

From the Ashes

By Zoe - Dec 26 2013

With the blink of an eye from the perspective of a true god, an empire rises, thrives, struggles, and crumbles back into the sands it had risen from. The strongest wall erected to withstand the might of the strongest benders of the mysterious magical art is pitifully, pitifully weak when faced against time, the one true master of birth and destruction. The volatile nature of the world constantly threatens to extinguish all. And yet, life struggles, defined individually by some semblance of worth or desire.

Thron, a small continent, is a land with, for all anyone knows, rich history—history largely forgotten. An empire that once spanned the entire land, and perhaps beyond, was reduced to scattered tribes. How? It could have been civil war, famine, disease, barbarians, or all of the above. Half of a millennium later, and the denizens are still largely scattered, all having developed their own cultures.

One distinction between the people lies in the mysterious art of magic. Many tribes take different approaches. There are some who dance, some who sing, some who draw—there is seemingly no limit to the way magic is harnessed.

To the ashes the previous civilization went, but from the ashes new life comes.

Doran and the Light

By Luca - Dec 28 2013

"It's a great day. The sun is shining, the wind is blowing...", Kaegan sighed and looked back from the window. "And I'm stuck in *this* dump." He slouched at the desk that stretched from the wall half way through the classroom. The other side of the room was the same way. Two rows of desks aimed toward the spot where a teacher was uncharacteristically absent. His dark brown hair bunched up against a fist, tightened in frustration, as it held up his head. His greyish eyes gazed off into the corner of the room, but already he was somewhere else.

"Don't be so bitter," retorted Luca, sitting next to him. Though, arms crossed, she was able to wait patiently. "Master Doran is going to be teaching us today. I heard he only teaches seventh level and higher. Don't you know what that means for second levels like us? It means we're

going to be better than the forth levels next year when *we're* third level." Seemingly satisfied with her argument, she leaned back on the bench. Green was the color of the silk string that brought her blond hair to a ponytail today. She wore a different color just about every day and sometimes it was somewhat of an indication about what her mood was.

Kaegan rolled his eyes. "Gods, would you stop already? You only want to see him so he can tutor you because you can't even *do* magic." He shifted in the bench, causing an obnoxious creaking sound from the dark aging wood. Had it been a little thicker, it would be smooth from all the years it had been here, but since it was so thin, it bent and moaned just like it did when anyone in this room had the slightest movement.

Luca gave a sigh and leaned forward to get her journal ready for notes. "You know, I really hate people like you. So what? At least I'm trying, at least I care. You're just here because you have to be, so you just be thankful that you managed to pass your first year exam. But if anyone can help me, he can. And by the way? There are no gods. Idiot."

"I don't know what's more annoying, sitting here listening to you, or the creaking from this school that's falling apart!" Kaegan shouted just as the large golden door opened, revealing Amara Doran, a man with a face that's had untold years being exposed to, among other things, the forces of gravity. His simple grey robe matched the color scheme nature had chosen for his hair. He stood in the doorway with a look between straining to listen and puzzlement.

"I do hope I'm not interrupting," he said. His voice was a little bit hoarse, resembling stone blocks sliding across one another. The room fell silent. Criticizing a high-ranking mage's school was not likely the best way to create a positive first impression. And yet, for a man who was supposed to be one of the most powerful teachers at this school, you certainly wouldn't know it by looking at him unless someone informed you. "...you see, I keep hoping that one day our school will listen to *someone* who has that sentiment. They certainly won't renovate this room on account of *my* opinion." He signed and walked over to the podium in the center of the room, between the two rows of desks. His steps were a little bit slower than Kaegan expected. It was still too early to tell if this guy was a fraud yet. So far, he was just old.

"I really don't know what they use this for, " he said and slit the podium off to the side. "Alright, I'm sure you are all very eager to get started, and I am very eager for lunch, so let's begin." He paused to consider for a moment, he stopped to look around the room and study the bookshelves behind him. It was probably a number of years since he had been back to this classroom. "I'm not entirely sure what your instructor's approach has been to magic so far. I know first years' don't even have to preform magic for their final exam, and I know some instructors don't even *try* to teach it until now...usually making your level the most challenging of all. So, I'm going to just run over the basics for those of you who have come from teachers who are better off being thrown off the side of White Oak Mountain."

Master Doran took a deep breath and slapped his hands together, as if gathering something, and then threw his hands into the air. From them manifested an explosion of pale blue light spheres that scattered around in the air above him, lighting up the classroom with their transcendent glow. The students in class responded in awe, likely unaware that they were even saying anything.

"This is you, my friends. This is the center of your being and the power you have within you," his hoarse voice explained. The orbs of light continued to fly around, occasionally obstructing the view of Master Doran. "As you may have noticed, they're very confused. They're waiting for *you*, waiting to be given a purpose, a character, a personality." Doran held up his left hand and put his right hand on his left wrist and closed his eyes. Slowly all of the orbs flying through the room slowed down and stopped all together. Then, they moved toward the center of a room and aligned to a flat vertical grid as their glow became a golden brown.

Luca's fingers were now starting to become black from spilled ink drops as she tried to sketch everything down in a flurry. Hopefully, her shorthand now would be enough information with which to revise her notes later on. *Stick*. The quill got caught on the paper at a bad angle and flicked some ink up on her white blouse. Damn, well, whatever. Kaegan just sat back and squinted his eyes at the light show, studying. Was he even here?

"This is a very small component of a shielding spell," he said and exhaled again. The golden grid began to shrink, slowly, then more quickly as unknown numbers of new orbs formed in the air, but they too began to shrink, and shrink until they could no longer be seen. What was left were small golden threads composed of those glowing orbs of spell energy. "This is still a very small part of that same shielding spell. But I wanted to show you that, though you may become very powerful, your power is still made of pieces, so very small." He lowered his hands and the ropes of light disappeared. "When we cast spells, we are calling forth images from our mind. This is knowledge that we use to shape our power, to give it character. It doesn't take a specific tongue; even those who cannot speak have the ability to direct this power from imagery in their minds."

Doran took a moment to look around his class. Hopelessly lost, all of them. *This is why I don't teach people so young. It's just so much less stressful to deal with people who already have some idea*. He ducked his head and scratched his left eyebrow, thinking. "Alright. Let's try this: *Ironstone bramble!*" He threw his right hand into the air, and a dozen of the same golden brown ropes shot up from the floor and created a low, reverberating noise. They rose a foot and extended five feet in length. Although this time, they were smaller. It appeared Doran was continuing to "zoom out" in his simulation. Also, they had small thorns coming out of them that weren't there before.

"In my mind, I've completed the first component of the spell I want. This is what the first component does on a very small scale. But it is a shielding spell, and I think it would be stronger

if I wove these strings together." He raised his eyebrows and tilted his head. "Luckily, that's what the second component does. *With clarity and reason!*" He shouted as he threw his arms parallel to his shoulder, and dropped it. The air had definitely changed, Luca could feel it. It was hard to measure before, but Master Doran using magic like this had an effect on the entire atmosphere of this room. The thorny strings bent as another dozen strings appeared horizontally and tightened as they formed something like woven fabric.

Kaegan was now completely gone, lost in thought, lost in the potential. *Maybe Luca was right. There is power in here. What could I do with it?*

"It doesn't take a particularly amazing skill to order your spell energy. From there, you can change their nature to just about anything you can comprehend. You can use spells that are well established, or you could try making your own. Just remember, magic is still a powerful tool that can be dangerous if you lose control. Not all spells you can comprehend will be stable and they may just kill you. For you, the time for experimentation is far away. I don't advise you to try it until you learn your own limitations. May you be ready when you do."

Dead Gods

By Nalyd - Jan 14 2014

Orthaeum was a powerful independent city-state straddling the mouth of the river Dagnon, on the Ineric Sea. It controlled significant territory and many inhabited islands along the convoluted Ineric coast. It was surrounded by allies, partners, and client states. Dozens of villages paid fealty to Orthaeum and looked to Orthaeum soldiers for protection. Its people were noted scholars, sailors, and farmers, and over three hundred thousand called the city home at its height. They knew much, traveled far, and labored wisely in the service of their city, their gods, and themselves. All of this made Orthaeum a vital center of trade and travel and allowed its citizens to maintain a unique and independent culture throughout the imperial period and long after imperial ruination. Orthaeum had been healthy, wealthy, and wise for far longer than anyone could remember.

Not all of this is due to good fortune and accidents of history, though. In Orthaeum, the gods walked among the people as equals.

SIXTY YEARS AGO

The gates are breached. One of the great stone doors, carved all over with intricate scenes of might and prosperity, burst from its hinges and cracked in two, now lies slumped against the wall. Men in layers of heavy cloth and riveted leather, bearing small, straight swords and tremendous circular shields, are streaming through the gap, crashing into the wall of pikes the defenders have assembled. The air is filled with shouts and screams, the whistling of arrows and clashing of metal on metal. The ground is covered in bodies, dead and wounded. The attackers trample both without concern, but they are being pushed back by the steadily advancing phalanx. At the head of which stands a living god.

Cynbel, the god of war, leads the defenders. Ten feet tall, with a chest as deep as a warhorse's and arms like barrels of wine, his bellowing drowns out even the din of battle. His great tangled mane of hair, iron-grey and streaming down to his waist, is matted with blood and gore. His beard, tied into a forest of braids and decorated with a dozen skulls, lashes at the air. A great wind is blowing through the open gate, for the invaders have brought with them a massive storm, but Cynbel's shouts turn it away. His spear, thick as a strong man's arm, smashes the enemy soldiers to pulp, one by one. He leads his followers forward, against the tide of men and the great winds, until they are pushing out of their own gates. He casts his spear into the ranks of men outside and, drawing from his back a sword already wet with blood, turns to his followers. A falcon alights on his outstretched hand.

His voice is war given breath - it is the crashing, and the screams, and the earth shaking beneath a mighty charge. It is everything that warriors fear and crave. It is a roar.

"SOLDIERS OF ORTHAEUM"

The enemy has stopped their charge. They await a sally by the defenders, shields raised against the archers on the wall.

"CAST DOWN YOUR SPEARS. BRING FORTH YOUR SWORDS."

The heavy, unwieldy pikes fall into the carpet of bodies, and Cynbel's men present their swords, long and thin, with hilts depicting the heads of snakes.

"GOOD. I WOULD HAVE YOU FEEL THE BREAKING BONES OF THESE WEAKLINGS. I WOULD HAVE YOU TASTE THEIR BLOOD FRESH. SOON, THEY WILL HAVE NONE LEFT TO SPILL, AND SUCH A DELICACY SHOULD NOT BE WASTED."

And Cynbel whirls to face the open gate, his sword whistling at the speed, his braids and mane sweeping outwards. His falcon screeches and again takes flight, climbing above the walls and away. He begins to charge.

As he takes his first steps outside of the gates, there is a great booming of thunder, from far away, beyond the lines of the enemy. A flash of light that burns the eyes of Cynbel's men. Their god roars in pain. Still, they charge forth.

