of unease about the place that he was not accustomed to feeling in Darival. A darkness of presence: that same feeling that enveloped him when Navon spoke about necromancy. He wondered if it was his own caution that gave rise to such feelings, or if there was a naturally sinister aura surrounding the matter. He grimaced at the strange runic markings carved into the stone face of the home and the faint, red-orange light glowing in the windows.

The inscrutability of it all certainly did not help. He swallowed audibly, his fists tightening on his hood. *'Don't be a coward,'* he growled internally.

"General Jikun, welcome," came a sudden voice behind him.

Jikun started, slipping on the ice and nearly tumbling back down the stairs. A hand caught him under the arm, steadying him.

"Ah, I'm sorry. I thought you sensed me coming," the voice lamented.

'Sensed you? I didn't even hear you,' Jikun thought, turning to regard the male, who carried on walking past him once his balance was reestablished.

He was lean, tall, and ageless. The blue of his hair had faded so that only the deepest white remained. He looked, in fact, remarkably like the Lithri, though his strongly chiseled face revealed his true origin. Although he was the oldest elf Jikun had heard of, he moved with grace and ease, stopping in a stoically composed manner before his cottage door.

"Are you going to stare at me until Darival melts, or are you going to come in?" the elf demanded as he waved a hand at his opened door.

Jikun hurried swiftly up the last few steps, across the snow-covered ridge, and stepped quickly through the male's door. He glanced over his shoulder as

the male followed him inside. “How did you know that it was me?” he frowned curiously, brows knit as the door closed behind them.

The elf chuckled as he set a basket down beside the fire and bent his lean, old body toward it with a little huff, as though a breath of warmth would inspire the flames to burn with a bit more radiance. “With age comes perception, General Taemrin.”

‘Well, I suppose this is useless then...’ Jikun thought as he drew his hood back.

“But,” the elf continued, straightening the vase of flowers on his table, “the emblem on your chest helped.”

Jikun looked down at his left breast. Right. He glanced back up, eyes sweeping the cluttered home briefly. It was devoid of color and life—a dry, simple mess of old books and scrolls, with those chilling runic markings beginning across parchment and finishing on another surface—as though one material was inseparable from another in the mage’s fervent scrawlings.

“I can perceive, however, that you are troubled,” the elf continued as he faced the fire, prodding at it once with an iron rod.

A shower of sparks danced up the chimney and Jikun followed their path, wishing they would linger longer within the home. His brow knit. “I show that I am troubled?”

“Why else would you come to see me?”

Jikun’s eyes turned away and narrowed. “I’m starting to doubt this whole ‘perception with age.’”

At that the elf looked up, leaning the metal prod beside the chimney, and smiled. The lines around his eyes creased and for a moment, age gripped him. “Sit, please,” he beckoned, gesturing to a chair beside the flames. “You did not write to me. This must be a truly personal matter indeed.”

Jikun felt his chest tighten anxiously. *A truly personal matter indeed...* That much was true. He settled into the chair, sinking deep into the under-stuffed cushion. He rested his hands on the mahogany arms and returned his attention to the elf, keeping his face as passive as he could manage as the topic loomed darkly overhead. “Murios, I am sorry to trouble you,” he began as the elf walked to a shelf of books. Jikun frowned. “I can see that you are quite busy... but I travelled all the way from Elvorum for this matter—”

“For your family.”

Jikun blinked. “...Yes... To see my family as well.”

The elf rounded, a black, leather-bound book gripped tightly in his hand. He settled into a chair across from Jikun and dropped the book onto the table

between them. It landed with a heavy thud, far greater than a book its size should make. "For your family," the elf repeated. "Navon, your brother-in-arms."

Jikun looked down at the book sharply. The edges of its leather jacket were tattered and stiff, curling back from the tarnished metal beneath. He could see that the edges of the pages were worn and brown, appearing so flaky that a mere touch might turn them to dust. "What is that?" he demanded stiffly, leaning slightly away.

Murios pressed a single, long finger into the center of the book, and the tome itself seemed to groan softly. "My father acquired this. And my father's father before him. And his father. And his father's father. And now I. It is a tome which once belonged to Tiras."

Jikun's eyes widened in a flicker of fear. No title was needed. No last name. No origin. Even though he knew of whom he spoke, he found himself demanding clarification, as though grasping for some last ray of light in the darkening room. "*The Tiras?*"

"The only."

Jikun found himself recoiling from the tome before him. "Is that... *necromancy?*"

The elf chuckled and Jikun felt his skin crawl. There was nothing humorous about the situation. "My fifth father was an apprentice to Tiras in his younger years, before Tiras quested with Eraydon. This was a book of spells that Tiras taught to him."

Jikun shook his head firmly, daring to push the book away. "Murios, I have come with questions concerning Saebellus' Beast," he spoke stiffly, forcing the topic down his chosen path. He continued before Murios could direct it otherwise. "It's an enormous creature—seven feet tall or so, very muscular, brown-skinned, auburn of hair. Two black horns curve backward from its head. Yellow eyes. It has these two tattered leather wings... like dragon wings... but I have never seen it fly. It fights in melee combat using long talons and unnatural, overpowering strength. It seems immune to injury. We've shot it, stabbed it, bludgeoned it, burned it... and it returns just as fierce. Murios, it has slain countless soldiers. *Countless*. You are the wisest elf I know."

"You mean the *oldest*. Somehow, age is akin to wisdom." The elf leaned back, regarding Jikun thoughtfully, his pale eyes shifting across Jikun's face in an unnaturally scrutinizing stare. He revealed nothing about himself and yet Jikun could feel his layers of defense peeled back by the intensity of the male's

gaze. “I have not heard of a beast like yours. His looks sound of a man with demonic qualities. Cambions rarely retain the large form of their demonic parent, but perhaps that is what you are dealing with. Although this is no typical demonic entity. Immunities to weapons... that, I have not heard of in mere cambions. And yet, High City Demons are inescapably grey-skinned. Ramulean—well, if it was Ramulean, you would all be dead.” He paused then, as though giving Jikun the opportunity to end the conversation. When Jikun offered no reaction, he continued, his voice softening, “There is one magic that deals with demons. And this is what you fear.” He leaned forward toward the tome.

“With good reason,” Jikun retorted, keeping his body pressed away. “I fear that in Navon’s desperation to stop the Beast, he will use necromancy. And whether it is successful or not, I fear what it will do to him—due to its own nature—and what retribution Elvorium will invoke.” He paused, closing his eyes tightly as Navon’s suggestions in Elvorium rushed back to him. He took a deep breath. “Am I wrong to fear necromancy?”

When he opened his eyes, Murios’ face had grown grave.

“No,” the male replied solidly. “You are not wrong to fear it. Tiras lost his wife and child to his practice of necromancy and he himself eventually became blind as a result of its use. The Helvari on Ryekarayn have long allowed the use of necromancy, but even they are wise and fear the magic. The river that runs beside their mountains is teeming with the souls of those killed *for* the magic... or *by* the magic. And it is a terrible place of suffering and torture. Necromancy, even used for good, as Tiras used it, is a dark magic. Souls subjected to necromancy are often souls which were safe within the Realms of the Dead. When they are wrenched once more to this earth, they become weakened, tattered, and confused. And to utilize such power, the necromancer himself often must travel to the Realms with his own soul. The Realms are not a place for mortal men—and souls do not freely leave it. For a necromancer to travel to the realms and attempt to leave in entirety, the risk is great. A necromancer can be very great indeed, but if he cannot leave the realms, his magic is useless. As such, necromantic magic is often destructive to the user’s own soul or body. And with the loss of the soul comes the loss of self. Sel’vi have good reason to loathe necromancy. And you are wise to fear it. Your comrade is a Helven. He should know the stories of necromancy from his people.”

Jikun heaved a deep sigh. “I thought as much. And it doesn’t bring me comfort. Navon sees the devastation the Beast wreaks in battle and it only

spurs on his deep lust for necromancy, turning it into one of ‘justified’ motivation. Is there nothing good that can come of it?”

Murios hesitated. “Tiras was one of the greatest mages of his age. And without his assistance, The Six would have never succeeded in their quest. Malranus would rule this world and you and I would be cowering deep within the mountains for fear of dragons. Back then, it was the cost of the revival of Malranus’ dragons weighed against Tiras’ soul. You tell me... is the Beast worth Navon’s?”

Jikun stood slowly, his eyes hardening. “Thank you, Murios. That’s all I wanted to know.”

*

Weaving down from Murios’ home and travelling north across Kaivervale, Jikun came to the great lip of a cave. It towered high above him, casting a third of the city in its shadow in the morning and half that as evening fell. The turmazel stalactites jutted from the ceiling in enormous shards of purple often streaked with lines and waves of cerulean blue. Smaller, green crystals had formed near their bases and eagerly attempted to extend as far. But their efforts for growth were often halted by their odd directions. Before they had grown too far, they collided with one another and formed a sort of web of luminescent, green crystal-rays above him.

He took several more steps into the shadow of the cave and the snow beneath his feet gradually thinned until only a dusting encroached upon the base of his mansion. The home of the general was made of both ice and stone, although it was primarily ice that extended across the exterior. He took the stairs up to the front of his home and opened the unlocked doors, throwing his hood back as he stepped into the great hall, his boots echoing softly in the high vaulted ceiling.

The hall was cold and empty, and perhaps its chill was amplified by the heaviness that weighed on his mind. Was Navon obeying him, or was he even, at this moment, throwing himself deeper into the confines of necromancy?

Jikun shook the dark magic firmly from his mind, forcing his eyes to sweep the clean interior; the residence had been well-kept in his absence, and yet somehow he found it oddly unwelcoming. For a brief moment he stood there, a stranger in his own home, and reflected that he would rather wake up from a thousand nights on the ground of a fur-sprawled tent, surrounded by his

soldiers, than alone in this drafty, empty house—there was something far more final about its loneliness.

And why *was* it so empty? He passed underneath the turmazel chandelier hanging still above him, between the columns of ice sculptures, and swept from room to room... But aside from his furnishings and belongings, the place was vacant.

Jikun dropped his sack beside his bed of thick, white furs and left his mansion. His gaze turned toward the falling sun and he strode with deliberate steps to the west. He noticed nothing but the market as he passed, and even that was now still—the lights in the buildings had gone out and the city was oddly dark and silent.

He glanced around with the caution he had grown accustomed to in the army, but there was not a soul in sight. He paused briefly at the edge of the street. ‘*Odd...*’ he wondered, before finally turning away.

His quickened footsteps—perhaps finding greater speed as the emptiness of the night unsettled him—led him to a stop at the door to a small, square, stone home. An ice sculpture of Lithriella was displayed in the midst of a garden of purple and white hyaline flowers, whose petals had begun to close for the evening. He reached out for the door, knocking solidly and swiftly, and with a hint of frustration, against the stone.

Here, the sign of life came in a muffled hum of voices and the quiet padding of feet. He stepped back once and the door swung open.

The male who stood in the stone hallway before Jikun was a few inches taller, sturdier, older, and dressed in thick grey and brown furs. Yet there was an uncanny similarity to their chiseled features.

For a moment, the two males just looked at each other.

“Why—” Jikun began in a slightly exasperated tone.

But the male extended his arms and grabbed Jikun firmly by the shoulders. “Catervi, Jikun has come home!”

It was almost instantaneous that a female’s head bobbed into view over his shoulder, eyes wide, and shoved her husband out of the way. “Jikun! My dear, dear Jikun!” She grabbed him by the front of his shirt and jerked him in. “Close the door, Nulaves!” she barked to the male as she dragged her son forward. “Oh, stop for a moment and let me look at you.”

“Why—” Jikun tried again, feeling her hand on the front of his shirt push back against his body to force him to a halt.

“By Lithriella, you look underfed!” she lamented, shaking her head ruefully. “Do they not feed you in the army?” She released his shirt and

clasped her petite hands together, smiling broadly. “I was just setting dinner out! Come. Eat.” She paused for a moment and then threw her arms about him tightly, burying her face into his chest. “I prayed to the goddess every day for your safe return,” she breathed, struggling to keep her voice steady.

Before Jikun could offer his mother words of reassurance, his father had stepped up beside them and dropped a strong hand on their shoulders. “Let us move this into the dining room,” he insisted with a gentle push. He was getting hungry and even the reunion of mother and son could not stand between his father and his meal.

Catervi stood back and quickly wiped a tear from her eye. She was a bit more emotional than her mate. “Why, yes. Of course. Come, this way,” she beckoned, stepping quickly down the hallway and turning into a small dining room. A fire roared in the hearth on the far wall and a pot simmered gently above it.

“*Why*,” Jikun finally breathed as he slowly took a seat, “are you still here? My mansion is countless times larger than this. I insisted that you stay there. This house is no place for the parents of Sevrigel’s general.”

They laughed, Nulaves chuckling heavily as he set a plate and bowl before himself onto the worn wood of the ancient table. He would have left the others to fend for their own dining wares were his mother not in possession of the soup ladle. “Oh, I’m sure the Sel’vi won’t make it this far just to scrutinize your parentage.”