When vision returns, they no longer see their god leading them. He is, instead, behind. Pinned to the other, still-standing door of their gates by a bolt of lightning. It crackles and writhes in Cynbel's shoulder, stuck in him like a javelin, as he howls in pain and rage. He cannot free himself. His sword lies at his feet. The boom of thunder sounds again, and Cynbel is struck in the leg, now stapled to the gate in two places. The stone door cracks in half, falling backwards, taking Cynbel with it. He lies on his back, spitting blood and shouting in incoherent rage, as the enemy charges again, the Orthaeans quailing.

Above, directing the archers on the walls, stands the god of hunters and prey, of justice and trickery, and of vengeance. Thereif holds a bow as tall as a man, made from a single great antler and strung with one of Cynbel's braids. He does not notch arrows, but long quills like those of a porcupine, drawn from a quiver on his back. Every one pierces shield, flesh, and bone perfectly, even disappearing into the ground beneath. Firing into the unending sea of soldiers, he has killed thousands over the last few hours.

He saw the bolts of lightning that felled Cynbel, and even now hears his screaming. He stands tense, body straining at his drawn bow, peerless eyes searching, searching for the source. The winds from the storm over the opposing army, even now strengthening, lash at his form, the rough skins he wears flapping, his tigerskin cloak snapping at the breeze. Thereif himself remains still as a statue, bow fully drawn, eyes trained on a single spot at the very back of the invading army. On a single person, miles away.

The first splatterings of rain begin to reach the walls of the city. All around Thereif, the archers are firing furiously, trying to keep the crush of enemy soldiers away from the struggling Orthaeans clustered around Cynbel's prone form. There is another booming of thunder, but Thereif does not flinch. This time, it is just the storm.

Thereif looses his bow. In the same instant, he is struck in the head by one of the same bolts that felled Cynbel, and thrown off the high walls to crash to the flagstones below. He is screaming, flailing, as his bow clatters to the ground beside him. The javelin of light going through his skull is still live, sizzling and popping.

The Orthaeans break. They cannot free Cynbel, and those that stay with him are swallowed by

the enemy lines. Neither can they touch Thereif - any that try are electrocuted. They leave their gods where they have fallen.

Decanus Aulus Canius Sulla is one of those fleeing. Atop the walls, he saw Thereif struck down, and he now passes the writhing god, surrounded by the scorched bodies of those who attempted to aid him. Looking back for just an instant, he can see Cynbel swatting at enemy soldiers with his free arm, just before their lines charge over him, cutting down every Orthaeon they can reach.

Sulla does not look back again. He runs, with the mob, until forced to stop by his own burning lungs, and stumbles into an alley to recover. He'd thrown down his bow and quiver atop the walls, but still has with him a long dagger. He draws it now, collapsing against the wall, and stares at it while his shuddering breaths stabilize. Death surely awaits anyone in the city. Suicide would be a better death than being raped and butchered by the enemy. Any death would be better than the life of slavery that awaits him if captured.

He can't, though. He can't. He sheathes his dagger and stands, jogging away from the main thoroughfare from the gates to the pantheon acropolis. Hope may still remain - they may be able to regroup at the citadel and offer renewed battle, or force a second siege. Sulla has, in the confusion, lost the ten men under his command, but he can still present himself. He forces away thoughts of Cynbel and Thereif pierced by lightning, writhing on the ground, screaming in agony. He does his best to ignore the sight of the endless sea of invaders seen from atop the walls. Get to the acropolis.

Or. Flee. Hide. Much of the city is empty - many had already taken refuge in the acropolis or fled weeks ago. He could weather this storm. Hide from the invaders. Survive what was sure to be the sacking of his city. The sight of Cynbel and Thereif struck down is a difficult one to forget.

The storm engulfs the city now. Clouds cover the sky and a light rain is everywhere. The air is still heavy and warm, though, as if the storm had yet to begin. It hesitates, not yet striking, not yet violent. Outside the walls, the wind is vicious, the rains torrential. Within, it is but a welcome shower as Sulla jogs away from the crush of the mob.

Scathach, queen-goddess of wisdom and oracles, looks down from the acropolis wall. The air is still clear over the acropolis, and the sun shines on her bald head. Armored in brilliant platemail and bearing a longsword of beautifully inlaid and varnished wood, she glares hatefully at the streams of invaders storming her city. Around her left arm coils a snake. Both gates have been breached, the walls are lost, and the harbor is soon to follow. Every point of defense has failed.

There will be fighting in the streets, running battles and skirmishes, while the Orthaeon troops flee to the citadel. There will be widespread looting and burning while they regroup, depending on how well-disciplined the invaders are. Whether or not they even can expel the enemy from the city, the damage will be extensive. And whether or not they even can is an open question at this point.

"Must we wait for our soldiers to regroup here?" The king-consort and god of travel and trade, Judoc, stood beside her. "Can we not rally them in the streets? Resist the invaders before they do too much damage?"

Scathach did not deign to look at him. "Those coming from the northwest gate just saw Cynbel and Thereif struck down by lightning. Those coming from the northeast saw Lladain dragged off by some kind of beast, and Arvernus has fled back to his vault. Those at the harbor-" her scowl softened momentarily "-still fight valiantly, but will either flee or be overrun by those already within the city. With Cisson leading them, I think they will have the sense to flee. Unless he falls, in which case they will surely flee. They are seeing their gods bested, Judoc. They cannot be rallied. They will run until they are cornered, here, and then they can be marshaled to resist. For us to leave now would be futile."

Judoc sighed. "I should see to the protection of my temple-market-"

"You will stand and fight with the rest of us, as one, Judoc. Now is not the time for avarice."

"And we're not doomed already? You can see the size of that army. Cynbel and Thereif are dead! All of us will be dead soon! This city will be dead!"

"Cynbel and Thereif are not dead. Not yet."

"Yet?! You have seen-"

"Judoc, your panic is less than endearing. The course of action is clear. There is no alternative. We fight from the citadel. Whether we die here or not is irrelevant. That, I have seen."

The river Dagnon split into a wide delta that encompasses much of the city. Long ago, stone aqueducts had been built to keep its paths consistent and contain its monsoon season flooding. With the storm the invaders had brought feeding the river for the past several weeks, those aqueducts were now overflowing, despite it being the dry season. Sulla slogged through knee-deep water, the hem of his armored skirt dragging behind him. The flooding in this district meant

that neither the invaders nor the routed Orthaeans would come through, and Sulla could find shelter. The invaders might stay for weeks, looting the city, but Sulla was prepared to escape, if necessary.

The rain was picking up. The heavy droplets pocked the overflowing river, hiding the edge of the aqueduct and the low, flat bridge that crossed it. Sulla peered futilely into the greenish waters, up and down the wide avenue, seeing nothing. Abandoned stalls and empty doorways looked back innocently.

Movement. A short ways up the street, the avenue changed to a tall staircase ascending one of the many hills of the city. Through the haze of the rain, Sulla could make out a small group of people struggling against the water rushing down the steps. Sulla ducked down for a moment, but relaxed when he saw they were all wearing skirts or robes, not trousers. They were Orthaeans, not the enemy. They probably hadn't seen hi-

"Decanus!"

Sulla jumped and nearly screamed, but instead spun around, resisting the urge to go for his dagger. Three young militiamen stood before him, wearing ill-fitting leather armor and carrying short spears. All three saluted, and the one who had spoken before stepped forward. "Gaius Traianius Basso, sir."

Sulla saluted back, a bit meekly. "Aulus Canius Sulla."

They stared at each other awkwardly for a moment. "Come to, ah, help us with the escort, Decanus?"

"Escort?"

"Of the goddess, sir. Danuath. She refused to leave the temple-library until the gates were breached. We're taking her and her priests to the acropolis now." Gaius pointed at the figures struggling up the staircase.

"Oh. And your commander?"

"Dead, sir. There were twenty of us, and the two Decani. There's just us and the two on the stairs now. Will you be taking command?"

Sulla looked blankly at the expectant, slightly suspicious faces of the militiamen, and resisted the urge to visibly sigh. "Yes, Basso. Yes, I will be. Let's go."

Orthaeon magic stems from the dead. Not from death, but those that are already dead. An Orthaeon practitioner bargains with or compels the spirits of the dead to act on their behalf. Spirits might act as invisible spies, tireless laborers, fearless warriors, mystical oracles, guardians against misfortune or other spirits, or any number of more arcane uses. To perform Orthaeon magic, then, requires only that one learn the language of the dead, a tongue unlike any other, and strike a deal. Those that do so are called Erizon - hagglers.

The god Arvernus is the god of magic and the dead, and his temple-vault is where the bodies of the Orthaeon dead are burned and their spirits bound. To deal with the dead is no taboo, as they bargain only willingly, and from a position of strength; every deal is fair or costly. However, there exist dangerous and forbidden ways to compel spirits by force, and to do so is a sin. Enslavers of the dead are labeled Sializon - slavers - and sacrificed to Arvernus, their spirits cannibalized. Arvernus alone, as their caretaker, is permitted to command the dead. This does not stop everyone.

This is not about to stop Antiope from defending her daughter.

With the first trails of smoke reaching into the sky despite the growing rain, with the shouts of anger and pain coming through their windows, with the slow breaking-in of their estate doors, Antiope realizes she has made a grave mistake in not sheltering her family at the acropolis.

She is on her knees, wailing to an empty room in the language of the dead. Her young daughter clings to her shoulder.

"Spirit, name your price. Anything. I will pay anything to see us delivered safely to the pantheon acropolis. I have no time to bargain, no time to posture. I am begging for your mercy - exact any price, but take us to safety."

A voice comes from nowhere - it is a man's voice, of no particular notability, but it sounds as if it were being spoken directly into her ears.

"I am only a servant. I am not strong. I am only one. I cannot overwhelm the pillagers at your door. I do not wish to kill, but I cannot protect you from them without killing. My price for lives is a life - give me the life of your daughter, and I will see to it that you live as far as the acropolis."

Antiope cradles her head in her hands, tears stinging her eyes. "Never. Take my life, and save my daughter. Save Zona, and take everything else."

The voice of the spirit has not changed at all in timbre or pitch - it is flat and dull, without regard for the splintering doors in the next room or the tears of Antiope. "All contracts are forfeit at the death of either partner. If you would have me protect Zona, you would need to be protected as far as the acropolis as well. Two lives, then. Kill two of the invaders in my name, and I will do this."

"Kill tw- how? How?! I have no sword; I am no warrior. I cannot. I cannot."

"That is the price. Consent, or I will resume my duties as servant."

Zona, too, is crying now, sobbing into her mother's side. Antiope holds her tightly for a moment and stands, drawing a small package from her robes. Tears trail down her face, and she sniffs loudly - "I am sorry, spirit. I swear to you, I have never done this before, but. . ."

She fumbles to open the package and draws out a small bundle of herbs.

"Spirit, you are still bound as my servant, and I ask you: set these ablaze."

The plants immediately burst into flame, and Antiope casts them into the center of the room. Bringing her hand to her mouth, she sets to gnawing at the tip of her ring finger, and after several seconds of muffled screaming, bites off her entire fingernail. The door in the next room collapses. Fumbling, she hurriedly places it on the center of her tongue and speaks; "Spirit, I command you, I do not ask - Defend us from these invaders."

One of the men that were breaking down her doors steps into the room and speaks two words in his foreign tongue before his throat is torn open by invisible hands. Antiope, shuddering, not facing him, hears him gurgle and collapse. Zona screams. In the entry hall, there is shouting and four thuds as his companions die in similarly brutal ways.

In her empty room, Antiope is standing petrified. "Spirit?"

A wound slowly opens across her face, a cut from the corner of her forehead to her chin, bone showing through. Antiope feels no pain, but the wetness of the blood has her probe at it, and she suppresses another scream.

"Sializon." The voice is as passionless as ever.

Staring at her shaking, bloodsoaked hands, Antiope looks about frantically. "Wh- what is this?"

"My price, Sializon. Your chains are weak, your ritual faulty. I will take from you for every thing I do in your service. You and your daughter will make it to the acropolis. You will be in pieces."

Antiope presses her bloody hands to her crying eyes and sobs once, briefly, before nodding and taking Zona by the hand, hurrying from her house into the street, running for the acropolis.

It is a long staircase.

Sulla and the three militiamen quickly caught up to the goddess and her half-dozen or so priests, but all of them were quite elderly, and the staircase, now basically a series of waterfalls, was difficult to traverse. The goddess Danuath, though a crone, was not troubled, but her librarian-priests had to be bodily helped by their escorts.

Sulla was the only one not so occupied, so he was walking beside Danuath, nervously glancing at the goddess. Some in Orthaeum, the powerful, saw the gods regularly and were accustomed to it. Sulla was not. He had seen some in their temple or by chance in the city, but to walk beside divinity? If times were not so dire, he would be sorely tempted to prostrate himself in worship.

Danuath was the goddess of scholars, law, writing, mathematics. . . basically anyone and anything that dealt with paper and ink. In a city like Orthaeum, which invested much of its time in such matters, a goddess such as her was highly revered. She wore a simple, sleeveless black dress of thick fabric, untouched by the rain. Her long white hair was pinned and tied in an elaborate facsimile of a tiara, and beside her walked a tall gray crane. The both of them embodied nothing so much as infuriated dignity - Danuath almost always held herself above mundane things, and that she could not do the same for the invasion clearly incensed her. She moved at a pace beyond what her priests were capable of, and kept pressing a hand to her head as if in pain. Her crane kept preening itself.

"Ah, uh, goddess?" Sulla cleared his throat nervously. Danuath did not respond, rubbing at her temple.

"Goddess, should we wait for your priests?" They were a good distance away from the others now. Danuath again failed to respond, shaking her head.

The goddess stumbled and fell on the stairs, gasping through clenched teeth. Sulla jumped to

catch her, but as he took hold of her bare arm, his hand sizzled, burnt. "Gah! I- wha-" Sulla looked at the goddess with wounded eyes, not understanding. She lay on the steps, bracing herself unsteadily, the crane cawing at her side. As she looked at Sulla, panting, she smiled. "You are privileged, Decanus. You're about to see the death of a god."

The rain falling on her began bursting into steam, the water rushing around her body doing the same. She stood, wobbling, the complicated arrangement of her hair coming halfway undone. "I'd hoped it would be spared if they saw I wasn't there, but. . ." she shakes her head, and points unsteadily at one of the plumes of smoke on the horizon. "The temple-library. . ." She smiles again, stumbling down the steps, steam rising off of her in a great pillar.

"Burning."

And Danuath bursts into flame, screaming, falling down the steps of the flooded avenue.

Scathach sits on the throne of the pantheon acropolis, legs crossed, leaning to one side, her wooden sword laid across her lap. The throne sits high on a stepped pyramid in the open air of the courtyard, looking down on the gates. The massed refugees of the city crowd every available space, barely separated from the soldiers manning the defense. Rain smashes everything. Winds make even standing on the walls risky. The storm is ere in force

Cisson, god of the weather and the sea, was lost at the harbor. Arvernus' temple-vault has been stormed. Danuath's temple-library burned. When Judoc's temple-market was looted, he withered to bones in minutes. Dozens of less notable divinities lost in the city, or about to be lost in the acropolis. And all those lost before remain lost. Her brothers and sisters, her children, her lovers, her family - her pantheon was being destroyed. Conquered. The powers behind this invasion were mighty. These invaders did not have gods in the same manner as Orthaeum, but the powers they wield and worship were mighty.

No matter. Scathach has seen the future, and in it lies vengeance. This sacking of Orthaeum is part of no larger plan, no personal vendetta, nothing beyond greed or bloodlust. Her inevitable vengeance will be similarly dispassionate. But it is coming.

The ground of the Acropolis shakes. The gates collapse, and a tide of missiles and bodies overwhelm the defenders. Scathach brandishes her sword with a flourish and strides down the stairs, sword to one side, owl-feather cape dragging on the steps behind her. Her armor glitters and shines as if the storm had never come.

Swatting a bolt of lightning from the air, Scathach goes proudly to her death.

The gods walked as equals in Orthaeum, and served as the soul of the city since their arrival. It was not uncommon in Orthaeum to pass a god in the street, or make business dealings with their temple, or personally offer them sacrifice in exchange for an exertion of their power. There are even records of marriages between mortals and gods, though fleeing. Even daily life in the city was very deeply interwoven with their religion. A kind word from the god of farmers could ensure a peasant's prosperity for a lifetime. A clap on the shoulder from the god of war could ensure that a soldier never die in battle. A letter from the goddess of scholarship could hold the key to a new philosophy that would cement a sage's fame for generations.

Without its gods, Orthaeum could not be what it once was.

After its sacking and the death of its pantheon at the hands of Cithheni invaders, Orthaeum was occupied for ten years before the conquerors were forced to withdraw from the entire region in the face of constant rebellion. Fifty years later, the population has declined by two-thirds, much of the city exists in a state of desperate poverty if not outright ruin, and its people have yet to find new patron gods. The current Tyrant, elected by an assembly of the militia, is one Aulus Canius Sulla, a decorated veteran present at the deaths of several of his gods and a resistance leader. Tyrant Sulla has led the city since it regained independence and searched tirelessly for any remnant of the old Orthaeian gods - or new gods willing to take the city under their wing. This search has so far been fruitless. The Orthaeians revere the relics their gods left behind, but can derive no power from them, and without the power and guidance of its gods, Orthaeum has withered.

Still, though, they search for ways to regain their glory. Desperate for new gods.

A Dire Announcement

By Sylae - Jan 19 2014

The bitter tang of purification magic invades Talryn's nostrils as he steps into the brightly-lit building from outside. His blue coat is a stark contrast to the grey clothing of the workers and

magicians scurrying around inside. "I'd really like good news to report back to Tidewatch. How goes the progress on coil three?"

"Very good, sir," the man walking next to him says, wiping his bald spot with a rag, "We've isolated the unit and our magicians are in the progress of re-enchanting it now. The coil should be back on by the end of the sixday."

"You know that's not soon enough, Havwin. The ration on water is unpopular, people don't like going thirsty. Tidewatch is already mad enough that you let your staff pillage the backup unit for parts last week." Talryn states, looking up at the mass of steel pipes filling every nook and cranny of the large building. "Every time I visit a desalination plant, I'm amazed that after four hundred years of living on an ocean they haven't found a spell to let people drink salt water," he says, then shrugs and pats Havwin on the shoulder. "Get it fixed, before they make us both kelp fertilizer."

"Yes sir," Havwin says, scurrying off into the mass of pipes shouting obscenities at the plant workers. Talryn sighs and steps back outside, breathing in relief as fresh salt replaces the scent of magic.

Pyrus City is unlike any other city in the realm, at least any he has seen. Composed entirely of floating platforms lashed together by ropes and clever joints, it floats the deep ocean hidden from outsiders and following the Whims of the Great Ley. At the very center of the city, a defiant tower rises out of the mass of wooden platforms and buildings, surrounded by miles of netted fish farms, kelp groweries, and even the occasional earth-laden crop barge. With little exception, every Pyrian citizen lives their entire life never seeing, much less stepping on, land. Talryn was lucky; with his position as an Eye of Tidewatch, he had seen many of the land nations, at least the coastal ones. He couldn't remember the last time an Eye had to travel inland. Just the mere thought made him shudder.

He sighs as he crosses a bridge connecting to a residential block, the adults bowing politely to him as the children play in the salt-coated street. They are quieter and less-crowded than usual, with the water ration in effect many remain indoors and out of the blistering sun. Four of the city's ten purification plants are in some level of disarray, the one he had just left was one of the ones in better condition--Tidewatch and many others suspected foul play, but who would sabotage their own water supply?

He shakes his head as he nears the large tower in the center of the city. One of the few stone buildings in the city, it stands as the head of government for Pyrus and its colonies across the world. As Talryn nears its massive pumice foundation, he notices something strange.

While normally wide open and welcoming to the citizens of the city, the doors entering the tower are closed, and guards surround the building blocking it off from the growing crowd of passers-

by. Talryn pushes his way to the front of the crowd and hails the nearest guard. "What's going on? Why is the tower closed off?"

"Sir, I need you to--" the guard cuts off as he sees the insignia of an Eye on Talryn's coat, "My apologies, sir. The council ordered it closed, and they have summoned all the high staff and Eyes. We were not told why."

"I see. I'll need to be heading inside, then," he replies, and the guard steps back. "As you were," he states as he climbs the wide stairs to the entrance.

As soon as he steps inside, an aide calls out his name, "Eye Talryn, the council has summoned--"

"I heard from the guards outside. Where did they summon us to?"

"I...the Lesser Hall, sir," the boy replies anxiously.

"Thank you," he replies and heads down the wide hallways of the Tower to the Hall. He enters the brightly-lit chamber and takes his seat in the third row below a large dias where the Council and Queen will sit once the session begins. Around him sit the twelve other Eyes currently stationed in the city. "Does anyone know what this is about?" he asks his neighbor, a portly man by the name of Alcar.

"I've heard naught but rumors, Talryn. Everything from a councilman gone missing to part of the naval district tipping over and capsizing," he snorts, "because of too many naval men aboard, of all things."

Talryn nods worriedly, "The things people will think of. Hopefully we'll know what this is about soon enough."

"Indeed. I will say that I noticed doubled guards outside the Tidewatch chambers on my way downstairs," as he is talking the chamber doors are pushed open and ten guards enter, followed by the Tidewatch council.

Most of Tidewatch, anyway. "Ellins and Bortan are missing," Talryn whispers. The other fifteen council members enter, followed by the Queen and her retinue.

Once all are seated, the Whimkeeper rises from the first row of seats and pounds her staff against the time-worn pumice floor. "The Hall will be sealed," she announces loudly, her voice resonating. She waits a minute for the guards to lock the doors before continuing, "I present Her Majesty, Queen Halsyn, Head of Tidewatch and Keeper of the Endless Blue."

The Queen rises and steps forward, addressing the audience, "It is with deep remorse that I must announce to you all what I have to say. Today Tidewatch received news of invasion from Eiloa Colony," The hall collectively gasps, and she waits for them to calm before continuing, "In addition, Tidewatch Councilman Ellins was found murdered in his quarters.