“Indeed,” Catervi huffed, brushing a strand of blue-tinted hair from her face. “And your home is *lovely*, Jikun. But it’s far too big and drafty for just the two of us. We didn’t know what to do with ourselves! This place is far more suited to our lifestyle. But we have kept your mansion well for you—so that you would have a nice place to come home to.”

Jikun looked about the small dining room. The shelves in the stone were still cluttered with neat rows of little knickknacks Jikun had made for his parents as a child, and the rug beneath the table was still faintly stained with the blood of Jikun’s first military training injury. Like the ice and snow of Darival, the people of the city never changed. Not even his parents. And yet he wondered if, by leaving Kaivervale, he *had*.

The affection for the simplicity about him had dimmed somewhat beneath the wealth and grandeur of Elvorium. The loving grasp his parents had on his youth seemed unprofitable and rather puerile.

Internally, he started at the thought—he had never had reason to complain about Darival in the past—let alone his own blood. Indeed, the status of

general had weakened his character and he attempted to shake such corruption violently from his head. “I just do not want to see you uncomfortable,” he drew his focus back to the loving couple before him.

He paused, his previous thoughts of his solitary walk through the city returning to him. “Where, by the way, is everyone...?”

His father placed a hand on Jikun’s shoulder as he sat down beside him. “Jikun, may I give you some advice?” He paused, meeting his eyes steadily. “Pull out the stick the Sel’vi have shoved up your ass, and *relax*.”

Jikun reclined in his chair and inhaled deeply. His father was right. He *had* changed. He stood, walking stiffly to the pot of stew simmering above the fire. Lingering there for a moment, he inhaled the rich smells of the soup until they had drawn him in and his shoulders relaxed. He attempted to lift a floating piece from its surface. “Is that rabbit?”

“Yes,” his mother replied, smacking his hand with a spoon and turning with a wink. “Do they not teach you manners in the army? Nulaves, hand me the bowls.” She jostled Jikun aside until he had retreated to the table and was sitting as impatiently as his father. When dinner had been laid out across the table, his mother sat down on his other side, bright-eyed and expectant.

“Tell us about the war and Elvorium,” his father began, raising a spoonful of soup to his lips. He blew on it softly as his eyes rested attentively on his son.

Jikun reached out and placed a slice of bread on his plate. Back south, it was only Navon he could confide in. But here, in his hometown, he knew every word he said, every action he took, would never leave the frozen tundra. A genuinely tranquil smile crept across his lips. “Elvorium is as haughty as ever. But Liadeltris has died and his son has taken the throne. Based on my conversation with him when I returned to the city, I believe that things may change—he seems to have the courage to defy the corrupted politics of his council.”

“Oh? Liadeltris seemed like such a respectable ruler,” his mother lamented, though Jikun was aware that she knew nothing of his time on the throne. “May the gods grant him safe passage.”

Jikun paused to sip his wine, noting that Darival had still not received news of the death of the king. He felt it demonstrated just how removed from the Sel’vi they had become. Even their own council member, Mikanum, had not prioritized the information to his people, perhaps thinking it better to distance himself even further from his wild brethren of the north.

Jikun continued, keeping his voice as dismissive as he could. He knew that it was his mother's nature to worry excessively. His father, on the other hand, had at least half of his attention on fishing out bits of rabbit from the soup. "As for Saebellus, he has not been defeated. I cannot stay in Kaivervale for long—I have responsibilities to the army in Elvorium." He straightened his shoulders. Of course, what he said and did may remain in Kaivervale, but with nothing new leaving or coming, the city was ripe with gossip. It was best to tell his parents firsthand that he had seen the mage. "I came here first and foremost to see Murios."

His mother looked up and he could see her brows knit in concern. "Murios? Why Murios?"

"Is something wrong?" his father demanded, leaning forward sharply. His soup lay forgotten.

Jikun sipped his wine calmly and set the glass down. Still southern wine, even for the north. He remained silent for a moment, tapping a piece of the dried bread along the edge of his plate. "It's just a little issue with one of Saebellus'... soldiers. A private matter. I simply sought Murios' wisdom. I cannot stay long."

His father nodded understandingly, even as his mother sighed in disappointment. She tapped the table once as though in thought, and then suddenly clasped his hand, seemingly desperate to change the topic. "I just remembered—eat more bread, you look famished—Laikum's son killed a white thakish the other day. *By himself.*"

Jikun raised a brow, glad as well for the change in topic. "A white thakish by himself? Was it fully grown—eyes fully set in and everything?"

His mother nodded excitedly. "Brought back three, fully developed eyes to prove it! What a soldier he will make!"

Jikun chuckled, admittedly impressed. "Indeed." He remembered the hunts shortly before his deployment to Elvorium—they were always a rush of adrenaline. But he had never known any elf crazy enough to hunt alone—in fact, no hunt was even *allowed* with less than four soldiers.

"What about you, dear?" his mother broke in. "Do you still hunt frequently? With your new southern friends, I suppose?"

His father laughed. "It must seem like child's play to hunt the passive creatures of the south!"

Jikun's lips twisted in resignation at the question—unfortunately, he didn't know whether he was now displaying a smile or a grimace. "I don't hunt. I have no time."

His mother's fingers slipped from her cup in offended disbelief and she raised a brow. "Well, they *must* give you time to yourself," she said reasonably. When Jikun offered nothing more, she pried further, suddenly grinning and eyeing him expectantly. "What about your poetry, then? Are you winning any hearts in the military?"

Jikun trailed his spoon through his soup as he flatly met her gaze. "There are no females in the king's army. And even if there were, I haven't written poetry since I moved to the capital."

"What?" his mother exclaimed in dismay. "But you used to write all the time. I still have the poem you wrote about Lithriella—the one where you said that her world uses so *many* colors that, to mere mortals, it appears white. I thought that it was so lovely and clever."

Jikun pursed his lips at the mention of the goddess' name. "I don't have time for such luxuries working for the capital." He was a general now—not some green soldier. Things were different in the south.

But unfortunately it was his father he was sitting with, and the male who had raised him was scrutinizing him with a piercing gaze. Nothing could get past him, even with half of his mind on food. "...Do the other males still give you a hard time about your religion?" he finally grimaced.

"No," Jikun replied shortly. His eyes flicked down in subconscious shame before he realized his action. *'Damn it.'* There was no avoiding the conversation now.

"What do you mean 'no'?" his father pried. "You wrote to us after you were first transferred and said that the military is quite cynical about the practice of foreign religions. You're telling me that the soldiers simply dropped the matter all together?"

"Yes, as *you* should," Jikun replied stiffly.

His father narrowed his eyes. "You're worshipping Sel'ari now, aren't you?"

Jikun laughed outright, shaking his head once in anger. "No. For your information, I am not groveling to *anyone* right now."

His mother let out a little gasp and her eyes flicked to his father as though demanding he repair the situation.

"Jikun Taemrin, you should be far wiser than that! A lack of devout worship is only complete arrogance to—"

Jikun raised his finger and pointed it sharply to the ceiling. *Gods* could they not drop the subject?! "You think she cares?" he demanded in exasperation. "The fact that I walk out of every battle without so much as a

scratch and some of my most devout Sel'ari-grovelers are cut down *screaming* proves otherwise. She *doesn't* care who abases himself to her and who does *not*."

His father stiffened. "I would think your safety and success proves she *does* care for you."

Jikun snorted once. "I have seen thousands upon thousands of adoring followers die in ways you can't even *imagine*. Gods. Don't. Care. Not one of them," he snapped, numb to the frustration and pain at the core of his attack.

"Jikun, you are a—"

His mother smacked the table desperately. "Boys! Boys!" she raised her voice sharply in desperation. "I get to see my son once every few years and I will not have this home turned into another battleground. That's enough. You two can write angry letters back and forth about this, but you will not carry on in my home. Nulaves, *silence*."

Jikun's expression softened as his mother bit her lip, eyeing him as though he was an icicle just waiting to fall loose and shatter. He sighed and forced a smile onto his face, nodding to his father respectfully.

"Lais just got a new winter wolf pup," his mother spoke after a moment of silence, continuing the thread of their previous conversation as though the fight had never occurred. "His was killed on a hunt a few months ago. The poor boy. The garrison let him have first pick from the newest litter."

"...A good, large pup," his father ceded. He scraped the remaining contents from his bowl and dabbed his lips with the cloth on his right. His expression had become passive once more, but Jikun suspected that fury, indignation, and concern still roiled beneath the ice.

He sighed, wishing he had better-concealed his disdain for the gods. The gods' folly was no fault of theirs, and it was not his desire to break down their lifelong faith.

"And I was thinking," his mother continued, "When it gets cold in the south, you could bring Nazra with you to Elvorum. She would certainly be an aid in battle. How she misses you!"

Jikun smiled faintly, but shook his head. His mother already knew the answer to that. "I would not put her at such risk. Animals make it back far less often than even my *best* soldiers."

His mother patted his hand as she refilled his bowl, as though to comfort him. But Jikun knew it was she that needed reassurance. "The life of a soldier is rough..." she trailed off quietly.

Jikun drew his hand away and met her gaze steadily. "It is what I want."

His mother sat back down, taking a long sip of wine before she spoke again. “Merkan and Nalaen got married,” she carried on. She waved a finger at his bowl sharply. “*Eat more.*” She paused and exchanged a look with his father, a subtle attempt Jikun caught only from the corner of his icy blue eyes.

He looked up and narrowed them cautiously. “Oh please—”

“Jikun,” his father began reproachfully.

“Kaivervi has grown up to be *beautiful and strong*,” his mother spoke in almost a reprimanding tone, and yet she giggled—a sound far more youthful than her age.

“The point being,” his father added, waving a hand at his wife. “With your reputation, you could have *any* of these ladies. How do you think I won such a lady as your mother? A good soldier is a desired spouse. An excellent soldier, more so. Don’t squander it!”

Jikun opened his mouth to respond, but a loud knock interrupted his cynical reply.

“I wonder who that is... Nulaves, the door,” his mother barked her orders again. As he vanished from the room his mother leaned in, dropping her voice to a soft whisper. “While you are here, you *will* see her, won’t you?”

Jikun had begun to protest when a tumult of voices erupted from the front door.

“Nulaves!” A chorus of males shouted their boisterous greetings.

“We heard Jikun is back in the city! Where are you hiding him?!” a voice jested loudly in a charismatic ring.

Jikun heard his father chuckle. He leaned forward, glaring reproachfully at his mother. “No—I wanted a peaceful—” he began in irritation to her, but no sooner had he begun his sentence than a dozen faces crowded into the doorway of the dining room, grinning broadly.

“Jikun Taemrin!” one bellowed, some throwing in an afterthought of “general” or “captain” behind it.

Jikun leaned back in his chair and waved a hand. He could see tattered boots poking out from the feet amassed before him and a silvery mane of hair bobbing behind a shoulder; Rulan and Daiki peered up sheepishly from the back of the throng.

“This is no hero’s welcome!” Jekum waved a hand from the front, as though brushing Jikun’s parents aside. “No offense, Catervi.”

“Jikun, up! Come!”

Before he could respond, hands grabbed his arms and dragged him forward, down the hallway, and toward the door as though he was entirely weightless and his protests were mute.

“Have a good evening!” his mother called after them.

Jikun found himself half-carried through the streets despite his continued protests. The temperature in Darival had fallen with the sun, who had also, it seemed, taken her blanket of clouds with her. The sky was a show of glittering stars and moonlight, as light as dawn with the white rays reflecting off of the snow. In the distance, he briefly glimpsed the turmazel crystals glittering from the mountain’s face.

He was finally deposited at the north end of the banquet hall. Whereas the rest of the city lay dark and quiet, the torches outside this building were lit and a tumult of muffled noise sounded from within. “I—” he began, not certain what he was going to say after that, but he didn’t have to finish. The doors flew open and a gust of warm air laced with grease and ale swept over him. He was released and pushed into the long room in the final endeavor to raise him to social interaction.

“I—” he began reproachfully once more as the males squeezed in behind him. But he stopped at the sight of the hundreds of elves crowding the room, raising their mugs in anticipation for his arrival. A slight smile crept across his face despite himself and his cheeks flushed. It was one thing to be honored before his own soldiers. But he knew every one of these faces. “Thank you,” he spoke humbly after the eruption died just long enough for those two words. Perhaps, in a more sober state, they would have even demanded a speech.

Fortunately, that had passed.

“Our table is over here,” Merkan began as the ruckus once more filled the room. He smiled his slightly crooked smile, a match with his brother, Rulan, and pranced half clumsily toward the west end of the room.

“There is enough ale to fill all the dwarves in the Black Hills!” Daiki piped in as he hurried after him. “As you may be able to tell, *some* of us have already dipped in.”

‘I would have never guessed,’ Jikun thought in amusement. He walked between their escort to the long table along the wall, eyes scanning the familiar faces across the hall. He inhaled heavily as he went, sucking in the sweet scent of sugar baked into something along the far wall. In the south, the scent was as common as the gold, but here in the north, sugar *was* gold.

He dropped himself down on the thick stone bench. They had spared no expense in celebrating his return.

“You walk so rigidly... the commanding nature of a general, I suppose?” came a quiet voice behind him the moment he had settled. A lean body bent over his right shoulder, pressing a slender hand against his.