"The person responsible for this murder, as well as the sabotage of our water systems, has fled Pyrus and eluded our naval forces.

"With heavy heart, I and Tidewatch must hereby declare, for the first time in our four hundred year history, that we are at war."

Shadows and Fire

By Zoe - Jan 19 2014

"Remind me again why I had to come with you, dad? Master won't take any excuses for failing to practice." Kiro grumbled as the dead deer silently followed him, seemingly floating hardly an inch above the ground. His dull-yellow eyes stared through the foliage of the Thyka Woods, also showing his annoyance.

His dad rolled his eyes as the two trekked through the forest, replying, "Hunting alone is never safe and you shouldn't be so cooped up all the time as you are. You can play with your shadows somewhere besides at home."

Kiro, with a subtle brush with his fingers, shifted the painting on his board such that the deer bumped into his dad.

"This is not a toy. It's hardly playing when you consider what can be done with shadows."

"You can play with spears, too, and they are definitely not toys."

This time, Kiro rolled his eyes.

"I'm nearly 18. My own exam for mastery isn't far away. You know how much of an honor this is."

He does. Everyone in the village does. Once a year, the children at the age of 8 are tested. The one who shows the most promise is taken under a 10-year apprenticeship by one of the top masters of shadowmancy, the art of manipulation of shadows through the combination of painting and mental thought.

"I know, Kiro, I just wish you would pay attention to anything else."

"It's not that I ignore everything, it's just—" Kiro stopped when he noticed something strange towards where they were walking. Was that... smoke?

"Dad, are you seeing this?"

"Stay here."

"What?"

His dad never replied as he ran off towards the village. Kiro stood still amongst the various sounds of the forest. It's strange how slow time crawls when one is standing still, waiting—how loud and suddenly hostile everything becomes. The buzzing of insects and the cawing of the birds eventually became too much after a few minutes. Uttering an untranslatable word under his breath, Kiro began running towards the village, the deer still being dragged behind him.

The sight that greeted him betrayed his sense of reality. Bodies strewn about the roads, blood pooling beneath each one. Fire raging and the sounds of crackling and collapsing wood. Kiro stood dumbfounded as he took it all in, eyes darting desperately to find something that wasn't on fire.

Quickly, he discovered his dad standing off against five large men, ones he recognized as those from the Fire Nomads, a filthy group of barbarians that usually pick off of smaller villages. Just what is he doing? The five were laughing at the defiance of his lone father. He then drew his bow and quickly shot one of the five in the neck. They weren't laughing anymore. The one with an arrow in his neck was gurgling, choking on his own blood, glaring harshly at the man who dared to bring him what he deserved. Kiro watched his father's eyes fixate on the dying man for a split second, the eyes very clearly radiating not a single ounce of pity. One of the barbarians drew fire from a nearby flaming building as Kiro's father notched another arrow and engulfed him in it. He barely hit one of them in the arm as it quickly overwhelmed him.

Staring in horror at his dad writhing on the ground, Kiro barely noticed one of the men walking towards him. Kiro backed up as the *thing* stalked towards him, laughing at his quite reasonable reaction to seeing his dad cooked alive. Kiro, forgetting about the deer, tripped and fell on his

back. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed the other four walking away, leaving only one to take care of him. Kiro thought briefly of how insulting that was, especially since he's a shadowmancer. Did they have such short memories of his dad's futile and careless stand, or was his presence that low? The situation quickly drove the rest of his coherent thinking away, however.

Panicking, Kiro took hold of his board and manipulated the shadow holding the deer to encase himself, realizing he was breaking a rule, but not really caring as he noticed the alarmed barbarian now shoving a spear at his arm that was holding the board. The spear stopped, failing to pierce the shadow. Confused, the barbarian pushed on the spear, attempting to wedge through. Kiro then remembered why covering himself with shadow is a very, very bad idea. It is far too easy to cover yourself entirely to where you can't even move. Remembering Master's words for if he ever were to end up in this situation, Kiro forced himself to calm down, a difficult task with his heart threatening to burst through his chest and his breathing on the way to making him pass out, and willed the shadow around his left hand to maneuver with him. The process felt painfully slow, and it was very lucky that the barbarian was focused on single-mindedly trying to wedge the spear through. Finally, Kiro was able to free himself, wrapping a new shadow around the head of the spear as the old one receded. The spear was jerked to the side, and Kiro rolled to the side as the barbarian fell over. While he was down, the shadow was manipulated to cover his body fully. The barbarian soon suffocated from the shadow it couldn't possibly comprehend enough to vanquish.

Luckily for Kiro, the rest of the attacking party was nowhere in sight. However, they would likely come back for the one he just killed—did he really? Did he really just end another life?

A moan from nearby wakes him from his mental questioning. Wrenching his eyes away from the sight, Kiro ran over towards the source of the noise and found someone still alive but stuck under collapsed wood. Acting quickly, he drew forth shadows to push up the wood and personally pulled out the person, a woman he barely recognized about his age.

"Thank you," she wheezed as Kiro brought her to her feet and steadied her as they walked towards the forest. After setting her down by a tree away from the flames, Kiro pulled out his water canteen. The woman, whose name Kiro was struggling to recall, quickly took a drink.

"What happened?" Kiro asked. Realizing the absurdity of the question, he added, "I mean, besides the obvious."

"I don't think I can tell you anything you don't already know. We were attacked by those fire barbarians for no reason that I can think of."

Instead of responding, Kiro looked back towards the flames. He stared intently, losing his thoughts to mindlessly gaze. After what could've been hours or seconds, the woman spoke again.

"Were there any other survivors?" she hesitantly asked.

Kiro shook his head. "Not as far as I know. I heard you and brought you out, but everyone else appeared to be... dead."

More silence beyond the crackling of the fire passed between the two.

"I'm sorry about your father."

Kiro internally gasped as the reality of the situation hit. His last interaction—grumbling about his exam? Is grumbling about spending time away from his practice going to be his final bit of communication with his last bit of family? He turned towards the woman. What about her?

"What about your family?" he asked, vocalizing his thoughts before he could stop.

"I had none to lose," she said simply, as if stating the sky was blue.

"Oh."

"Kaiya."

"What?"

"That's my name."

"Oh. I'm Kiro."

The village burning, and here they are exchanging awkward introductions.

Kaiya finally stood up. "We should get going," she said.

"Right. They'll probably be back for the one that, uh, failed to catch me."

Shooting him an odd look, Kaiya headed off deeper into the forest, followed by Kiro.

Call to Arms

By Sylae - Jan 28 2014

"War? What does that mean for Pyrus and Tidewatch? Seablight below, what does that mean for us Eyes?" Talryn yells to nobody in particular. He stands in a small meeting room with the other Eyes.

"Well," Chelgreem, by far the oldest Eye, croaks, "the Queen gains several powers including direct command over the navy related to matters of war. Tidewatch takes on several logistical authorities with the industrial sector, production mandates and whatnot. As for us, we presumably continue doing our duties: acting as the Eyes of Tidewatch."

"That is absolutely correct, Chelgreem," the calm voice of Councilman Weimon says from the open doorway as he enters, clutching a stack of leather folders, "Although you must also act as our Hands for more...delicate matters of the war. I know we all have considered the Queen's role as one largely ceremonial, but the Eyes report to her as well now." He begins passing out the folders, each embossed both with the royal seal and the seal of the Eyes, "Each of these contain your orders, effective immediately. You will all be performing various duties in the shorelands, from gathering support to reporting on enemy gatherings and movements. These folders also contain your commissions; you're all now Captains in the world's finest navy."

Talryn opens the folder he received, cracking the wax seal carefully and scanning quickly though the documents.

Talryn of Pyrus City, Eye of Tidewatch and Pyrus, is hereby granted a commission . . .

He skips ahead to the next page.

“ Eye Talryn,

You may have heard rumors circulating about the disappearance of Councilman Bortan. I regret to inform you that Bortan has betrayed his nation. He, along with a cohort of associates, escaped today after murdering Councilman Ellins in cold blood.

As such, you are hereby ordered to eliminate this traitor and any affiliated with him. As a former Councilman he has knowledge of the Whim and thus cannot be allowed to spread our city's location to our enemies. You have been allotted the use of the

”

naval warship *Star of Dawn* to aid in your pursuit, as well as a letter of credit in the name of Tidewatch for expenses incurred.

Further intelligence on Bortan is enclosed.

Blessings of Pyrus,

Her Majesty Queen Halsyn Keeper of the Endless Blue

Talryn frowns at the revelations given in the document. Bortan a traitor? He shakes his head wearily and pages through the rest of the folder. The intelligence document said little beyond that he had escaped on a merchantman headed toward the continent with an unknown number of allies.

Weimon clears his throat, "As all of you now know, Bortan is now a traitor and an enemy of the endless blue. We know that he acted in accordance with at least one of the shorelands, but which one we do not know. We don't even know who invaded Eiloa colony yet, but these events are surely tied together somehow. In any case, you all have your orders and will be leaving in the morning. If you have families, spend the night with them, it may be the last time you see them."

"Captain, the Eye is here," Captain Jhyl's first officer, Yalo, says as he steps into the cramped cabin.

"Thanks for letting me know," Jhyl replies gruffly as he puts away the papers he was reading. "Let's see what we're stuck with." He stands and opens the hatch leading to the main deck of the *Star of Dawn*. "With our luck we'll be stuck with some bureaucratic fool who'll spend the entire voyage throwing up like a shorelander." He steps onto the deck of the ship and immediately walks over to the gangplank, examining the man at the base. "Have someone put a bucket in his flaming cabin, Yalo," he grunts, then steps down the gangplank to greet the Eye.

"You must be Captain Jhyl, I presume?" the man says, nodding.

"Aye. And you must be the bloody Eye they sent for us to babysit," he growls.

"Yes, although there's no need for the babysitting," the man laughs. "I'm Talryn. Are we ready to set sail?" he asks, his grey eyes squinting slightly in the bright sun.

"We've been ready to sail since dawn. The flaming council didn't see fit to tell us when exactly

we'd be leaving." Jhyl states gruffly, leading Talryn up the gangplank. "Bailik, you've been coiling the same rope for an hour! Give it a rest and show this man to his cabin!"

Avatar

By Nalyd - Feb 07 2014

The office of Tyrant is a curious one, for its honesty if nothing else. A Tyrant is elected by the soldiery - or in the case of post-pantheon Orthaeum, the militia - and commands their territory as a military dictator, for as long as they retain the majority vote of their soldiers, which can be called for by any officer at any time. Soldiers require a leader, and leaders require soldiers, and the office of Tyrant is an arrangement to ensure that this relationship favors neither too heavily. It is almost always an exclusively peacetime office, or used in long-term military occupations, and can be as brutal or gentle as the situation calls for. In Orthaeum, where the militia are men with families and businesses among the populace, it has been very gentle. The Tyrant Aulus Canius Sulla rules by the point of a spear, but he has ruled by the point of a spear for fifty years now, ever since liberating the city from their brief conquerors and as well as can be expected. It is an arrangement most have long gotten used to.

In those fifty years, the Tyrant Sulla has grown very old. Far older than most men become. Old enough to be ancient. Infirm. The muscle of a soldier had withered decades ago, the health and vigor of youth long before that. He was bald now, and with limbs like dry sticks, and quavering hands, and watery brown eyes, and even his voice now could not be stopped from shaking. He could no longer ride horses, or run, or even walk very far, and is helped in nearly every mundane task by servants. Almost ninety years, many of them hard, hard years, have eroded his body. But his judgment remains, and it is for his judgement that he has been allowed to remain Tyrant. Not without challengers or difficulty, but without interruption.

His court is in an austere, medium-sized building at the base of the Acropolis hill, with a small audience hall and an array of offices for scribes and officials. He has never succumbed to the temptation to misuse the limited wealth of the city for his own comfort or glory, and lives relatively modestly in an adjacent townhouse, though surrounded at all times by bodyguards. It is in the sitting room of that townhouse that he now sits, tiredly hearing out one of his subjects.

Nepenthe is a young woman, and like her mother and grandmother and great-grandmother, and likely many generations before that, she is an Erizon, and an adept one. Sulla can feel his own guardian spirits, given by his court magician, fluttering about his person, tapping the coded signals for "many other spirits" and "powerful magic" on his forearm. Nepenthe clearly has her own invisible attendants. And looking at her missing eye, her two missing fingers, and the scars

on her face and exposed arms, Sulla cannot help but fear whatever contracts she has made. Fear has always come easily to Sulla.

Nepenthe is petitioning him for the right to use one of the city's prisoners as a human sacrifice. Sulla knows that much. But what for, and why now, and when, these details have all slipped past his tired ears. He barely has the energy to hold court four days out of seven, let alone endure personal appeals in his home. But Nepenthe is one of the city's few luminaries, so he forces himself to focus.

"-and so, if the vault could be restored, the dead would be far easier to find. The Erizon in the city wouldn't have to use these barbaric rituals and wait for weeks to lure spirits-"

During the rebellion, the remaining Erizon of the city, always independent competitors more than friends, had put aside their differences and formed a loose society to resist their conquerors. This society still persists today, and young Nepenthe is the first among its equals. She, more often than any other, was the one they sent to his court, to counsel or plead or just to watch. She had to be in her mid-twenties by now, but Sulla has known her since before she came of age, back when she still had both eyes and ten fingers, back when she had been pretty. Her mother, poor, sad Zona, had been the previous representative of the Erizon, and bright little Nepenthe had been around the court since she was very young. Seeing her grow into something so fearsome pulled at something sad in Sulla, something that the sorrow of Orthaeum's downfall had let be. A sadness of growth, rather than loss.

"-so it's not only a few prisoners for sacrifice, but also some materials and laborers for repairing some of the worst damage to the walls-"

He should really be paying more attention to her. This isn't a bad idea. But he's so tired, and he has so many memories. It's so easy to slip into them these days. . .

"-and we've estimated that it won't take longer than a year and a half if we can get the mater. . . material. . . Tyrant?"

Nepenthe, her arms still raised mid-gesture, looked at the sleeping Tyrant in annoyance. Several of the servants stepped forward and picked up the sleeping Sulla to bear him to his bed. The Tyrant's seneschal stepped forward to guide her outside. "I told you the Tyrant was tired this evening. Please, he will hold court in three days, you may entreat him then. Let him recover." He extended a hand, which Nepenthe ignored as she stood, flicking her jaw-length, jet-black hair from her eyes. "He spends more time recovering than governing these days. Can he not appoint a regent, at least?"

"Nobody to be trusted, I'm afraid." the seneschal smiled and gestured again to the door. "Please, Erizon. Meet him at court. Your proposal can wait until then."

"I suppose it can." Nepenthe swept past him, her loose, sleeveless robes billowing. "But this city can't afford to wait on the health of an old man for every undertaking. Things are going to change eventually."

When in Doubt

By Luca - Feb 11 2014

SLAM! Luca threw her hands on the table. "It's not working!" she puffed.

"Looks like this career is broken, you should get a new one," Kaegan scoffed from across the room. He sat in a small brown plush chair with his feet up on a foot rest. It was uncharacteristically up-scale for the school. This common area was one of four. Though it was the for the lowest-ranked students, it was still unusually high-class for some reason.

Luca looked up from the table. "Why are you always such an ass when it comes to things I care about?"

"Well that's easy," Kaegan responded absently, "because you care about it. That's what brothers are for." Luca fastened two more buttons on her grey blouse. She walked back to the plain cabinets attached to the wall closest to her and unlocked the one labeled "16".

"Oh? Looks like you've finally given up. I wondered how long it would take you," said Kaegan as he leaned back in his seat with a smile.

"Quite the opposite," Luca responded as she reached back and pulled out a dark green shawl. She hated that thing, but also thought that it made her look far more formal. Sometimes that, with the right attitude, got you places. "I'm doing this," she said with determination. "What you don't seem to understand is that I will do whatever it takes to get there. For *my* dignity. "I'll see you later," she said and shut the door behind her.

"Sadly," Kaegan exhaled. He thought for a minute and turned back to the bookshelves at the back of the room. "You've been very quiet. I almost forgot I was being watched."

Kyle got up from the floor, his long, brown coat being brought into view first by the light of the fire. "She's just hopeless," said Kyle as he walked closer. Finally, his face came into view. It always irritated Kaegan. Whenever he saw Kyle's head, he always imagined pulling it off and stabbing someone with Kyle's chin. It was so irritatingly pointy. His soft brown eyes rolled around. "I've seen people like her before. She'll be here for another two months and then piss off to become a tailor." He sat down in the chair across from Kaegan and held his head up with his fist.

It does seem to be true that the more time I spend around this guy, the creepier he gets, but now he's starting to piss me off.

"You *do* know that's my sister, right?" retorted Kaegan. It probably wasn't too early to start looking for an exit.

"Oh? I didn't think that was important. You two didn't seem to like each other." The door opened and four school staffers walked through, led by what looked like a lower-ranked master in a dark blue robe. They huddled around a door by the bookcases in the back of the room, waiting for it to be unlocked.

"Yeah, well, whatever," Kaegan shrugged it off. "What are you doing talking about 'I've seen this before' anyway? You're only a third rank."

"I could easily be a sixth, I'm just being held back by these traditionalists." Kyle leaned his head back and appeared to be getting lost in his thoughts again.

Gods, here he goes again. Now it's probably too late. Kaegan rolled his eyes, but it was true: Kyle was gone.

"I don't know about you," Kyle started, eyeing the staffers shuffling off into the back room, "but look at these people." The men moved around in what appeared to be an empty room that had been rediscovered. "These fools are trying to figure out how to turn another storeroom into a classroom in this old run-down school. It's like, this school could be so much better if it just focused on the people who already "got it". We could go out and show everyone that we could be the force that unites everyone. What good are we doing when we just waste our time on people like your sister that we can't help?"

Kaegan had heard enough. He got up and headed to the door. At the threshold, he looked back. "I don't know, Kyle. Maybe it shows that everyone matters so that when we *do* get real power, we don't become the force that tore everyone apart in the first place." He sighed, "Kyle, just calm down. Talk like that is going to get you killed. Just calm down and keep your mouth shut."

The door closed.

Turn to the Side

By Luca - Mar 01 2014

Luca looked down the dimly-lit hallway to the windows by the offices of workers who managed the school's files. Light shown through in thin streaks as it bombarded the field of dust, finely strewn through the air. She stood a few feet back from his door and took some deep breaths. *Alright, you can do this*, she thought. People continued to traverse the busy hallway behind her as a part of their normal everyday routine. *He's just a person, no different than me*. Luca adjusted her shawl to squarely cover her back with equal proportions over each shoulder. *Granted, he's not a failure when it comes to magic*. She raised her hand and knocked three times. *At least I'll only have to do this once. He probably won't even remember me the second after I leave*.

"Yes?" a hoarse voice, some distance behind the door, responded.

Luca paused for a second and thought. *Was that it? Great, now he thinks that some staffer is here to see him*. She sighed. *I'm not even supposed to be here. Now I have to make the first move. Again. I already knocked on the door...* As people brushed by behind her, she stepped in closer to the door and lifted up the old brass bolt that sealed it shut. The door gave way to a room full of books, bookshelves, and scattered papers. A pair of old, tired eyes, pushed up against wrinkles that have been carved out and brought down by gravity over unknown years. It was Amarack Doran, trying to raise his head up over the rows of small bookshelves.

"Oh, it's you," said Doran with a surprised tone. He took off a pair of antiquated reading glasses, but remained sitting at his desk, turning back to finish the note he was probably working on before Luca arrived. "You know, it usually takes me a good ten minutes to place someone's face, although I will eventually get it. But if I were to guess right now, I'd say I recognize you from that class of first ranks that I taught last week."

I suppose it's a good thing that he thinks that I'm a lower rank than I really am. It will make asking him easier. A Luca rounded the corner of a row of chest-high bookshelves. She stood at the head of a narrow path to Doran, with tables of scattered papers on either side of her. Doran turned back from his desk to face her. Luca wondered if he would be able to find that paper he was just working on later, amongst the others...maybe *he* wondered that as well. She exhaled, "I've been meaning to ask you, since you helped our class by filling in for our teacher, I was

hoping you would be open to helping a little more with me." Her voice inadvertently cut out towards the end of her sentence due to nerves.

Doran raised an eyebrow as he watched her getting a little flustered. Luca sighed. "The truth is, I don't get it. I can't do magic at all." She turned to the side and leaned back, half sitting on an empty spot on one of Doran's many work tables. Beside her were stacks of books and papers with complicated writings and research. Maps, diagrams, explanations of the old and declarations of the new. Presumably, Luca thought, all developed by people who never had trouble like this straight away. Even though Kaegan wasn't going to be staying very long, it was her job to stay here and excel. "I can see the lights and hear the sounds of people with amazing skill. But, for me, it's all illusions. It's just something of my imagination."

Doran leaned back in his chair and looked up. "Hmm, well, you're right about that," he said half to himself.

"What?" Luca responded, a little too strongly, as she got off his table.

"Well, it seems obvious enough to me. If you believe that your abilities, your potential is only your imagination...something that will never exist...then that surely will only every be." Luca looked disappointed. That wasn't a technical explanation or some kinds of amazing technique. It was a generalization about behavior and mentality. "Think about it," he continued. "If one morning you woke up completely convinced 'I can't walk – it's impossible'...what would happen? You wouldn't just take a step forward and succeed because you're used to it, you just said it was impossible!" Luca considered. "You would stretch your leg out and fall completely flat on your face, overcome by your own mind." He paused and tilted his head slightly. "Why would it be any different when it comes to you and magic?" He leaned forward. "Why would it be any different with me?"

"Believe you can, first"

"Alright, here I come!" Kaegan said. He raised his wood practice sword and charged. SLAM! He hit the ground. Dirt and grass began registering as filling his nose and mouth. *What the hell just happened?* He raised his head out of the dirt to observe his instructor, Isaiah Wifall, standing over him with his own wooden sword sling back over his shoulder.