“Kaivervi...?” Jikun began, his chest tightening, but she drew away before his words had left his tongue, dragged swiftly away by Nalaen toward the south end of the table. Damn Nalaen!

“You don’t mind if I take this seat here, do you?” Rulan asked as he dropped himself heavily down beside Jikun, unclasping his cloak and kicking it under the table. “Damn, what a long watch today. Can bones freeze?” He breathed into his hands and swiftly rubbed them together.

Jikun narrowed one eye at him, turning away from Kaivervi reluctantly. “I told you not to tell anyone.”

“Oh, I didn’t. Not a word. Not a soul,” Rulan protested the accusation. “Daiki did.”

Jikun kept his face stoically reprimanding for another moment, making sure to catch Daiki’s eye, and then his face broke into a broad smile. His muscles relaxed. This was home. These were his friends and family. This was the Darival he remembered: before he had even finished his dinner the entire city was aware that he had come home. How many nights had he spent in these halls as a child, a page, a soldier, a captain? He had fished beside the great ice falls in the summer, froze fish in the autumn, and prepared stews in the winter. He had hunted and trained his way up from the digging of excrement trenches to the mansion he now possessed. There was nowhere else he’d rather be—not even Roshenhyde.

And that was a damn good place.

“What are you waiting for? Give me my first ale!”

And they did. The first. The second. The third. The fourth. Things gradually became more humorous. His responsibilities faded. And the weight of his military title fell somewhere into the bottom of his third mug.

Laikum had settled in across from him, his youthful face riveted to Jikun in adoration. They were close in age and had trained together in the academy, and yet, the years had been far kinder to the broad-shouldered male before him—he had hardly aged a day in the last two centuries: he had the body of a male and the face of a child. “How many soldiers have you slain in battle?” Laikum asked excitedly, leaning forward from across the table. “Twenty? Thirty?”

Jikun blinked. “Twenty? Thirty...? Gods. You know I’ve been fighting for *years*, right?”

“So then eighty?”

Jikun waved his hand. “Two.”

“Eighty two?”

Jikun rubbed a hand over his face. “Eighty two what?”

“Soldiers. Dead.”

“Where?”

Laikum paused for a moment thoughtfully. “I don’t remember. What are we talking about?”

There was a sudden rumble through the mountain that rose even above the din and the hall fell into a deathly silence.

Jikun’s mind cleared somewhat and he raised his head from Laikum’s plastered smile. “What... was that?” His hand moved on instinct to the hilt of his sword.

“A white thakish,” Daiki replied with a shake of his head, leaning in from the other side as a wave of whispers swept the room. “They have been particularly vicious this spring.”

Jikun frowned thoughtfully, wondering if that would mean something to him in a more sober state. But the noise in the room was rising once more and the words seemed even less important.

“Ladies! Tell about the females in the army!” Jekum breathed excitedly, waving away the white thakish, leaning forward and knocking an unclaimed ale across a half-eaten plate of food. Jikun watched with a grimace as Lais picked up a piece of food from within the pool and popped it into his mouth.

“Females...” Jikun looked up, catching Kaivervi’s eye down the table as she glanced away from Nalaen and Merkan. She smiled at him and he could see her cheeks redden.

He found himself smiling back, his cheeks a little hotter, his heart a little faster.

Jekum followed his gaze and leaned forward, his long, silvery hair trailing into the food before him. “You know,” he whispered conspiratorially. “She still loves you.”

Jikun started, forcing his eyes away from Kaivervi. Was it obvious? Or was he theorizing? “Your hair...”

Jekum sat back, wiping the ends on the sleeve of Lais beside him. They were apparently still very close. Lais merely swallowed the food he had found and wiped his sleeve back on Jekum’s shirt.

“A song!” Rulan suddenly shouted out from his conversation with Daiki, interrupting Jikun’s thoughts to matters of a less interesting nature. “Daiki was

just reminding me of your ceremony out of Darival. Gods, did you sing! The army must be full of songs! Sing us one!”

Jikun laughed. Perhaps more sober he would have frowned on the request. But ale had loosened his lips and spirit and he found himself standing to oblige.

“Valiant and daring,
Light Ones, they fight,
To push back the Dark God’s growing night,
Far away, far away.
Sel’ari bring them home!

Quick and fleeting,
Spirits they run,
Over the hills to the setting sun,
Far away, far away.
Sel’ari bring them home!

Sad and weeping,
Their kin they rest,
In the bosom of the Light God’s breast,
Far away, far away.
Sel’ari bring them home!”

The words were not exactly rippling with cheer, but the melody made up for that. He raised his mug at the last line and the ground attempted to scamper out from under his feet. He toppled backwards through roars of laughter.

A face appeared suddenly above his, blue-grey eyes creased with a smile. “Why don’t I help you home? If you keep drinking like that there won’t be enough for the rest of this room, let alone the dwarves of the Black Hills.”

“Kaivervi...!” he let the mug fall from his hand and roll across the floor as she helped him to his feet—somehow managing to assist despite how unsteady she was herself.

She turned to the rest of the room, her hand tightening on his arm. “I believe our general has had enough for this night, my friends. Bid him goodnight! I’m sure we shall see more of him in the coming days!”

There was a clamor of boisterous and genuine honor as the room erupted with farewells. But their faces had become merely a blur of greys and blues.

Kaivervi put a strong arm underneath his, balancing him against her sturdy frame. “They love you, don’t they?” she commented with a smile as she pushed the banquet hall’s door open.

The comment sent a rush through his chest and words left his lips before he could catch himself, “Do you?” The door snapped shut at their heels and the sounds of laughter and music became muffled.

Kaivervi laughed and stumbled slightly as she took the first step. “Oh my. I don’t think I’m very much more... much more... damn it... I don’t think I am any much more... *ANYMORE* sober than you are.”

Jikun blinked as his mind tried to process her sentence. Was there an answer in there? “Do you remember where I live?” he asked finally.

She chuckled. “How could I not?”

Their feet trudged through the snow for several minutes as they talked about the food and alcohol they had just consumed: trivial chatter, but it was about as much as Jikun could muster.

“Does your army really sing those songs? Do you sing with them?” Kaivervi asked as she turned him around a building to follow the narrow street.

Jikun nodded his head as he took an unsteady step to the right. “You think I remember a song about *Sel’ari* without it being drilled into my sub...conscious through years of war? They are Sel’vi. They don’t stop singing. I listen. I... have an appearance to maintain... I’m a general after all... A general has... certain obligatoriations to maintain...”

She grimaced. “Obligatories...”

“Right. A general has certain obligatories to maintain.”

She nodded and then giggled.

“What?” he asked, finding that it was now he that had to catch her balance as they stumbled past another building.

“I have no idea!” she replied. “It’s the ale. I mean, obviously it’s the ale.”

“Obviously,” he agreed with a nod. “I asked you a question earlier...” It was suddenly coming back to him now. “I asked...”

“Are there females in the Sel’varian army?” she interrupted, diverting his path to avoid a row of close-budded flowers.

“Not in the Sel’varian army,” Jikun replied with a shake of his head, his mind losing the trail of his previous thought. He hopelessly abandoned retrieving it. “I have to get all my women with money,” he grieved.

Kaivervi turned her head sharply, her surprise utterly plain, even through the ale. “Prostitution? Gods, there is a death penalty for that!” She seemed mildly sobered at those words and her smile vanished.

Jikun laughed dismissively and waved a hand. “You sound like my captain. There is only a death penalty *if you get caught*.” He narrowed his brow. Something sounded ridiculous in his response, but his mind was too foggy to pinpoint what that was.

Kaivervi shook her head. “You never were very good at doing what you didn’t want to do...”

“You were never good at being the thing that I didn’t want to... that I wanted to...” he trailed off. “I don’t know what I was going to say.”

She chuckled once more, the lines on her face easing. Gods, was his mother right... she *was* beautiful... Blue-tinted hair. Cerulean eyes. Cheek bones that jutted fiercely from her alabaster skin. “I don’t know either!”

Jikun shook his head, determined to clear it somewhat. “What are you doing now?”

Kaivervi cocked her head. “Walking you—Oh. I’m a hunter. Lais, Nalaen, Jekum, and I. We’ve been tracking the behavior of the white thakish since last fall.”

Jikun looked back at her again. A hunter... She had filled out—sturdier than the Sel’varian females he was used to seeing these last few years. Maybe as supple as some of the human women he had bedded... Tall, lean, and muscular. He found his eyes had landed on her breasts.

Kaivervi took a large step, forcing him to look away in order to not trip. “I see where your eyes are,” she spoke with reproach, but he saw the corner of her mouth twitch slightly. “We are here. Welcome home, General.”

Jikun put a hand out against his door frame and stepped away from her support. He looked at her slight smile for a moment, thoughtfully considering her. She gazed back at him, silent and... expectant? “...You should stay,” he spoke softly, his mind feeling clearer than it had been since he had started drinking.

Kaivervi took his jaw in her hand and kissed his cheek. “No thank you, Jikun. I would like to imagine our reunion as more substantial than that. You get some sleep.” Her hand dropped away and she turned, stepping swiftly down his steps.

Jikun opened his door with a heavy exhale, not sure if it was the door or him who sighed more loudly.

Kaivervi paused at the last step and glanced once over her shoulder. “Would you like to go on the hunt with us in a few days?”

Jikun felt his chest lighten and his smile returned. “Gods know you’ll have to remind me of this conversation tomorrow... But yes. I would like that, Kaivervi.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Elvorum: the seat of The Council of Elves, around which the politics of Sevrigel revolved. Hairem noted the fitting composition of the city, with its seven uniquely designed mansions circling the center of the city in arrays of color and design, yet closed off to the world around them. And his palace—balanced on the edge of a cliff. No great beauty in its majestically pearlescent and golden structure could allow Hairem to see beyond this fitting arrangement.

The largest structure in the center of the city was the Council's Hall. The building was enormous, with creamy white walls and plated gold along the roof. Eight columns supported a long archway over a steep staircase leading from the cobbled street to the carved, double ivory doors. In the shadows of the overcast sky, it presented a rather formidable atmosphere. Hairem knew that the building was far larger than the council members could ever make use of, but rather than allow it for public use, the unused rooms sat empty and useless, collecting dust, webs, and whatever city critters saw fit to utilize the taxpayers' coin.

On the left of the Council's Hall was the second home of Nilanis. He did not use this home for himself, but it was a testament to his wealth and power. While his wife had been alive, she had used it for lavish entertainment with the high nobility of the city. Now, Hairem believed it primarily housed his guests and merchant captains when they came into port. As such, it was perhaps the busiest and gaudiest home in the city.

The house to the left of Nilanis was that of Yulairm, the speaker for the nocturnal elves, the Noc'olari. His title, Nocalarum, was owed to the Noc'olarian worship of Noctem—a practice every bit as unseemly as the rest of their culture. They were unabashedly scandalous individuals, with a deep fascination for the humanoid body and other living creatures. Rumors would

occasionally surface of research conducted by the Noc'olari that would be sacrilegious to a follower of Sel'ari, but the secretive nature of the race had prevented any proof from surfacing. Here, the line of Noc'olarian council members had seen fit to ensure no one forgot their risqué tendencies: the porch columns were naked dancing maidens, and the arches they upheld were crescent carvings of the night sky. It was, even by Noc'olarian standards, verging on shocking.

To his left was Mikanum's estate. Mikanum was, in addition to Yulairm, one of Hairem's most consistent supporters. Mikanum was the speaker for the Darivalians and General Jikun had been his strongly recommended appointment—and as General Jikun had yet to lose a battle, this had helped to endear him further to the king. The home for the speaker had always been a rather jagged, incongruous mansion, taking after, Hairem imagined, the plain and simple tendencies of the Darivalians. Fortunately, recent renovations, on which Mikanum and his wife had spent their personal fortune, had toned the building out to a far less garish and more elegant palace. At night, it would shimmer like carved ice and perhaps could be named the fairest building in the city.

Beside Mikanum was the speaker for the seafaring Galweni. The architecture of Fildor's home reflected the ocean—the roof swept downward like a crashing wave and the pillars seemed to remain untouched beneath it. Having Fildor on the council was fittingly like a day at sea—one moment he was calm and the next he was a raging storm. Hairem pursed his lips; walking past the house gave him a sour feeling. Unwed and generally disliked, it was purely by the request of the Galweni that Fildor had found a place on the council at all.

Then there was the home of Cahsari, the Kasan, or speaker of the Helvari. His home was made entirely of white stone and the entrance to his mansion was like that of a cave. Though the number of Helvari on Sevrigel was scarce—most of the elves of the mountains choosing to reside on Ryekarayn—Cahsari had slithered his way in with the right people—as had the Helvarian council members before him. He was, without a doubt, one of the fiercest opponents Hairem had had the displeasure of working with.

The Eph'ven speaker's home, now occupied by Heshellon, was perhaps the least appealing in its bland, sandy architecture, but the mere knowledge that one of his few supporters lived within somehow made the home seem remarkably agreeable. There were times when Hairem had heard his father's bitter complaints about the Eph'ven need for outsiders to “prove themselves”

in order to gain an Eph'ven's cooperation, but Hairem had not seen this desert cultural insistence at work for himself. In addition, Heshellon had only been in his seat of power since Gildeen had been murdered by the assassin two years prior. Yet, he had wasted no time in staunchly reverting to the Eph'ven cause previously aligned with the True Blood tendencies toward politics. To Hairem, this seemed perfectly agreeable.

The last home was the smallest of the seven, making an impression like ripples on the water—which Hairem thought fitting considering it was their race that held and traversed Sevrigel's inner waterways. It had been the home of Leisum. Hairem paused briefly outside of it, bowing his head in respect, eyes flicking across the flowers still strewn about outside of it. He knew that within days of hearing of Leisum's murder, the Ruljenari had appointed a new speaker. Ilrae, as he was known. With Hairem's coronation having yet to be completed at Leisum's death, Hairem had had no say in the appointment. He wondered what sort of male this new Ruljarian speaker would be.

Along with the Council's Hall, the seven other buildings created a circle around a cobbled courtyard and the statue planted at the center. As was his custom acquired from the True Blood prince Hadoream, Hairem made his final stop before it, bowing his head in respect to the memory of the six ancient warriors.

Yet his pause was longer than usual that day.

'Put in a word for me to Sel'ari,' he prayed. '...That Ilrae is half the male... even half the male that Leisum was, and I shall build an even grander temple in your honor.'

It was a rather lofty promise and he didn't pause long to think whether he would *actually* tear down the temple for a larger one, but he imagined she would accept the essence of his words.

Of the six stony faces, only one gazed back at him. Hairem felt self-conscious then, averting his eyes and giving another brief bow. He stepped past them, across the cobbled way, and up the wide stairs.

"Welcome, Your Majesty," his personal guards greeted before the door.

But Hairem's anxieties had drawn him inward and their voices fell deafly upon his ears. He glanced down at himself once, debating his particular color choice of such a passive white and gold. Red would have been better. Fiercer. Or perhaps it could be too closely associated with Malranus. Yes, bad choice. He probably should have worn a blue. Something darker. More—

"Er... Haire—Your Majesty," Erallus' voice cut off his thoughts. "The council is waiting for you."

Hairem looked up sharply, realizing the doors had been thrown wide to his arrival and the hall had fallen into expectant silence.

The seven eyed the door inquisitively.

“Greetings, Your Majesty,” Nilanis finally spoke loudly, causing the males about him to scramble swiftly to their feet and fall into deep and respectful bows.

Hairem’s eyes flicked from face to face and his brow raised faintly. *‘I thought I was early...’* Yet every member was already present. “Greetings, Nilanis,” Hairem finally replied, nodding his head toward the speaker in a strong, curt motion, attempting to project complete control over his expectations.

Half of the game of politics was maintaining the appearance of control. He had been given this advice countless times by Sairel, but the eldest of the princes had never seemed to lack genuine power at all. Attempting to imbue himself with the male’s personality, he glanced stoically about the well-lit room as his feet padded softly across the marble floor. He took the stairs up to his desk and stopped before his chair. Even with his back toward them, he could feel all eyes boring into him, narrowed and scrutinizing, searching for the slightest suggestion that his countenance was anything less than assured.

Hairem turned about to the males waiting for him to take his seat first. *‘Gods grant me patience.’* And he sat.

“My lord,” Nilanis began before the other council members had even pulled their chairs in toward their carved desks. “This is Ilrae. He is the new speaker for the Ruljenari since Leisum—may Sel’ari grant him solace—is no longer with us.”

The unfamiliar face to the left of Mikanum offered an otherwise expressionless half-smile, bowing his head toward the king. He seemed slightly older than the other elves in the room, with faint lines at the corners of his mouth and eyes suggesting he had climbed well into his years. His silvery blue hair was braided back sharply, pulling his eyes slightly at an angle and accentuating the sharp rise of his cheekbones. Hairem squinted, his muscles subconsciously sympathizing with the poor elf’s taut composure. “It is my great honor to join you on the council, My King,” Ilrae spoke softly, stormy eyes rising in expressionless affixation. There was something unsettling about the intensity of the gaze and Hairem found himself incapable of more than a mere nod in return.

He drew himself up. *‘Half of the game of politics is maintaining the appearance of control,’* Sairel’s words rushed back to him suddenly. Hairem

stiffened. “Welcome, Ilrae.” He rubbed his jaw, making sure to study the Ruljen with unabashed frankness. He knew little about the male and so far, Ilrae had given him no more than a cold gaze to work with. His face shifted expressions as though on etiquette’s queue, but his eyes had remained unsettlingly emotionless.

‘I suppose time will have to tell...’ Hairem gestured for Nilanis to seat himself as he prepared to conduct their meeting.

The El’adorium opened his mouth to speak further, but changed his mind, pulling his seat up in exact proximity to the desk as the others had done. He straightened the already straight emblem on his chest, as though reminding Hairem of his position.

Hairem regarded them all silently, blue eyes flicking from one expressionless, attentive face to the next. There was the twist of anxiety in his stomach, but his composure was deliberately relaxed. *‘I let them see only who I want them to see,’* he recalled Sairel’s stoically commanding words. If ever a male had been born to be king, Sairel was that elf.

Hairem drew himself up against the back of his chair, tapping his finger once on the solid wood of his desk. “I see here there is a list of matters that we need to address... ”

Several pairs of eyes regarded him cynically and several bodies shifted impatiently, as though his failure was somehow, already, unsalvageable.

Hairem set the parchment down, leaning back with an inward sigh. The council would have no patience with his lead. Not at this time. It was true: he hardly knew what he was doing. Revealing the extent of this fact would perhaps be more detrimental than just... “Nilanis, if you would?”

The speaker for the Sel’vi stood swiftly, moving around the circle of desks to stand in the middle of the room as though he had been waiting for Hairem to turn over command. And yet, Hairem could not help but be impressed as he noted the way the male walked—strong, brisk, and remarkably commanding. His experience was unchallenged. He stood silently for a moment, tension building. Finally he spoke.

“Yes, my fellow council members. Today is the day that we must finally address the proposition by our Noc’olarian brethren: term limits on the council positions. Since this matter is clearly a primary concern for our Nocalarum, Yulairm, we shall let him express to us his people’s concern.” The tone he used was, without contest, passively aggressive and Hairem was taken aback by the unabashed bias with which he had already addressed the matter.

Yet his inner emotions remained closed behind an outward composure of silent observation. He rested his chin on the back of his hand. No sooner than a few score words and the internal conflict of the council had begun. Or perhaps he had not accorded them enough credit—his mere entrance in the Council’s Hall seemed to have created a rather chilly atmosphere.

Yulairm stood, grey eyes regarding Nilanis with open contempt. He transferred his attention toward Hairem. “My Lord, the Noc’olari wish to see term limits placed on the council members. Their concern is that there are members of the council who, once they have gained power, can, without repercussions, ignore the will of the people and pass laws applying to their own personal benefit. Let me remind you of 3514 P.E. when the council passed a yearly income increase of fifteen percent when there was no financial reason to do so—all council members were already earning ten percent more than the average elven home, entirely excluding their personal financial ventures. If a term limit—or a vote to renew the term—could be established, corrupt council members could no longer remain on the council for—” and here he paused to deliberately eye Nilanis, “three hundred years or more.”

His eyes returned to Hairem as though he knew that a term limit was exactly what the king had been advocating to Heshellon for the last few weeks. Had Heshellon opened his mouth? Damn it!—this was too soon to bring it before the rest of the council for a vote! What had prompted the Nocalarum’s impatience? Did he fear that Hairem would become corrupted by the other council members? His father had certainly lost his sway over the council over time...

Lost his sway to people like Nilanis. Leisum had been a respectable council member, but he had retained his position for one thousand five hundred years. And Nilanis was nothing like Leisum. Additionally, he likely had well over two thousand years left. It helped that the elven people were intelligent enough to appoint older elves as council members—to allow shorter terms by impending death—but when a younger elf like Nilanis slithered his way in, there was no extricating him. Especially when half the city’s commerce went through his docks.

Hairem leaned forward on his hand, inclining his head to encourage Yulairm to continue. He would have to make the most of this unexpected timing. He knew his eyes were reproachful, however, rebuking Yulairm for bringing the topic to council without his foreknowledge.

Still, the Nocalarum was fearless as he pressed forward. His lean body drew up sharply, as straight and tall and scraggly as a weathered tree, but his

eyes were grey, deep, and fierce. “I have been advocating shorter terms on the council for over fifty years, Your Majesty. And every year the council votes against it. Three centuries ago, the former royal bloodline abandoned Sevrigel for Ryekarayn because of the corrupted state of our council. Silandrus went so far as to abolish any such council on Ryekarayn and now his son Sairel rules as sole voice for his people: King *as well as* El’adorium. I challenge any council member here to come forth with a reason as to why a term limit—or even vote of renewal—would be a negative addition to our laws. If the True Bloods deemed our shortcomings to be such a detriment to the people we serve, then perhaps we should find a way to—”

Cahsari snorted and Hairem felt a rise of hatred toward the Helven at the interruption. “Of *course* the Noc’olari would propose this.” He rubbed the narrow ridge of his pale nose and then threw his hand outward in a broad, animated sweep. “With the shortest average lifespans of our peoples, one can hardly see a reason *not* to. And a term limit certainly does not affect Yulairm either. You have had your seat for what... sixty years? Seventy years? What sort of term limit are you proposing? Two hundred? Three hundred? It must be nice for you to see the rest of us removed while you retain power. Fresh, inexperienced blood for you to take control of when the rest of us are disposed. We all know Silandrus was a power hungry savage who shared your ideals. He allowed our elves to fall beneath the clutches of the sirens. Saebellus is a testament to what sort of prodigy he left behind with *his* ideas and affinities. I daresay such ideas even border on being treasonous! Like Silandrus, Saebellus would also see us all removed—except that he possesses the madness to follow through with his sword. He would take our heads first, the king not being withheld from the same fate.”

Yulairm narrowed his icy eyes threateningly. “Silandrus was not only a *True Blood*, but a very well-respected king amongst the Sel’vi in Elvorum *and* the other elven cities throughout Sevrigel. That is your first offense. The second... How *dare* you suggest that I am as corrupt and manipulative as you, Cahsari. If I was, let me assure you that you would long since have been *removed*.”

Cahsari stood, blue eyes flashing. “Is that a threat on my life? Last I recall, you saw Leisum last before he died. Perhaps you did not appreciate his traditional stance on the seat terms. I—”

“ENOUGH,” Hairem spoke forcibly. He narrowed his eyes at both elves, noting how they hesitated to immediately comply with his order. “Sit. *Both* of you.” His voice rose in force, wresting control over the room.

Cahsari sat back slowly as Yulairm muttered an apology.

“First, I will not hear ill spoken of the True Bloods. Keep it to yourself in my presence, Cahsari. *Now*, it seems to me that the Noc’olari’s proposition is quite reasonable. If the council was to be renewed by vote every two hundred years, that would help to maintain a will of the people. In order to prevent a benefit on the timing for this proposition, council terms could be voted on for renewal next year and proceed to a two hundred year cycle thereafter.”

Mikanum raised a hand slightly, gesturing to himself. “If I may, Your Majesty.”

Hairem leaned back, smiling slightly. Mikanum would no doubt have a far more elegant method of persuasion on his behalf. “Speak.”

The heads turned as Mikanum stood and pulled himself up to a straight, regal stance. Standing before his chair in the stiff composure of command, he appeared to Hairem as a far older version of the general. And his first meeting with the general had been a relief from the façade of polite politics. He was lean, pale, and even from the great expanse across the room, Hairem felt as though he could feel a chill emanating from his icy exterior. “Thank you, Your Majesty. No doubt every one of us is a strong elf of tradition. I would like to remind each of us of the council’s tradition that even the True Blood king Silandrus would not usurp or alter—”

“Your self-importance knows no bounds,” Yulairm spat. “Silandrus didn’t uphold tradition because he respected the council, he upheld tradition because he respected that the *people* elected you here. The same *people* whom you now exploit and ignore.”

“Enough,” Mikanum retorted, his visage of venerability fading as irritation began to surface. “*Now*, in theory, the proposition for which Yulairm and his people so staunchly argue for seems in the best interest of the people—*when* regarded in first light.” Hairem could feel his smile quickly fading. “But has not *tradition* always been the best interest of our people?—A virtue *necessary* to the fabric of our society. If we do not have our tradition, than who are we but *humans* or *dwarves*? When the other races fled Eraydon’s side, who there remained but our elven brethren? It is our tradition that separates us from the lesser races: our tradition of racial bonds, of history, of gestures, of gods... of morality. And there is no tradition older than that of our council.

“When our races first united on Sevrigel after The Last War, a Sel’ven was appointed king of all the elven people in honor of Ephraim and Eraydon’s heritage. When the True Bloods abandoned the throne three centuries ago, a Sel’ven was appointed to replace him. To this day, a Sel’ven has always been

the king of all elven people—just king or unjust. You, Hairem, are a figure of tradition. Although you are not of traditional royal blood, your father’s Sel’varian heritage and his position as the El’adorium made him the next king without contest. Would you give up your position—tradition—to allow the people to *vote* for who they wished to be made king? Do you believe that the people know best? Or do *you*, Your Majesty, know best?” He paused here briefly, challenging Hairem to consider.