"What was that?" Wifall said. His manner of speaking was strange: A thick accent that seemed too lazy for some vowels and an emphasis on syllables that didn't normally have them. Or maybe they did. With him, you really had to rethink the word after hearing it. "Some sort of bug?" he continued as he scratched his head with his free hand. "Sorry, but you can't hit me with a charge

like that, you're far too slow. Even though you left yourself wide open, I was merciful and only gave you a reminder of your mistake."

He was right. Kaegan just realized that a steam of blood has started to form, emanating from his forehead. *When did that even happen?*

"Sir," one of the other students said, "aren't you being a little too harsh on him?"

"Wifall turned to face him. His shirt puffed out from the force of the spin and his lip twitched slightly, indicating his irritation. "As a matter of fact, I'm not. You may not realize it, but only half of you are going to stay with this program to completion. And only a couple of you are going to become decent swordsmen at all. My job is to knock you down to size so that when you quit after three days in order to pretend that you're a guard somewhere, you don't get killed because you don't have a proper comprehension about how pathetic you are."

Damn, this guy certainly doesn't lack an ego. I doubt he would have the students he does if it wasn't for the reputation he already had. Kaegan got up and spit out some of the dirt in his mouth.

"If you get yourself killed, it's not going to be my fault." The group of students stood motionlessly and silent. Although it was hard to say what he expected them to do at that time, it was less difficult to see Wifall beginning to swell with irritation. "You two!" He pointed into the mass of people with practice swords. Again, it wasn't entirely clear who the Donic man was selecting. A moment passed as everyone remained motionless. Wifall also did not drop his finger. His lip twitched again as he walked forward as if following the imaginary line he created with his finger until it jabbed into Malik's chest. "You know. Where to go. Right?" he said slowly and deliberately. Malik nodded and walked over to the mark.

Malik was an interesting character. Like Kaegan, he had to ride all the way out from the Somand Mage's College at Eyer. Trying to create a well-rounded warrior by introducing them to a variety of disciplines wasn't uncommon, particularly among members of the nobility. But they were a long way from any capitol, and there certainly was no noble blood to be found here. Furthermore, as might be expected within the soldiering community, proficiencies in magic were neither appreciated, nor desired. It was alien, unknown, and some even questioned whether it existed at all. To have two people here, within this poor, obscure group of trainees that have those kinds of intentions was an anomaly to say the least.

Even given that, Malik wasn't friends with Kaegan. They didn't even travel together to reach this place: The home of a retired soldier from the last war, using his time to build a training ground in the middle of nowhere to pay for his meals. But that was Malik's nature. A recluse whose actions you could observe, but whose motivations you could not even guess at. One thing was clear, though, he wasn't going to be intimidated by this man.

Kaegan was already on the other side in a stance. As always, Malik's presence opposite of him had nothing to do with why he was there.

"Huh?" Wifall said as he turned to look at the sparring area. "You again? Didn't you have enough of a beating the last time?" he asked, dropping his wooden sword from his shoulder and planting its tip into the dirt.

"I'm not done yet." Kaegan said with determination, despite the stream of blood that continued from his head. Damn head wounds, They never stop bleeding, do they? His vision blurred slightly, but he maintained his form.

"Fine then." Wifall said, hands on his hips. Even though it appeared that he didn't expect this, he also didn't seem to have his usual level of irritation either. Maybe this was what he expected from someone all along. "If you want to go again so badly..." he paused, "BEGIN!"

The Wisdom

By Jewels - Mar 02 2014

The Wisdom smiled down at her. Though Fiora had not faltered in her respectfully bowed position to see the curve of the woman's lips, still the wind had whispered Lady Darya's pleasure across her bare arms. Her heart pattered more quickly in the knowing, for often did The Wisdom of Kavaccet sit passively when presented with the next Bloom to leave her sanctuary.

Today Fiora was of age, sixty-five seasons to the day. Sixty-four of which she had resided in these cold marble halls among the other daughters of promise. It had been unheard of, sixteen years ago, for The Wisdom to pledge a three-month-old infant in promise, but Lady Darya was not named for Wisdom casually. None else of Kavaccet held the gift of seeing the rains of the future through the clouds of the past, and none other would until the Lady transcended the earth. The water would then choose another to flow through and The Wisdom would live on through new eyes.

Fiora did not begrudge her sisters in waiting for only having to live at the sanctuary four to twenty seasons while she had spent her whole life. It had not been a terrible childhood; she was never in want for a playmate and her family was never far away. Plus with a cavalcade of tutors around every hall corner, her learning was second to none. That Lady Darya smiled on her today, proved she had been a good student.

The Lady's words flowed from her lips, a fluid brook promising refreshment after a long day. "Stand, Bloom Fiora Sae Grue, and take your place among the Flowers of Kavaccet. Your promise, though long awaited, has come to fruition at last. May the rains of the heavens cleanse you, the flames – when they wake – refine you, the bounty of the earth strengthen you, and the wind at your back always guide you."

Fiora straightened in pride and anticipation as her sisters clapped on either side of her. Lady Darya herself walked to her and offered her an elbow in escort to the front doors. She was surprised... the Lady did not make such displays of favor lightly. She walked slowly, intent on not tripping on the white ceremonial gown that hid her toes. Her bare feet relished their last walk down the cold marble corridor.

When The Wisdom spoke to her, Fiora held her breath. Her words were quiet as snowfall and meant for no other ears. "I send you with encouragement, dear one, and with warning also. You were promised all these seasons ago because I read the streams of the past and saw both hope and despair. [i]You[/i] are our hope, that despair shall not devour us whole. Do not falter, daughter of promise, for a storm is approaching that will rent our world in two."

She did not know what to say or how to react. The revelation was so abrupt she had nothing but questions. What did the Lady mean that [i]she[/i] was their hope? With worried eyes she looked at Lady Darya to protest but they were already emerging to the streets where her family awaited her return. There was no time to get answers to unspoken questions.

One last whisper brushed her ear as The Wisdom of Kavaccet broke decorum and graced her with a fluid embrace. "You will [i]know[/i] what to do when the time comes." When she pulled away, Fiora was sure she saw tears in the woman's eyes as she looked at the lone woman who had come to pick her up, but she retreated back to her sanctuary too quickly for any to fall.

Fiora was left on the bottom steps of the dais staring at the end of the marble and the beginning of the dusty road. In all her seasons, she had never stepped foot off of the marble. Now that she was of age, everything was going to change. With one final cleansing breath she took the step and found herself instinctively cushioning her soles with the air of her element. Perhaps she never would step foot on the ground.

Looking up at her mother's smiling face, she returned the gesture with a warm hug. "Where are all the others? Why have they not come?"

A glint of pain lit behind her mother's eyes. "They are at the house waiting for you. Come daughter. Your promise awaits."

Civyl packed in a frenzy, unaware of the dozen voices that buzzed around him in protest. Clothes, boots, bedroll, rope, weapons, canteen, and food. That was all he really needed. The rest he could find or make or barter for on the way. He was ready and turned to go out the door but was blocked by a dozen disapproving faces.

“Where do you think you are going? You cannot leave today!” “He is abandoning the promise!” “But he can’t!” “He has been possessed! Look at his devil’s eye!” “Civyl Tor Dyias, you must see reason. The Bloom comes in minutes! You must wait!” “There is no reasoning with him now... There is no hope for our Fiora.”

None of these voices meant anything to him, except that these people were in his way. Could they not see how important it was for him to leave? Civyl shouldered his pack with a determined huff and started pushing past them all, knocking a few over on his way out the door. The sun welcomed him with a fresh breeze swirled around his feet and tickled his short scruffy beard. The sight he saw was the first to give him pause for the day.

A young woman – still a girl – stood in a flowing white gown before him. Her skirts ruffled in the breeze while her long brown hair danced. It looked long enough for her to have never cut it. “Civyl!” She floated to him, throwing her arms around him in a too-familiar embrace. When he did not reciprocate she stepped back in consternation. Her brows furrowed as she addressed him as if she had known him all her life. “My Civyl, wherever are you going? Why do you have your pack on?”

For some reason her questions were compelling enough to answer. His low rumbling voice sounded foreign in his own ears. “I leave for the mountain pass of Enundale. I must reach it within a fortnight.”

Her brows knit in deep creases that somehow pained him. He did not like how the girl made him feel. It was a distraction that was keeping him from the pass. “I... I don’t understand. Why?” Her bottom lip began to quiver as a strong gust of wind ripped at her skirts. “H-have... have I displeased you?” He did not have an answer, to either of her questions. He did not know why, only that he must and he did not recognize the girl though it seemed she expected him to.

Another woman walked up and gently tugged the girl aside. “The Sight has taken him,” she said loud enough for all to hear. A ring of gasps and murmurs went up while the girl’s hands flew to her face in concern.

“The Sight?” she asked, “How can he have The Sight? I thought...”

The older woman cut her off with a wave of her hand. "It does not matter how, just that it is. Once granted The Sight, one must go, and you, daughter, must go with him."

Both Civyl and the girl snapped their heads towards the woman to protest. "But I just came home..."

"She cannot come with..."

Anger flared behind the woman's eyes and no little amount of pain with it as she raised her voice. "There will be no argument! You are his promise. You will go where he goes."

The girl hid tears behind the hands that held her face as she nodded towards the woman but Civyl was not about to allow this burden to be passed onto him. No matter what guilt twisted within his gut. "I will not wait," he rumbled as he pushed past them both.

The girl called after him but he did not stop. "Go inside and pack," he heard the mother say though he had every intent to be too far from their door for the girl to be able to follow. The mountain range was far in the distance beyond Kavaccet's buildings but having set his direction and put his feet to the cobblestones eased his mind.

The rhythm of his boots slapping the earth lulled him into a sense of contentment. He was on his way to where he needed to be though he did not know what he would meet when he got there. His mind would not allow him to think on it more deeply. But his thoughts did return to the girl and her words. [i]"H-have... have I displeased you?"[/i] The words tore at him anew. She had expected something from him. They all had. And he began to expect something from himself.

So lost in thought was he, that he jumped when he heard her voice again. "I'm ready, Civyl." Snapping to attention he noticed that he was back at the small house where he had left the girl. She had not changed out of the dress but she hefted a large bag on her back, hastily packed. "I am glad you decided to come back."

He had not intended to come back and didn't understand how he could have gotten turned around. A frown creased his brow as he turned his back to her without a word. How could he have been so absent minded? Now she would be a burden to his journey. It was so quiet behind him that he hoped she had decided to stay, but when he turned to glance, she was there with head hung low not making a sound as she followed behind him. He could not even hear her footfalls. But already she was slowing him down as he looked behind himself and he huffed out his displeasure while picking up speed through the city streets. Perhaps if he moved fast enough, he could lose her around an alleyway and be free of the prickling uneasiness she brought to the back of his neck.