Hairem did consider. Of course he believed he knew best. Did not every elf? And the idea of giving up power to a vote...? The thought was comical at best.

“The council is like our king. Yulairm is the king of the Noc’olari. Cahsari is the king of the Helvari. Fildor is the king of the—”

Yulairm shook his head sternly as his voice sharply interrupted the Darivalian from continuing. “If we are like the kings to our respective peoples and not Sevrigel as a whole, then why are, say, the Lithri not represented?—the Lithri may live near Mikanum’s people, but the Darivalians had never feigned camaraderie with their kind. We are required to be so much more than the representatives of our races and we have an obligation to serve *all* of Sevrigel. Reducing our time ensures less risk of corruption in serving our own interests, *or* those solely pertaining to our own kind—”

Cahsari laughed, a burst of sound so sharp that it projected as though it had been long contained through Yulairm’s speech. Hairem grimaced once more. Gods, did he ever let anyone finish? “The *Lithri*?! No one gives a damn about the *Lithri*.”

“And let’s be honest,” Fildor joined in with a soft tone that the room hushed to hear, “Murios once prophesized one of their kind would wrest the throne from beneath the king and slay his followers by the hundreds. The further they are from this capital, the better.”

“A Lithri born of Lithri blood but not of Lithri parentage?” Yulairm repeated in disbelief. “It doesn’t even make *sense*. That prophecy is millennia old and Murios is nothing but a mad—Wait, by *Noctem* this is an entirely diverging topic! My *point* was that too much power is being attested to our positions and our races when—”

Mikanum raised his hand, even as Hairem leaned forward in interest. The reason for excluding the Lithri from the council was rarely spoken of, and yet this prophecy was regarded as unquestionable truth. And that it had come from a suggested necromancer had not weakened its weight of fear over past kings. “I’m sorry to interrupt you as you so *rudely* interrupted me, Nocalarum,”

Mikanum spoke, taking hold once more of the conversation, “but I’m afraid I was not finished in making my point. As I was saying, we *have* been appointed to represent our respective peoples. What is good for our people is good for the Lithri and those alike—surely they are not above our needs. And each of us kings stand in the shadow of our one king—King Hairem of Sevrigel.” He turned away from Yulairm to focus his gaze upon Hairem. “We are appointed by vote to take on the responsibilities of a ruler—a king like yourself, Your Majesty. Just or unjust. And like a vote cannot strip you of your position, neither should a vote strip us of ours. The tradition of elves dictates your position as it dictates ours. As such, I must stand with Nilanis in refusing to grant the Noc’olari their proposition.”

Hairem was quiet a moment. It was difficult to refute the tradition. No, impossible. Mikanum was accurate on all accounts. It was even tradition itself that had long since barred the Lithri from sitting on the council—even if the prophecy extended another millennium, the Lithri would never join them. But there were traditions of virtue that had been present since Sel’ari... and those traditions that the elves had created themselves. And the council was... “Well spoken, Mikanum.” Hairem stood, finding it difficult to follow Mikanum’s disappointedly elegant opposition. “Let us not forget that even we make mistakes. And that tradition not defined by Sel’ari is *not* above change. The Noc’olari’s proposition is not unjust. Nor does it change that every council member would still be appointed by vote. And unlike myself, none of you are truly kings. What this proposition accomplishes is checking the seat’s stance against that of the will of the people. You are appointed to uphold their will, are you not? Tradition first appointed you to do *that*.” He could see Cahsari’s scowl and Heshellon’s smile of approval as he shifted his eyes to the new male. Heshellon rarely spoke at the council meetings, making it difficult to find verbal support on matters. But perhaps this Ruljen... His spirit rose as he reflected on his earlier prayer request to Sel’ari. “Ilrae, what is your view on this matter?”

Ilrae stood, stormy eyes shifting as he met Hairem’s. His lips, which had drawn as tight as his eyes, loosened. “I stand with Nilanis, Mikanum, and Cahsari. I am not a king in name. But it is what I was appointed to act as. If the elves wanted the council to be voted upon, they would have declared so at the formation. I am not about to change a nine thousand year-old tradition for the sake of some nocturnal savages who still live in canopies and run about half-nude.”

Yulairm leapt to his feet. “You *dare* insult my people, you river rat? While your people were still living in tents my people cured the Amondos Plague. While your people were shitting in the same water others drank, my people made the year and the day and the stars to navigate by.”

“Oh? Your people made *stars*, did they?”

Hairem put a hand to his forehead and rubbed his brow as Ilrae lashed back. “*Thank you for nothing. I asked for only half the male Leisum had been.*” “Council,” Hairem raised his voice in exasperation, but Heshellon and Cahsari had entered the argument as well. “Council! COUNCIL!”

They quieted, turning towards him slowly as though challenging him to come up with a reason as to why they should remain silent.

He could not afford to lose them further on the matter. It pained him to have to adjourn the topic when it was so solidly a loss. “*Clearly* the discussion of this matter has come to a close. Nilanis, if you would take the vote.” Things would change, he reassured himself. The council was smugly comfortable right now. Let them think so. He would shake things up soon.

Nilanis bowed, the silence in the room remaining so at the king’s command. “Of course, Your Majesty.” He moved from council member to council member, allowing them to sign their names in support of the new proposition. He stopped last before Hairem, setting the parchment onto the wooden desk.

The king sighed. Only Yulairm and Heshellon had signed the Noc’olari proposition. Even with his signature counting for two of theirs, the vote still rested in the opposition’s favor. He picked up his quill and signed regardless, an overwhelming sense of discouragement settling in. It had been one thing to know the proposition would fail—another to see it happen. This proposition had arisen so quickly after his father’s death. He had had no time to win the council outside these aggressive meetings! He had been far too naïve...

Nilanis held the parchment up then, turning slowly so that each elf might see the signatures—as though the action was at all necessary—and spoke with a rather satisfied smile, “The Noc’olari proposition has been opposed. My regrets to your people, Yulairm.”

“Better luck next year,” Cahsari sneered under his breath. “Maybe your people will invent some poison we can test on you before then so we do not have to endure this yet *again*.”

Yulairm shot him a venomous scowl behind his fierce, gray eyes and remained silent.

“Now onto our second vote,” Nilanis prefaced, smiling broadly as though the first topic was solidly behind him. He patted down the red silk of his shirt as though un-ruffling from the last tension. “No doubt this topic is something we can *all* find agreement on. The celestial phoenixes’ territory is being encroached upon again. As most of you know, this creature is almost extinct and now only inhabits the southern end of Sevrigel, specifically in the Sevilan Marshes. This happens to be the same territory where the centaurs have their savage little ancient burial grounds. Over fifty graves have encroached farther in the last 10 years. The burial grounds can be moved. The phoenix cannot.”

Hairem held up his hand and Nilanis fell silent. “You will have to forgive me—no doubt this topic has been a matter of importance while my father was still on the throne—but what exactly is being proposed here...?”

“Forgive me, Your Majesty,” Nilanis spoke with the faintest impatient undertone. “Firstly, money for their conservation. Secondly, and most importantly, moving the centaurs.”

Hairem blinked, his mind refusing to grasp the proposition. “Excuse me? *Moving* the centaurs? Exactly how do you propose that they are moved? Drop a saddle on their asses and ride them out?” The thought caused him a laugh, inappropriately so.

Nilanis observed him seriously, and yet could not mask his discomfort in the king’s response. “Of course not, Your Majesty,” he replied calmly.

“Gods, put that proposition *away*,” Hairem ordered, smile vanishing. What in the realm of the gods were they thinking?!

Nilanis remained calm, his eye contact steady. “I apologize, Your Majesty. I understand that the council is a new position for you to partake in, but the proposition can only be ‘put away’ when a vote has been finalized.”

“Who speaks for the centaurs?”

Nilanis raised a brow. “I do not understand what you mean. One of us? None of us speak for the centaurs...”

Hairem threw a hand up in the air. “No one here speaks for the centaurs? Are you proposing you move them without any representation on their part?”

“Why don’t *you* represent them, Your Majesty,” Fildor suggested. He twisted a murky strand of hair about his claw-like finger and sneered wryly. Challengingly.

Hairem turned his head toward the Galwen, regarding his polite, thin-lipped smile as a challenge. “...I shall,” Hairem replied, standing. “First off, we are fighting a war right now. A *war*. Seeing as how you have all been voting on the money being sent out to fight it, you should all have some

concept of just how much this is costing us. And the *last* thing I am supporting is sending our much needed and limited supply of money to some asinine celestial phoenix conservation when we have a damn brilliant warlord on our doorstep! *PUT THE DAMN PROPOSITION AWAY.*”

Nilanis did not lose his calm stance. In fact, his apathetic expression did not change. “Is there anything else you would like to say on behalf of the centaurs?”

Hairem raised both of his hands in frustration, trying to keep his temper from flaring further. “They are ancient burial grounds. It is *their* tradition. The celestial phoenix is, I am well aware, a symbol of Sel’ari and I respect that as much as any of you. But if we uphold our tradition so highly, what gives us the right to spit on theirs? Leave the phoenix. *Leave the centaurs.*”

“What if,” Mikanum began thoughtfully, running a thumb down across his icy face to pause on the sharp point of his chin, “we simply send Jikun down that way. Saebellus just lost a decisive battle—he won’t be ready to lose another one immediately. Jikun’s army is large enough to simply scare the centaurs west or east—wherever they wish to go. *Extinction is permanent.* The centaurs refuse to be concerned with their effects on the creature of our goddess. Our religion versus theirs. Hardly an extreme to push them to move their burial grounds another direction. Just order the general to not use lethal force. The phoenix is saved. The centaurs have their burial grounds somewhere else. For but a little discomfort, everyone will ultimately be satisfied.”

Heshellon was shaking his head, his sandy blond hair shifting back and forth across his narrow shoulders. “This is simply *mad*. Jikun should be nearby, not in the southern wastelands moving horses for the sake of some blue *pigeon*—*which*, for the council’s record, does not return the protection in kind. Gods know Leisum was saved from this idiotic discussion!”

Nilanis’ eyes widened slightly. “Heshellon! Sel’ari may not be the goddess of your people but *she is ours*. That is reason enough to ‘*deserve*’ our assistance! Watch your tongue!” He straightened himself, patting down the silk of his shirt once more. “Jikun is not here now. And if he is off romping about in the northern tundra, *clearly* we can spare him.”

“Him, yes. But we *cannot* spare his soldiers,” Hairem replied angrily.

“*By the gods*, just vote,” Fildor groaned, leaning back in his chair. He gave the twist of muddy hair a jerk in release and threw his hand into the air. “Just move the fucking horses already. Then this whole cursed issue is at a rest. We have to talk about this every damn month. Get it *over with*.”

Nilanis turned to Hairem questioningly.

Hairem hesitated. It was truly mad to even consider sending Jikun down south to deal with the centaurs—Saebellus wounded or not. If Saebellus found the strength to strike while Jikun was away, the repercussions would be devastating. Could he take the city...? Perhaps not Elvorium, but the capital was hardly the only city on Sevrigel.

He looked from one council member to the next, trying to think of something else to say. What else *was* there to say? The entire proposition was so poorly timed that words escaped him! “If you want the centaurs to move, I will make it happen... just wait until the war is over. *Wait until the war is over*, and I will comply. Take the vote,” Hairem sighed. He watched the parchment make its rounds, growing increasingly concerned at each signature added. When it reached him, his jaw slacked. “The vote passes? You have voted to use our general to move the centaurs *now?! ARE YOU MAD?!*”

There came a soft, gurgled chuckle as the elf that had omitted it had been unable to swallow first. “There are, you will understand, issues at home that must be dealt with, even in times of war. The centaurs are not going to store their rotting dead while waiting for us to move them,” Ilrae spoke softly. “As a matter of fact, My Lord, as unfortunate a fact as it may be, the people overall will profit from the sale of military equipment and goods to do this bloodless operation. A war like this will certainly help to refill our coffers.”

“I know *who* will profit,” Hairem spoke harshly. Nilanis would—his ships would take to port a large number of necessary goods. Cahsari would—his people were the primary suppliers of weapons. Fildor’s people—they controlled the ports Nilanis would ultimately have to pass through at the coast near Elarium. Mikanum would—his reputation increased every time General Jikun gained another victory. And Ilrae’s people had primary control of the river and ground trade from shore to shore. And every one of their signatures was on the proposition.

“Last, but not least, there is a matter here right at home that we must address,” Nilanis began slowly, as though giving Hairem the opportunity to contend further. The king held his tongue. He was furious to realize that he had no power on matters where the council was concerned—even on something as grave as the war for Sevrigel herself. They needed but five votes to pass—or not pass—what they saw fit. His vote worth two was nothing more than a mockery of how little power he truly had.

He had once asked for assurance in Jikun's military support... His chest tightened at the thoughts wiggling free from the deepest crevices of his mind... He could... *refuse*... to order Jikun to move the centaurs...

The thought frightened him suddenly. He had few allies and Jikun was as far north as one could go. He had all the appearances of wealth and power, but these males... the males that voted against him held the *true* wealth and power in the country. He was nothing more than a pawn.

Their pawn.

"Your Majesty?"

Hairem snapped back, regarding the tanned face of the Eph'ven before him blankly.

"About the cotton, Your Majesty," Heshellon nudged.

Hairem tried to recall what he had gathered subconsciously from Nilanis' most recent statements. "...I apologize. Will you repeat the last thing you said?"

"...About the silk or the cotton or the tax...?" Nilanis asked.

Hairem sat up straighter, trying to look authoritative. He would *not* be their pawn. "*All* of it."

"Yes, Your Majesty. This is a proposition by some of our people. Some would like to see an increase of imported cotton from Ryekarayn as well as a lowering of its tax. The argument, of course, is against silk's relatively expensive cost."

"Continue."

"...And that is a summary of what I said last."

Hairem nodded matter-of-factly. "And what are the consequences of this proposition?" *'Aside from your personal income,'* he added to himself wryly.

"Sevrigel is known for her silk. We hurt our people at home by bringing in—"

"Competition?"

"...Cotton, Your Majesty. Cotton is a cheap, simple fabric. The price of silk simply cannot compete with it. If we bring in cotton, every maker and seller of silk will financially suffer."

"But the majority of people shall benefit from the option of a cheaper fabric?" It was a rhetorical question, but he liked to see the council squirm a little. Every one of them, with the exception of Heshellon, Mikanum, and Yulairm—whose people did not wear silk—were heavily invested in the silk market. "How would *you* suffer, Nilanis? You control the majority of trade for

this city. If you were bringing in more cotton, would that not benefit your market? Why would other merchants not benefit the same?"

"...I do not have connections in the cotton trade, Your Majesty. As it is hardly a fabric of high demand, there are not many of our merchants that do."

"So get connections."

Ilrae leaned forward, his dark eyes narrowing to become mere slits from the tightness of his hair. "Sevrigel is the largest center for silk in the world. If the demand in our nation decreases, our creators suffer. They have to cut the number of workers they employ. The *people* suffer."

"Then they can make cotton instead. I do not see how this will negatively—especially since cotton, as you stated, *is so cheap to make and buy*—affect anyone except those who are *personally* invested in the silk market."

"Hear hear," Yulairm spoke half-heartedly. He appeared quite worn out, slouched slightly in his chair. His eyes met with Hairem's and his unspoken words were very clear:

You are fighting a losing battle.

"...Let us take the vote."

*

Fury and hopelessness accompanied Hairem like newfound friends as he left the Council's Hall. *'No wonder the True Bloods didn't establish another council when they got to Ryekarayn!'* His perception of the difficulty that lay ahead of him had grown infinitely.

In his distress, he did not perceive the female standing beside the first column of the stairway, nor did he notice her hurry after him until she had caught his arm and tugged him to a halt.

"I apologize, Your Majesty," she said quickly, dropping her hand. "I just—you could not hear me so I—"

Hairem regarded her blankly for a moment, staring at her face as his mind struggled to return from its thoughts. "Ah, Lady Ilsevel. I'm afraid I was distracted." He raised his hands at the guards on either side of him whose hands rested at their weapons' sides. "It is alright. Give us some space." He had not immediately recognized her, so far from his thoughts had she fallen. He attempted to force a smile.

"The meeting went quite poorly, didn't it?"

Hairem could see her eyes searching his face for his own emotion. She was already aware of his failure in the meeting. He could tell by her tone—apologetic and... sympathetic? His emotions, no doubt, were written plainly across his face. “*Poorly?! There are hardly enough negative words in the elven tongue to describe just how ‘poorly’ it went. I’ll have three new propositions on my desk in a few days, none of which I think are in the best interest of the people as a whole!*” He found himself continuing, pouring his aggravation out onto her. “Today I lost the majority of the vote all three times and one of the males from whom I expected the greatest support was one of my most adamant opponents. I do not know how my father did it—or any king for that matter. The True Bloods may have been onto something—getting away from here!”

“It is difficult when the council is so... venal.”

“Yes! Ex—” he stopped and looked at her again. He had not expected that opinion from the daughter of the El’adorium. She had to know that her father voted—or did not vote—on almost every twistedly-selfish policy that came through the doors. With that sentence, the timid female he perceived her to be was gone. There was no hesitation to her words, no fear. She was soft spoken, but there was a fire in her eyes that he had glimpsed only for a moment when he had seen her last. Something he had perhaps mistaken for embarrassment.

“I am sorry for my father’s decisions. I wish there was something I could do. I do try to talk to him, believe me,” she continued as though not noticing Hairem’s surprise. “But you know, he is a *very* difficult male.” She shook her head wishfully. “And... I wanted to apologize for the other night. It must have been wholly exasperating to have my father, well... trying to introduce us.” She laughed then, rocking back on her heels. “I do not envy your position. I suppose every lord with a daughter in the city is trying to have you present for dinner.”

Hairem frowned, surveying her for a second time. He was not certain what to make of her. She did not seem to be the shy girl from dinner. And he was not sure how to reply to her unabashedly straightforward comments.

She seemed to detect this and continued without breaking stride. “Oh, I apologize. You were ranting about the council. Gods know you need to.”

Hairem smiled slightly then—an ever so slight, genuine smile. “I did not mean to unburden myself on you. That was rude of me. The council is what it is, and I can hardly expect to change it in a few weeks. *But* I am a very patient male.”

The female slid a bit closer, intensely focused on his words, as though they were sharing a secret. “Did the council lower the taxes on the cotton imports?”

Hairem pursed his lips for a moment. “*No*. I’m afraid quite the opposite.”

“*Truly?* But what about Mikanum? No doubt Yulairm and Heshellon voted with you, but why would Mikanum vote against you? His people have no interest in the silk market.”

“Mikanum’s *people* do not, but *Mikanum* is another matter entirely.”

“The gall of him!”

The door to the Council Hall swung open then and the lady fell silent, casting her eyes aside as the council filed out. Hairem stepped to the side, waiting for them to pass.

“Ilsevel,” Nilanis called to her as he paused before the council’s steps. He bowed his head briefly to the king, dismissive to his presence as though his mind lay on far superior matters. Like his three most recent victories.

The lady gestured for her father to wait and turned back toward the king, seemingly apologetic once more. “Have a good evening, Your Majesty. I wish you more fortune tomorrow.” She hurried after her father in swift, pattering strides, long blond braid bobbing softly behind her.

Hairem stood wholly perplexed. She had, no doubt, intrigued him.

CHAPTER SIX

A faint crunch sounded under each of Jikun's footsteps as he stepped heavily across Kaivervale's fresh layer of snow—it would be many months in the south before he would even glimpse a dusting. Dawn was just rising now, casting long shadows across the city. The sun was hidden deep behind the Telsuel Peaks in the east, but the cloudless sky was still filled with her light.

Jikun glanced to his right at the soft sound of crunching snow not his own. A stone home stood quiet and dark except for a small, heavily clothed child creeping from the doorway.

"F-fair day, General Taemrin," the girl greeted with a start as she stepped outside. She closed the door carefully behind her, leaning her face close to the crack as she did so, as though helping to soften the door against the frame.

Jikun paused, regarding the child reproachfully. "Do your parents know you are out?"

The child shifted sheepishly, eyes lingering on her feet. "Of course they do," she replied, pulling the basket she carried tighter to her side.

Jikun narrowed one eye. She was dressed in heavy boots and a thick cloak. A handmade scarf wound tightly about her head, but little tufts of white hair poked out from beneath it. He could catch a glimpse of the end of bread protruding from the opening of the basket. "Where are you off to?"

The child took a long step past him. "To the market, General. So glad to see you home! Lithriella's many blessings be upo—" she choked on the last words as Jikun caught her by the hood of her cloak and jerked her to a solid stop.

Children these days! Hardly different than the rabble of soldiers he had had to nurse for the last several years. "Hold up there," he insisted with a tone he reasoned was at least mildly intimidating. "Where did you say you were going?"

He saw the girl flinch. She hesitated for a moment, and then her jaw set. She turned, attempting to yank the cloak out of his hand. "To the market."

Jikun released her. "To the market," he repeated steadily. He could see the girl's eyes waver as he narrowed his gaze. "...Well, off with you then," he gave a sudden, off-putting smile.

The girl retreated several steps away and then fled down the street toward the business district. He saw her glance over her shoulder twice before she vanished behind a building and was lost.

He remained where he was standing thoughtfully. What trouble had he gotten into as a child? ...Gods, he was a terrible example. Still, the city was small and close-knit, with practically every member of the community looking out for one another's family—what could she possibly be doing, running off without permission, that wouldn't eventually be discovered?

He finally turned away and slipped behind the barracks. Yes, she couldn't do worse than he had: icing over doors, freezing the snow underneath unsuspecting elven feet, tossing a few rocks through the Watchtower's windows... The military had certainly curbed the miscreant out of him.

'Prostitution? Anti-religious reprobate?' He could almost hear Navon's stern reproach from a thousand leagues away.

Jikun scoffed. *Most* of the miscreant, anyways.

He stopped, eyeing the great field of white mounds stretched out before him. He placed his hands against the fence of ice that encircled the land and strode in without pausing, passing through the opening that he had formed in the ice. It closed behind with a soft, crackling refreeze.

"Nazra!" he called.

The field before him shifted. The mounds of snow raised their heads, grey noses sniffing the air, ears perking up. From his left, a wolf leapt to its feet, shaking the snow dust from her fur, tail beating rapidly against the face of a companion just behind her.

"Nazra!" he called again, a broad smile sweeping across his face. "Come."

The winter wolf pushed off the earth and bounded across the snow in long, rapid strides, skidding to a stop in front of him and coming to sit in a great wiggling mass of impatience and affection. Jikun crouched down before her large form and reached out a hand to stroke the long, thick, white fur of her chest.

"Good girl," he purred in response, tapping his knee softly. She leapt from her sitting position, licked his face once, and tore off to the fence of ice from

which he had entered. He chuckled slightly. “Impatient, aren’t we? I didn’t say we were going on a hunt.”

Nazra froze, her ears becoming stiff and attentive, her eyes round, blue reflections of the sky. Her tail hung still.

Jikun walked up behind her and unfroze the fence, passing through the newly made gap and gesturing to Nazra to follow. He closed the hole behind them. A hunt *was* the intention. But first... Jikun’s eyes flickered back toward the market. Curiosity: the curse of the elves. Damn it.

“Nazra, come,” he muttered below his breath, retracing his steps to the doorway where he had encountered the child. Her footsteps were invisible in the snow, so light and small. But Nazra’s eyes dilated as she sniffed around the doorway. “Find the girl,” he ordered, pointing toward the market.

Nazra bounded off, vanishing behind a few buildings every so often and reappearing eagerly to ensure her master had not lost her trail. But Jikun could see her massive paw-prints embedded in the snow. Unlike the child, the wolf had not driftwalked her bounding march across town.

Jikun’s brows knit in amusement as they turned toward the north end of the city: away from the market. “As I suspected,” he mused. After so many years in the strict regimen of the army, being involved in such a frivolous task seemed relaxing.

Was it worth the hassle just to tell the child off?

Absolutely. And perhaps he would march the misbehaving girl home to her worried mother, who would be undoubtedly grateful for the assistance...

Though it would hardly make amends for the terror he had caused the city in his youth.

“Nazra, good girl,” he praised as she wound them between the frost-covered buildings and through the gardens of flowers that were just beginning to pry open their icy petals. They passed beside the Temple of Lithriella, a crescent-shaped building glittering at its towered peaks as sunlight filtered through her structure of solid ice.

“Further?” Jikun inquired, his amusement fading to raw curiosity. Beyond the temple grounds flowed the expanse of a field and the grounds of the palace. The former was flat and sprinkled with patches of purple flowers. The latter was towering against the mountain face, made entirely of ice and turmazel crystals, glittering in purples, blues, greens, and whites—silent, dark, and still in the early dawn.

Yet there was no sign of the child. If *he* had been as gifted at drift-walking at her age, he may have staved off a good flogging or two.

Nazra had moved out into the field, her nose lowered to the earth, raising her head thoughtfully as she looked on ahead. She had turned slightly to the right of the palace, to a thick icefall that crashed into a frozen lake and vanished under the earth. There, to the right of the fall, Nazra concluded her hunt, sitting down before it and waiting patiently for Jikun to reveal the secret beyond.

Jikun studied the scenery. There was a small pool of ice in the snow, pressed against the face of the mountain where a long-since frozen waterfall cascaded into its depths. It was still. Unmoving. The face of the mountain was solid and unmarred, just a frozen fall against stone. Jikun stepped forward and rubbed his chin, running his hand down the side of the ice where a poor repair job had been fashioned after obvious deconstruction.

Someone had broken the fall. Why?

He let the ice melt before his hand until a hole formed large enough for him and Nazra to pass through: a hole that led right through the falls and into a cavern of the mountain beyond.

“Lithriella wing me!” he heard a surprised voice exclaim from shortly ahead.

Jikun hardly absorbed the blasphemous curse as his eyes quickly adjusted to the sight before him.

Three children sat in front of the back wall of the shallow cave, their bodies half turned, their eyes wide. But Jikun hardly noticed them. What they had gathered around, Jikun had never seen the like of in all his travels throughout Sevrigel.

“What is that?” he demanded, finding that his voice came out strong and fierce in the small cavern. It revealed nothing of his unsettled nature or caution.