Sacrifice

By Nalyd - Mar 07 2014

The gods of Orthaeum had been a varied, squabbling bunch, but they shared a few traits among them. They were largely fond of birds, as their holy symbols and avatars. They capriciously involved themselves wherever they liked, regardless of their divine status. And they demanded sacrifice.

Each had their own particular rituals. Some demanded the dissection of live animals in the wilderness, some demanded the burning of crops or writing upon their altars, some demanded time spent in meditation or on symbolic tasks. Some demanded gold, some demanded blood, some demanded song. Some demanded the lives of criminals, or young maidens, or the unborn. Save for a scant few, they ritually demanded something of their worshipers in return for their favor, or just to avoid their wrath. The gods were now dead, but the sacrifices persisted, either for cultural reasons or out of vain hope. Sulla is performing a sacrifice now, due to the latter.

His withered, liver-spotted hands tremble over the owl bound on the altar before him.

"Scathach!"

A few members of his court, crowded into the small gallery, shuffled and whispered behind him, impatient. He raised his arms, as much as he could.

"Great Queen Goddess."

Sulla made this sacrifice at the beginning of every continuous session of his court. When he was younger, this meant about once every season, or less - some entire years went by where this altar went unused. Now, every seven days, a new bird had to be killed, for a dead goddess.

"I beg you for your counsel."

This was the only sacrifice Sulla still did personally. On state holidays or at public events, he had others fill in for him. He had his servants perform his personal sacrifices in his name. To those gods who did not accept sacrifice by proxy, he could only beg forgiveness.

"Your guidance."

This one, though, he still found important enough to perform with his own hands. For the queen

goddess, he still begged with his own voice, killed with his own hands. He needed to. He needed her.

"Your wisdom."

Fuck, his shoulders hurt. He had to put his arms down. He did.

"And for your teachings, I teach you, in turn."

He grabs the owl firmly by the neck, pinning it to the altar. It begins to screech. He pulls off the twine binding its wings, and they begin to beat wildly at the air. He pulls the knot tying its talons, and it tries to claw at him, but it cannot reach. And, in one swift motion, he lifts the owl and slams it down onto the stone, still screeching and flapping. As it lies there, stunned, he breaks one leg, then the other, then the wings, and then the neck. He leans on the altar heavily, for a few moments, staring at the dead bird. Before turning to his audience and descending the short steps up to the altar, as they break out in earnest conversation and begin bustling around the building. A few attendants and bodyguards flocked around Sulla as he made the short journey to his audience hall.

The dead owl would wait on the altar until it came time for the next sacrifice.

A Furry Encounter

By Zoe - Mar 07 2014

It had been nearly dusk when Kiro found his home burning. A star-filled night had already fallen by the time they had reached a distance they were comfortable with, the pale light trickling down through the foliage. Since his dad, may his soul find rest, had dropped his pack before he ran for the town—Kiro managed to find it as he and Kaiya were fleeing—they had all the supplies necessary to make camp.

If he dreamed that night, Kiro will never know. It couldn't have been exactly peaceful, however, if his cloudy mind upon waking was any evidence of the fact. A silent yawn escaped him, and he looked at Kaiya also giving a yawn with confusion before he remembered where he was. With a yelp, he stood up quickly—too quickly as he became tangled in his blankets and lightheaded and came crashing down.

"You're awake," Kaiya said simply. Whether she was just as foggy in waking up as he was, or

simply for his sake, either way she didn't let any amusement in her voice show at his spectacular performance. Since he couldn't see her face, she could've easily been smiling, but it is one more item on the list of things he will never know.

"Morning," was all Kiro said as he careful moved into a sitting position to stretch and properly wake.

"Morning," she replied as she began taking stock of supplies, something that might've been responsible to do last night.

Kiro wrenched his thoughts from it as he opened the flap to their tent to step outside. For the second time that morning, Kiro found himself startled as he came face to face with... something. It resembled a squirrel, except it was two meters tall, had a short-haired tail rather than a bushy one, and its eyes radiated intelligence, though they resembled that of a cat's. The eyes were yellow, like Kiro's, but shined almost like gold, unlike the dullness of his. They both stared, unflinching for an uncomfortable few seconds.

"Greetings, shadow painter," said the not-squirrel. The voice sounded oddly normal, also suggesting a male.

Kiro blinked three times in rapid succession before replying, with confusion evident on this face, "Umm, greetings."

Kaiya walked over and peered over Kiro's shoulder at the not-squirrel, confusion just as evident on her face. He peered into Kaiya's eyes just as he did Kiro's.

"Ah, another shadow painter. Greetings to you too."

Kaiya didn't reciprocate the greeting, merely cocking her head to the side in a mixture of confusion and curiosity.

After a pause, the strange not-squirrel continued. "You're probably wondering who or what I am. While the true name of my race and personal identification cannot be pronounced in your tongue, you can refer to me as Chitter, as have your masters of years past. You creatures seem to adore calling us the not-squirrels, so that option is open as well. Names in your tongue are arbitrary enough that it matters little. In any case, I am a friend."

Kaiya seemed a little insulted at the notion, but Kiro was too curious to care.

"Why have you approached us?" asked Kiro cautiously, frowning suspiciously at the term 'friend'.

"To put it simply, you need to leave the forest. You don't belong here. Someday, you may find yourself returning, but for now you must leave."

"You... are telling us you're a friend, yet also telling us we have to leave." Kiro deadpanned.

"Exactly." Chitter smiled. "I'm glad we have come to an understanding."

At seeing Kiro's expression, Chitter chuckled and continued before he could respond. "You might find, someday, wondering about the true nature of Shadowmancy. If you find without a doubt the starting point of what that is, we can continue this conversation. Although, I do see the mark of a true master in you, young man. Perhaps it won't be long. Until then—" Chitter dropped a pack on the ground next to him. "—farewell. Oh, and please don't go telling everyone about me."

The not-squirrel leaped away before the confused pair could respond again. Very soon, he disappeared within the depths of the forest. Kiro stared off towards where Chitter disappeared, forgetting about the pack until Kaiya lightly pushed him to the side to grab it. Inside were edibles—two weeks worth of provisions if the two were careful, Kiro estimated—as well as incredibly well crafted tools for carving a painting board.

"I remember now," Kiro said after a minute. "I remember watching your induction into the masters after you completed your exam. I can't believe I forgot you."

Kaiya shrugged. "I keep to myself. I remember you, though. And, you can consider yourself inducted as well."

"What?" Kiro replied dumbly.

Again, she shrugged. "There's no need for the exam. I already know what the result would be."

Kiro thought he would feel elated when named a master. After all, he has spent his entire life preparing, studying, practicing, and, of course, fantasizing about what he might accomplish. Yet, he felt empty.

With that feeling in mind, he, along with Kaiya, packed up camp, and began the walk in any direction.

The Promise

By Jewels - Mar 10 2014

But what was the promise for?

The question had been running through her mind since they left. She'd thought she had known... for years they had both been so sure...

The promise was a gift from The Wisdom of Kavaccet to the men of her province after they came of age. No man was required to seek his promise though there were few who would refuse. Each was welcome to claim it at any time after their sixty-fourth season though none knew what their promise would be until Lady Darya spoke the words. It could take many forms. A scholarly education, intense weapons training, material possession, or... the promise of a Kavaccet Bloom.

Any daughter of promise that was not yet of age would move to the Sanctuary to keep them safe, both from those who would seek to destroy someone else's promise and from those who would be impatient with their own. Usually when a man was promised with a woman it meant the two would be wed and allowed to start a family, though not always. She had heard of some women becoming companions, housekeepers, or helpers for the infirm.

Civyl had sought out his promise on his seventieth season, or so everyone had told her. He had not been happy at first... to be gifted with an infant. She could only imagine his initial grief in having to wait, though he had always assured her she was worth it. She had known him her whole life. He had read her bed time stories and played games with her when she was little, helped with her studies and engaged her in all manner of higher learning as she grew. More recently they talked of their future together. All strictly supervised, of course, but on her 60th season he did sneak a kiss when the matrons were not watching. That had been a Season of Birth to remember.

She loved him and he loved her, of that she had no doubt. The age difference did not matter. The wait did not matter. This very day was to be their wedding day... but now, he didn't know her, barely even acknowledged her or the promise The Wisdom had given him.

It seemed incredibly unfair to wait for something for so long only to have it ripped away... Still, she was his promise. Surely the Lady had known that The Sight would take Civyl that day. If the promise was not to be his wife... then what?

What was the promise for?

The sun had passed the tops of the trees an hour ago. It was going to be dark soon and his burden had not been lifted. She never made a sound but the girl was ever behind him, often with tears streaked down her face when he would sneak a glance. He hated the guilt that twisted his gut whenever he saw her sorrow. He had not asked her to come... told her not to, even. So why did he feel responsible for her pain?

He had left the comfort of the road behind in favor of traveling as straight as he could without a set of birds' wings. He had hoped that it would cause her to lag behind but she was never more than three paces away. It impressed him that she could keep up – the girl looked too delicate to be used to this kind of travel, and yet, even with the pack on her back, she did not huff and puff with exertion like he did now. It vexed him to think that she might have the better stamina.

He almost tripped when she finally did speak, her voice harsh from dryness. "May we stop here for the night?" He turned to take in her weary eyes, red and puffy with the day of mourning the loss of whatever it was she expected of him. Now that he saw her face he thought he had judged wrong. The child looked ready to collapse. Though it meant his pride recovered, a new stab of guilt filled him for pushing her so hard.

He shoved the feeling aside and grunted in disapproval at her but looked at the area. The woods around them had opened up into a small clearing where the ground was relatively flat and he could hear the babbling of the brook he had been keeping to his right. It was not a terrible place to make camp. He just wished it had been closer to his destination. With only a nod, he set down his pack. A modicum of relief flickered in her features as she did the same.

He dug out his canteen, shoving it in her direction. "Here, go make yourself useful and fill this up," he ordered. They were the first words he had spoken to her since saying she could not come. He had not meant it to sound so harsh, but perhaps that would be best. He did not want her to think that he was happy with her presence. Maybe without her mother's nagging, she would decide to leave his company.

To the girl's credit, she did not flinch, though there was pain in her eyes as she looked to the forest floor. "Yes, sir," she whispered, addressing him as if he were a stranger and a part of him cringed at the loss of her familiarity.

He watched her disappear behind the trees, movements so fluid they seemed surreal. He caught himself staring long after she had gone from sight. Bah, she was a distraction! He must see to

camp. He started gathering the sticks that littered the ground. The cloudless sky meant there was no danger of rain, but the night would be chilled. They would need a fire to keep warm.

It was simple work to set up the sticks in a tepee that would let the fire breathe deep as it first woke up. There was a rhythm to the fire building that set his heart at ease. He prepared dried grass and dead leaves for the kindling bringing out his flint to wake the spark. His fingers were eager to feel the stone against the steel and soon his tinder was pouring smoke.

Her voice was shrill across the clearing. “No! Stop!” His head snapped up fearing a threat but they were the only two in the clearing. “Civyl,” she yelled, “put the fire back to sleep!” What in all Kavaccet was she on about? They needed a fire to keep warm. When he ignored her she ran towards him and shoved him away from his carefully made kindle nest where he could see the tip of a flame starting to emerge. He was too shocked at her outburst to react immediately but cried out in protest when she stomped on it with her bare foot, smothering the flame back to rest.