Nothing of his fear.

Before the three children was a small hole in the earth—no more than a foot wide in either direction. Like the chasm before Kaivervale, this hole emitted rays of blue light which lit the cavern fully around them. Where he had expected stone at the back wall, a thin layer of ice shimmered softly.

And behind the ice wall...

A great eye. Over a meter wide and nearly as tall—nearly the size of each child crouched before it. It stared unseeing back at them from beyond the layer of ice. Frozen. Still. Unmoving.

And yet, so animate.

Nazra let out a low growl, her lips curled against her bared teeth.

The three children spun fully around, wide-eyed and frightened. The girl dropped the stone she had clutched in her hand and it rolled to her right with a soft grate against the ice. “How did you find us?!”

Jikun’s eyes flicked downward at the broken silence and he pushed his fear away. The aura in the room was almost tangible. Something of fear and death. He stepped forward, coldly knocking the girl aside and picking up the stone.

He raised it in his white-knuckled grip while he ran his free hand across the ice covering the eye... The ice that had been recklessly chipped.

Behind him, the children were silent, frozen beneath his stern movement.

“How did you find this?” Jikun suddenly snarled, rounding on them. “What were you doing?!”

The three responded at once, blaming someone else accordingly as they made a scrambling, terrified retreat toward the icefall. Nazra blocked their flight with a resounding snap of her jaws.

“One of you,” Jikun barked. “How did you find this?!”

One of the boys stopped, biting his lip. “I found it, General Taemrin, sir,” he swallowed. “You always find a cave behind the falls, don’t you know? And we thought it would be our secret place... Like in *The Tales of Rukalain* or *Twin Nights*...”

Jikun dropped the stone into the chasm at his feet, disregarding, in his focus, its chilling similarity to the Tuserine outside the city walls. “Do you know what this *is*?” he demanded, pointing at the eye behind him.

The three children exchanged glances. “A dragon?”

“The Mother of the Thakish?”

“A demon?”

“Worse,” Jikun hissed in reply. “If you free it, it will rip you from limb to limb and drop your bones into this hole. And no one will ever know what became of you. Do you understand me? Do not *ever* return here! Do not breathe a *word* of this. *It will remember who awakened it.*” He snapped his fingers and Nazra stepped to the side to let the children run, screaming and crying, from the cavern.

Jikun turned back to the wall, no sympathies given, and rested a hand tensely on his wolf’s head. “*Gods* only know what that thing is,” he breathed nervously. A dragon? The Mother of the Thakish? A demon? Emal’drathar grant them protection from any of those beasts.

Nazra bared her teeth at it once more.

“Come. There is nothing more to do here...”

Jikun turned from the pale yellow eye and stepped out from the cavern.

“Jikun, what are you doing?”

Jikun straightened abruptly as his eyes readjusted to the morning light now peering up over the Turmazel peaks. “Kaivervi. Jekum. Lais. Nalaen,” Jikun greeted them in turn.

Lais cocked his head in unison with his wolf as he gazed at the hole in the falls, piercing grey eyes alighting with curiosity. “Yes, what *were* you doing?”

“We almost left without you,” Nalaen continued reproachfully, huffing out of her plump frown. “I did tell Merkan I would be back before dinner.”

Jikun glanced at Nazra as her composure relaxed and she ran to join the four other wolves. He exhaled heavily and gestured silently behind him.

“What?” Kaivervi’s brow knit as she studied his face. Silently, she stepped past him and ducked into the hole in the falls.

“By the goddess of Darival,” he heard her voice echo in horror from within.

The other three immediately shoved past him and vanished through the hole.

“Jikun! How did you find this!” he heard Nalaen’s high voice gasp.

“What in Ramul *is* it?” Lais breathed.

Jikun remained where he was. Saebellus’ beast had unnerved him. Frightened him even, as it should. But this creature, even in death, was comparable in the aura it produced. “I don’t know what it was; it was discovered by a handful of children,” Jikun responded. “I have felt something like this before in my war with Saebellus. But nothing of this size. Only the gods know how long it has been there.”

“Perhaps since Izre froze Darival?” Jekum theorized, reappearing from the cavern, somewhat paler than usual, even given his alabaster complexion.

Jikun turned in stern admonition for the ridiculous theory. “That’s mythology, Jekum. There are no gods.”

Jekum scowled. “Keep your skepticism to yourself. That’s not important right now. I *mean* hundreds of thousands of years.”

Lais, Nalaen, and Kaivervi appeared behind him shortly after, Nalaen closing the hole in the falls with the artistic perfection not achieved by the children in their attempt to protect their secret. “Whatever it is, it’s better off left where it is.” She shivered, tossing her light blue hair across her broad shoulders. “To think it’s been there *that* long and no one knew...” A shiver ran up her stocky body, but it was not the cold that made her shake.

“We’re not going to tell anyone?” Lais frowned, his thin lips drawn slightly in anxiety.

Jikun regarded him coolly. Even having been away from home for the last three years, he knew better than to suggest such a notion. “Do you really want to have people poking around that... *whatever* it is? Gods know someone’s curiosity will win over his reason. And if not us, the Sel’vi will hear of it. And they *will* come and they *will* explore it. You know the stories of the Black Iron Dwarves.”

He saw the four of them glance at each other nervously. Jekum and Lais grimaced as one.

“Dig far enough and you will not like what you find,” Kaivervi responded with a curt nod, as though for a moment any one of them could forget the lesson. “Whatever it is, it’s buried beneath this mountain. Lithriella’s blessing that you found this before the children caused trouble. Better we leave it there. We’ll make sure no one finds it.”

“Well, currently, your challenge is keeping the mouths of three children shut,” Jikun replied, smacking his thigh to get Nazra’s attention. “And I suspect that is challenge enough.” He stepped away from the fall, Nazra leaping several feet ahead. “Are we going on the hunt?”

He watched the four of them draw their eyes away from the falls.

“The thakish have been unnaturally vicious as of late,” Nalaen nodded as she focused in on his words. “We’d better get to it. Better to cull their numbers quickly before matters become much worse.”

Jikun fell into step between them as they moved away from the falls, but he found that his mind had wandered once more from the hunt, shifting past the great eye to the Beast. Was this the curiosity Navon felt when he delved into necromancy? Was this why he pursued his questions so persistently?

Did he not also feel the foreboding that lay in their answers?

*

Jikun tightened his grip on the scruff of Nazra’s neck as he lowered his body down over hers. He could feel her muscles tense beneath him.

“Do you see it?” Kaivervi whispered beside him from the back of Husakai. Her cerulean eyes were intense, her high cheeks purple in the cold.

Jikun pulled the focus off of her proximity and followed the narrowed gaze of her wolf out across the vivid white glare of the tundra. The world was silent and still—not even the wind dared breathe across her surface.

“I don’t see this one...” Nalaen murmured from his other side, her breath rising in a soft, white cloud above her thick lips as she gave a soft exhale.

Jikun studied the snow before him. The white thakish were skilled hunters, digging themselves into the tundra with their four powerful front legs and burying themselves back in with a handful of flexible finger-like structures on their backs. Their fur was as white as the snow itself, so even a failed bury was difficult to spot. And a successful hide was nearly impossible: just the tip of the thakish’s white nose and solid white eyes would remain above the surface.

And they were infinitely patient.

Jikun’s eyes slowed across a slight dip in the landscape.

“Ten meters, slightly to your left,” Kaivervi continued.

Jikun could see Lais and Jekum nod as one. “I see it,” they replied in unison.

Jikun’s eyes swept the tundra at her description and paused. Yes, there—nearly impossible to distinguish in the landscape. It stared directly at them in perfect stillness, waiting for one of them to wander close enough to its fanged jaws.

“I’ve gotten quite poor at this,” Jikun muttered shamefully. Gods, just as his father had said, southern hunting was embarrassingly easy compared to this. “That would definitely be a dead elf and wolf on my part.”

“That’s why you never hunt alone,” Jekum replied with a smile, raising his spear slightly. “Lais. Nalaen.”

Jikun watched as the two formed a wide circle around the thakish, coming to stop a good breadth behind it.

“Get ready,” Jekum ordered.

Kaivervi moved forward, nudging Husakai toward the waiting beast.

“You just freeze it, don’t you?” Jikun inquired, confused by the unfamiliarity of the hunters’ movement.

“We try to,” Jekum replied. “But lately it hasn’t been enough. You should see how they’ve changed over the last few months...”

Jikun’s brow knit. What drove the thakish’s new aggression? He watched as Kaivervi halted five meters from the beast and raised her hand before her fur-bound chest. In instant response to her command, the snow around the creature’s body liquefied and began to refreeze.

No sooner did this begin than the tundra around them shook.

Nazra had seen this many times before, but still, she reeled back cautiously, snapping her jaws and shaking her great head. Jikun’s body tensed as one with hers.

The thakish burst from the icy water in a single, high leap, sending snow and ice from its thick fur to shower across the tundra, letting out a shrill cry of fury as it landed beside Kaivervi.

Jikun's eyes widened at the distance it had covered. *'What in Aersadore...?!'*

As though of one mind, the wolves of Nalaen and Lais dashed forward in response, their riders' hands clenching the fur at their scruffs, legs pressed into their sides.

Jekum raised a wall of ice before Kaivervi to give her a moment's retreat, but as though it had been made of glass, the beast smashed through it with the single force of its weight, sending wolf and rider tumbling away.

"Kaivervi!"

Jikun watched as the two spears of Nalaen and Lais buried themselves deep into the haunches of the beast. It let out a shrill roar of fury, but to Jikun's horror, it did not turn to the two elves behind it, as Jikun remembered their behavior's usual predictability. Instead, it leapt forward, front legs crashing into the earth beside Kaivervi, crushing Husakai beneath its front left leg as easily as the snow beneath its right.

"HUSAKAI!!" Kaivervi let out a cry of anguish and terror that resounded across the tundra like a crash of thunder. She scrambled backward, throwing up a desperate wall of ice before her as she reached back toward some semblance of fleeting safety.

"Nazra, go!" Jikun ordered abruptly. He heard a shout of protest from Jekum as he lurched forward, tearing across the tundra toward the thakish. He loosed his spear, embedding it into the skull of the beast above the eye, causing it to toss its head in pain. It shifted its body away from Kaivervi long enough to identify its new attacker.

"Jikun!" he heard Jekum bellow again in desperate command. "Don't!!"

Jikun stopped beside Kaivervi, leaping from Nazra's back and scooping up her spear in a single, fluid motion. He launched it into the creature's middle eye. A series of walls formed before him as Nalaen and Lais circled back toward the front.

For a moment, the thakish was lost behind the façade of safety. "Are you alright?" Jikun asked as he pulled Kaivervi to her feet, eyes scanning her body swiftly for injury.

He could see her lips tremble as they parted for a response, her body balancing against him as her mind reeled from what had just occurred.

Her eyes scanned the ice behind him in desperation.

“He’s gone,” Jikun interrupted her harshly, pushing her toward Nazra with a disconnect he willed would snap her instincts to return. “Go!”

Kaivervi climbed onto Nazra’s back, jerking her scruff to the left, and turned back toward Jikun. “Come,” she ordered, extending her hand.

“Nazra, go!” he barked before Kaivervi had a chance to protest. He saw her face flicker in surprise as the wolf tore away on command.

But Jikun knew: Nazra couldn’t carry the both of them. She was not as large as Jekum’s or Lais’ companion. He swept his hand near the snow at his feet, a lance of ice forming in his right hand as he moved. He felt the earth around him tremble as the thakish slammed through a wall of ice layered before the next. He saw the taloned toes of the beast grip the top of the final wall before him, and the silhouette of the creature slid away from the earth.

Jikun stepped backward swiftly, raising the spear at the ready.

“Jikun!” Lais shouted from his right, his deep voice twisted high in terror and desperation. “Gods, what are you doing?! You’re going to get yourself killed!”

Jikun glanced over his shoulder where Nazra had stopped beside Jekum. Kaivervi had climbed from her back and the wolf regarded him expectantly.

“Come, Nazra,” Jikun shouted as he darted to the left. A shadow formed suddenly above him. He didn’t look up, but threw himself forward, tumbling across the snow and falling to his side. He let the snow around him turn to water, his body dropping into the icy cold like a stone.

A heavy thud sounded from where he had been and he raised his head above the surface in a painful sputter for air. He saw the thakish raise its body upward, unfazed by the volley of icy spears that had once again lodged into its body. It shook its head angrily, kicking its back legs against the snow and sending a shower of cold across the elves behind it.

Its eye met Jikun in hatred as its lips curled to reveal yellowed fangs. *‘This is not the beast I remember...!’*

Jikun dug a hand against the side of the pool of water, holding himself up from sinking further into its depths. Wet. Cold. And entirely vulnerable.

It hunkered down and leapt, crashing through a desperate wall of ice cast by one of the hunters behind it. Its jaws opened to consume Jikun in a single, crushing blow.

As its face came over the water, Jikun raised a hand in defense. He watched as the water before him shot up in an instant, hardening and piercing through the skull of the thakish in a large, solid stalagmite. At once, the beast flailed and went limp, dangling from the point by its head.

“Wing me and all things holy... *By Lithriella*,” Jekum blasphemed as the elves ran toward him. Like a shadow, Lais was directly at his heels, leaving Nalaen to trail behind with Kaivervi.

Jikun climbed from the icy water, putting a hand to his chest as he did so. With a deliberately casual sweep of his hand, the water was pulled from his clothes and dropped back into the pool.

The four jerked to a halt at his side, dubious to his cursory motion.

“Completely dry?” Nalaen demanded, grabbing him by the front of his shirt and jerking him toward her wolf. She gave his hair a sharp tug.

Jikun pushed her thick hands away, freeing his head with a glare.

“Your control over water is so... fast,” Lais breathed in awe as he dismounted his wolf in a slow stumble of astonishment. Beneath his mass of silver hair, he blinked his gray eyes balefully, once toward the thakish hanging limp above them in a final salute to its failure.

Jikun watched as those large, grey eyes shifted to regard him as the others did. Jikun disregarded their admiration and instead gestured toward Nazra. “Kaivervi, go ahead. I will walk.”

Kaivervi remounted Nazra with a faltering gaze as she glanced past them. Jikun felt a twinge of pain in his chest as he followed her thoughts.

“Husakai was a good wolf,” Jekum lamented, struggling to break the silence. He looked to Lais for some words of support, but his friend, for once, seemed at a loss to assist.

Jikun recalled that his mother had said Lais had recently lost his wolf in a hunt several months before. Years ago, such a thing was hardly heard of. He glanced once more to the thakish as the group departed, then his eyes pulled away toward Kaivervale. At their distance, its great wall was merely a shadow against the mountain face.

The thakish *had* become excessively aggressive, just as he had been warned at the banquet several nights before, when that howl had torn through their celebration with furious rage.

Thakish... throwing their own wellbeing aside in the lust for food...? But the tundra had not changed. ...Had it?

His eyes scanned in wary caution with the others as they travelled back across the frozen earth.

What, then, drove their hunger?

“I don’t remember you having such control before you left,” Jekum commented, snapping Jikun back to the elves about him. “What else can you do?”

Jikun's eyes flicked back to the single face that had dared to take its eyes from the landscape and smiled slightly, remembering the marveling reaction of his soldiers when he had first cast in battle. "Freeze water from anywhere. Even the unseen. As long as there is water in the air, I have something to manipulate."

And if he had not been there, what would have happened to Kaivervi, let alone the others?

Nalaen's wolf loped several steps ahead and she pulled him to a sudden stop in front of the general. "Teach us!" she begged. "Show me. With that power, we could beat the thakish! You know damn well we would have been in a far worse state if you had not just been with us on that hunt. Things only continue to worsen!"

Jikun raised his hand out from his side and pulled the water from the air around them until he had formed a perfect sphere of ice. He tossed it to her and watched her eyes widen in amazement.

"I can't teach it," he replied. "I don't know how I do it or what, exactly, it is that I do. It's thoughtless. Like a reflex..."

Nalaen tossed the sphere to Lais with an extra flick of frustration. Her shoulders straightened and she drew her stocky body up. "Nonsense. There must be something you can teach. Something you have learned!"

Jikun shook his head bitterly. "There is not, Nalaen. I haven't given it much thought and hardly more practice. I'm a *general*. My own magical potential is fairly irrelevant when I have a warlord to fight for Sevrigel." And *damn* that warlord. Kaivervale needed him.

Nalaen drew her wolf aside to let him pass, but he could see her disappointment reflected in all of their gazes.

Back south, his ability was nothing more than a trivial annoyance to Saebellus and his beast.

There was a sudden series of shrill cries at their backs that split the moment of silence like a blade. Jekum spun round on Susai; his knuckles grew white. His mouth parted but no words left it. His eyes were torn wide in horror.

Nalaen looked up in a mesmerized gaze of equal terror. "...RUN!" her high voice cracked across the tundra.

Jikun turned long enough to catch sight of the pack of white thakish in the distance, tearing through the tundra rapidly as their six legs propelled them across the flat plane.

"A pack?!" Kaivervi cried in disbelief. "Jikun, you must get on a wolf!"

Jekum's hand was already outstretched and Jikun mindlessly took hold of it, swinging himself up behind the largest of the wolves.

Their minds had all centered on one thought, Jikun knew: *Thakish did not move in packs, let alone hunt together.*

Their wolves fled to the west, running along the base of the Turmazel, the shrill cries of the thakish rapidly growing louder. Jikun turned slightly, throwing up a field of ice-made stalagmites behind them, causing the thakish to break to the left in a wide circle. The wind at his face was bitter, numbing his senses, cutting through the furs on his body like sharp blades. Still closer the thakish came and Jikun could feel an unsettling exhaustion gaining on him as more ice formed at his command. He caught Jekum's shoulder to balance himself.

"Jikun, are you alright?"

Another shrill cry echoed across the tundra, hardly one hundred feet behind them. *The beasts were undaunted!* He did not bother to utter a response but reset his focus on the ice at his fingertips—he knew his strength was waning now—hardly a fragment of its former self. He let the snow behind their wolves turn to water, the ground giving out beneath the feet of the first thakish. He refroze it instantly and the beasts' movement terminated as only their back legs protruded, kicking viciously, from the frozen surface.

And with that, Jikun's strength all but vanished. The world abruptly spun and Jikun's grip loosed from Jekum's shoulder. He felt a sharp pain shoot through his body as he collided with the earth and tumbled across the hard snow. He heard cries of alarm from ahead and the rapid sounds of feet returning to him.

"Jikun!" Kaivervi screamed as her feet landed beside him. "Get up! Get up!"

He heard ice shatter to his left and raised his head in time to see a thakish burst through the quickly formed wall Nalaen and Jekum had created. It leapt forward, jaws snapping short of Jekum's arm, ripping the blade from his hand and tossing it carelessly aside.

Jikun struggled greatly, digging what meager strength he could find within himself to form a solid wall before them. But it had taken everything he had left. He collapsed against the earth just as a distant trumpet call rang out from the north. His mind struggled to clarify the sound.

"Up ahead!" Lais shouted. "Hunters! They must have heard the thakish!"

Jikun could see the beasts hesitate and withdraw slightly as the sounds of snarling wolves grew closer. This was not just the sound of one or two hunting

groups, and the tumult of noise led Jikun to believe that there were at least a dozen such contingents approaching.

The thakish seemed to conclude the same. He saw the creatures turn, tucking their short tails between their hind legs, and flee to the east.

'Damn it...' he muttered wearily to himself and his eyes slid closed beneath heavy lids.

"General Jikun," came a voice from above him moments later. It was foggy—muffled by the cloud that hung across his mind.

He felt hands pull him up.

"General Jikun has expended himself, I'm afraid," came Kaivervi's reply.

"Did you see the thakish, Captain Resul?" Lais demanded. "A damn pack of thakish!"

There was silence for a moment, then a bitter reply, "I saw them. Are you all alright?"

Jikun blearily opened his eyes in silent response.

"More or less." Nalaen rose merely to Jikun's breast, but still, she helped him forward, wrapping a firm arm around his chest. "Can you stand?"

Jikun shook his head once, humiliated to have to express his weakness so plainly before Kaivervale's new captain. "No, I don't think so..." he muttered.

"Let's get the general back to the city," Captain Resul spoke up, as though Jikun's state was inconsequential. "Daiki, Sesul, take the general to his home."

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By the time Jikun was assisted into his mansion, his strength had returned somewhat—albeit pitifully—but it was enough to allow him a somewhat dignified stumble to the living room. He sank into the couch beside the fireplace, wearily resting his head against the cushions. As Daiki and Sesul left, Kaivervi vanished into the kitchen.

Captain Resul lingered in the doorway, his lips parted as though aching to speak. Yet he merely watched Nalaen, Jekum, and Lais settle in beside the general.

"Can I help you, Captain?" Jikun muttered, closing his eyes.

Captain Resul cleared his throat. "I apologize for this untimely summons, but Elvorum has demanded your immediate return to the capital. It seems you are wanted on the warfront."

Jikun raised his head sharply, feeling a wave of nausea rush over him. "What news? Has Saebellus moved?"

Resul stepped forward, extending a parchment toward Jikun. “The letter did not say.”

Jikun let Nalaen accept it for him as his arm faltered its extension. She unfolded the parchment, holding it level to his eyes to allow him to scan it.

Resul hesitated to interrupt his reading. “Good evening, General. May Lithriella bless your recovery. You saved their lives today.”

Jikun nodded his thank-you curtly, his mood growing sour as the captain’s footsteps faded down the hall.

“Here, Jikun. Eat. Drink.” Kaivervi had reappeared from the dining hall and laid a tray across his lap. “Did I hear that right? You are to return to Elvorium already? You’ve hardly been here four days.”

Jikun reached down and raised the cup of hot tea unsteadily to his lips, aware of its proximity to his groin, and shifted his arms to the side in the event that his grip faltered. He could hear the concern in Kaivervi’s voice as she came to stop beside him. “Yes.”

Lais crouched back as the fire started in the hearth. He pushed off his knees as he stood, dropping the iron rod against the stone wall. “Is there anything else you need, Jikun?” he asked after a moment of silence.

Jikun shook his head wearily, wishing the fire would rise more quickly. What he wouldn’t trade for the fiery magic of the Malravi instead.

“Well then, Nalaen, Jekum, and I will give you a tundra’s length. I will take Nazra back to rest, if you like.”

Jikun shook his head solidly, setting his cup aside. “Leave Nazra,” he commanded quietly.

Nalaen strode to the edge of the room in her short, solid strides, and paused in the doorway. “Thank you,” she spoke softly. “The thakish would have surely taken us.”

Jikun flinched slightly at the praise. *Damn Saebellus!* He should be in Darival for at *least* weeks longer to help his own people! He raised a hand slightly to stop them. “When I return to Elvorium, I shall send what I can to assist Darival in the purging of the thakish. You can expect significant aid within a few weeks. Elvorium cannot let this matter go unchecked.”

He saw the four of them exchange smiles.

“Come, Kaivervi,” Jekum nodded toward her as he stepped through the doorway. “Let the general—”

Jikun caught Kaivervi’s hand as she stepped away. “Wait.”

Kaivervi hesitated, her eyes meeting his anxiously. She turned her head slightly to the side to call after them, though her eyes remained locked with his. "Go on ahead. I will catch up."

Jikun dropped her hand and waited until he heard the soft tap of the door against the icy frame. He raised the cup once more to his lips and sipped the tea silently for a moment.

"What—"

"Nazra needs a master. The battlefield is no place for her." He looked up, catching the tears forming in her eyes.

She looked away sharply, determined to hide her anguish.

"I would be honored if you were that master."

He could see her swallow, as though taking her tears with it. She turned back, forcing a smile across her dark lips. "Thank you. I would be honored to be hers..." She wiped a hand quickly across her cheek and shook her head fiercely. "I'm sorry. Husakai and I were together since The Wailing. You start to grow invincible, you know? After you have seen that much, you start to think you and he will just continue on and time will just... slide past you."

Jikun smiled weakly. No, he did not know what she meant. War had taught him that life was fleeting and time was a cruel master. He sipped the tea as she turned to watch the flicker of flames in the hearth before them. For a long time, they sat in silence.

"I suppose I should get home. Are you alright now? You seem stronger." She stood, moving the tray from his lap to the table.

"Stay." He caught her hand again, softly this time.

Kaivervi smiled faintly. "If I stay, does that mean you will return to Elvorium and paid women will be forgotten? If I stay, will I become the lady of single importance to you?"

Jikun released her hand, his smile faltering.

Her eyes met his, piercing through his barriers with the ease of long familiarity. "You *will* return home. *I know what you are thinking.* But that does not mean that I wish to wait here loyally for you while you squander your affections on other females. You can't expect me to wait here for you when you don't wait out there for me."

Jikun remained silent, his face hard and emotionless, pushing her insight away. He would not let her see him vulnerable.

"Are you afraid?" she suddenly whispered, moving to sit beside him, leaning forward and resting a hand against his chest as though she was

reaching past his mask. “Even when the thakish bore down on you, I saw no fear in your eyes. What drives your fear now?”

Jikun scoffed, setting his cup on the table and pushing her hand away.

She caught his wrist, squeezing it firmly. “What drives your fear now, General Taemrin?”

Jikun pursed his lips tightly in silence.

“Are you afraid that you will leave this place and spend your years in fervent loyalty to me, only to die and have it all be wasted?”

“Dying benefits us nothing,” Jikun muttered.

He saw her eyes flash, her grip tightening on his wrist. “Does loving me prevent you from living?”

Jikun opened his mouth but she leaned forward sharply, locking lips with his, drawing her body tightly against his and pressing her breasts against his chest. And for the briefest moment, they were inseparable.

“Or do I help you live?”

Jikun tried to kiss her back, but she pulled away just as fiercely, standing in resolution.

She laughed. “I know what the answer is, Jikun. You do not need to tell me. You would be willing to die for any of your soldiers. And for your country. But... you cannot live for me.” She smiled and turned. “Good evening, Jikun. May your journey to Elvorium be blessed by the goddess.”

And to Jikun’s shame, he said nothing, and the door to his estate closed with a hollow snap.

END OF SAMPLE

—Devious gnomes stole the rest of the book and are holding it for ransom—