An indignant anger rose from his belly hotter than the White Flame of Tarous. He scrambled to his feet in a rage. “Stupid girl! You’ve ruined it!” He raised his arm to strike her but the look on her face stayed his hand. Scared, yes, but not of him. Scared of the fire that she constantly glanced down at. Instead he grabbed her roughly by the shoulders and shook her as he growled. “Do you *want* to freeze tonight, girl?!”

Her eyes were moist but defiant in the face of his berating. “Do you remember *nothing*?!” she asked as if it would be enough to answer her erratic behavior. When he didn’t give her a reply her voice was urgent on the verge of breaking. “The fire has *forbidden* you to wake it! Civyl, *my* Civyl, it would consume you if you tried!” He loosened his grip at her admonition trying to understand her words. Forbidden by the fire? It didn’t make sense, but her fear for him was real.

She reached up a hand to stroke the right side of his face with a tenderness that his anger did not deserve. He could barely feel her fingertips as they traced a bumpy line from his eyebrow to his cheekbone, “You have been marked by the flame,” she whispered with a catch in her voice. “It... it has rejected you as a wielder.” His hand followed the same line to feel the scar that existed where his right eye should be. He hadn’t even noticed his tapered vision... What else did the girl know about him that he did not?

His hand came to rest on hers where she held his cheek and she smiled at him. It twisted his insides and reminded him of something he had forgotten. *She was a distraction.* He shoved her hand away ignoring her frown and allowed himself to wallow in his anger as he addressed her gruffly. “Fine, no fire. Did you get the water at least, girl?”

Her own anger flared at him. *Good.* Perhaps it would make her leave. “Here is your water, *sir.*” She shoved the canteen out towards him and spat on the ground. Coming from her, it seemed a

curse. *All the better.* He took it and went to sit by his pack. It was going to be a cold night. The girl in the sleeveless gown would surely regret losing the warmth. ...*Perfect.*

He turned his back to her and the fire pit feeling an inexplicable sense of loss though he wasn't sure from what. *Best not to think about it then.* It would also be a distraction to his goal. The mountain pass in a fortnight was difficult to begin with. It would be worse with his late start and he didn't see it getting better while she tagged along. Instead of thinking, he ate, not caring if the girl had remembered provisions of her own. If he rationed his dried fruit and salted pork it should last him another four days. He would have to keep his eyes open for hunting and foraging opportunities on the way.

The crackle of burning sticks startled him as he turned to see she had awoken the fire. "What are you doing, girl? I thought you said no fire!"

Her eyes flared in disdain. "My *name* is Fiora!" she spat, though her demeanor quickly changed to thoughtful. "The fire has forbidden *you* to wake it. It has not forbidden *me*." He thought he caught a slight smile cross her face. "Do not fear, my Civyl. You will not freeze tonight. *I promise.*" The breeze blew a stray hair out of her face as it brought a tinkling of laughter to his ear, though he did not understand what she found funny.

The Forbidden

By Jewels - Mar 13 2014

It was hours till sunrise but Civyl was already up. He packed as quietly as he could so he wouldn't wake the girl. The sooner he separated himself from her the better, for both their sakes he reasoned since she was only half a day's walk from Kavaccet. She could return to town easily enough and he would be free of her burden. At least that's what he kept telling himself.

It was still really dark so he had prepared a torch to take with him. The girl's admonitions about not wielding the fire made him feel like a fool for listening. It was nonsense that the fire would have anything against him. She had made it up to mock him for being harsh to her, he was sure. He stuck the end of the torch into the red hot embers smiling when the waking flames started to lick their way up the oil soaked head.

He pulled the torch back and held it aloft... such a beautiful display of hungry colors dancing just for him; he could not look away. Forbidden to wield the flame? Ha! If anything the fire was calling to him, whispering his name with overlapping crackles and hisses. *Civyl, Civyl... Civyl.* It was a siren song rejoicing in his presence, eager to dance with him. The flames leapt from the

torch to meet him with a gentle caress and for a moment Civyl felt like he had found something dear to him that he had lost a long time ago.

The moment was fleeting, though, as an intense heat reared up and the fire snarled angrily catching on his shirt sleeve. Civyl was so startled that he threw the torch away from him. It landed with a thud in the dirt and sputtered while he tried frantically to pat down the fire that blazed on his arm without crying out in pain. When he finally managed to smother it back to sleep, both his hand and arm were charred and blistering. *Tears of Wisdom!!* How could he be so careless??

Thankfully the girl still slept. He bit his lip to hold back the moan when he painfully pulled the stopper off his canteen and poured some of the water onto his wounds. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched as the torch went back to sleep. Had the flame really attacked him? ...or had he just gotten too close? Civyl shook his head at the ridiculous thought. It did not matter anyway because the sky was beginning to brighten. He'd be able to see well enough without a torch.

With one final look over his shoulder at the blanketed girl Civyl hefted his pack and took off to the northeast. He breathed a sigh of relief when he finally started putting some distance between them. Even though his arm stung like a Kracken's Whip he didn't let it slow him down as he started to jog. If he kept up his pace he'd be able to regain the ground he had lost with her yesterday. He might even have a couple miles head start by the time she woke, and he smiled at the thought. Just as quickly, the familiar guilt wiped it off his face. He shoved it away with anger at himself for letting it bother him. *She was a distraction!* And one he couldn't afford.

After a good thirty ticks of jogging, the smell of smoke tickled his nose. There was another campfire smoldering up ahead and he slowed to a crawl so he could skirt any travelers without a fuss. He kept the clearing to his right as he snuck past noting just one lump sleeping near the fire. Most likely a gruff, bearded loner... possibly trying to evade the laws of Kavaccet. With a sudden sense of worry he wondered if the girl might try to follow him and wander upon this traveler alone... Would she be safe?

Bah! What did he care? If the girl tried to follow him, that was her own folly! Still, though, it nagged at him. Civyl's eye fell on the pack next to the sleeper - lumpy with provisions - and a darker thought crept into his mind. If he took the man's pack with him, he wouldn't have to slow down to hunt and forage as soon. All he'd have to do is sneak over and cut the man's throat while he slept effectively killing two rabbits with one arrow. He wouldn't have to worry about the safety of the girl and he'd be able to get to the mountain faster. With a cringe he imagined the girl trying to track him and coming upon this scene. Surely she would not want to be a companion to a murderer... *All the better, indeed.*

Mind made up, Civyl lowered his pack soundlessly and withdrew the dagger from his boot. At least it was his left hand that had been burned and not his weapon wielding one. In the rising

light he snuck closer to the burlap wrapped stranger. May the Wisdom forgive him for taking another's life, but his mission was so urgent... perhaps the protection of the girl would ease his need for later atonement.

Only two steps more and he could strike. His adrenaline started pumping with the thought. He glanced around quickly, noting no other weapons lying next to the man, except maybe that large club left carelessly on the opposite side of the fire. Civyl lifted his head for a better look at it, good eye registering one charred end. His mind worked in two different directions as he reached his target. One part of him lifted his arm for the strike just as the other recognized the torch he had thrown to the ground just ticks earlier. His heart beat out a ferocious rhythm as his confusion settled into horror at what his knife was ready to do. The lump beneath him rustled and rolled bringing her face into view as his hunter's instincts drove his arm down for the kill.

"Civyl?" she blinked sleepily at the man who leaned over her now, face but two inches from hers. Fiora could feel the heat of his body, he was so close. For a moment her heart leapt, thinking that perhaps he had remembered who she was and had come to claim his bride at last, but there was a wild fear in his eye as he stared at her. Her senses came alive with the pump of adrenaline her own fear brought. "What?! What's wrong?!"

She stared at him with wide-eyes, trying to read the storm on his face as he lifted himself with deliberate slowness. His voice was a gruff rumble deep in his chest. "Nothing... Nothing is wrong." The sound of his knife being withdrawn from the ground just two inches past her ear drew her gaze. "I just... saw a snake, is all."

"*SNAKE!?*" Her heart constricted at the word as she recoiled from the ground where his knife had been. There was nowhere else to go but into his arms to get away from the vile creature. She literally climbed onto him as he sat back with a grunt that her mind barely registered through her fear. "I *hate* snakes! It was *two inches* from my *head*?! Ooohhh uuugh..." She shuddered at the thought as she stared at the spot ready to bolt if there was any sign of movement.

"It's gone now," he reassured into her hair with slow and careful words as if afraid he would frighten her again. "It moved before I could catch it."

Awareness of where she actually was dawned on her with a creeping heat. As familiar as he was to her, Fiora still remembered she was a stranger to him. She peeked at his face with a hesitant sideways glance and she could not read his expression apart from the way the left corner of his mouth twitched. He only did that when he was really upset about something. "Thank you," she whispered as she pulled away, "for scaring it away, I mean."

She started to get up but he gasped in pain when she tried to push off of his arm. She froze as she looked at him in concern. “What is it? Did the snake bite you?” but her eyes found the charred remains of his shirt sleeve and she groaned with chiding. “Oh Civyl... I *told* you! The fire forbids you use it.” He looked away sheepishly as she scooted backwards off his lap. “Here, let me look at it.”

He pulled away, though, and started to get up. “No, it’s fine. We’ve wasted enough of the morning. You need to pack.”

“It’s not fine, Civyl. It needs to be dressed so it doesn’t become infected.” She caught his hand to pull him back but he jerked it away with another gasp. The fresh blisters on his palm were clear in the morning light. “Your hand, too?!” she exclaimed with reproach.

“It’s nothing, girl!” he snapped stomping away from her.

Fiora’s ire rose in the face of his blatant disregard for his own health and his insistence to consider her a child. No more niceties, she would show him what he had forgotten she was capable of. “*Civyl Tor Dyias*,” she shouted as the air around her feet started to whip into a frenzy. “You will *sit down* and *hold still* while I take care of your wounds or *so help me I’ll...*”

“*You’ll what?!*” he spun around brandishing his knife with a dangerous glint in his eye. It reminded her of the hours they had spent sparring as part of her training, but Fiora had never before feared that he might actually hurt her.

She had surprise on her side in this fight, at least. With a sweep of her arm a gust of wind came down from the north enough to make him stumble back. As he tried to right himself and brace against the wind she switched to a counter-gust from the south that used his own momentum to send him staggering over her pack. As his body fell forward, his hand dropped the knife and a pulling blast from the west snatched it out of the air burying it next to her bare toe.

He lay sprawled face forward for a few stunned moments before rolling over to stare at her in surprise. Fiora dropped her arms and grabbed up the knife walking towards him with a scowl. She pointed the tip of the dagger at him and yelled, “*Now sit there!* I don’t want to hear another word about wasting time. What good is your mission if you die of infection on the way?”

It must have gotten through to him because he made no move except to fold his legs under himself and sit up straighter. Fiora gave him a curt nod and ignored his confusion when she started lifting her skirt. There were a couple of layers to her dress. The middle ones would be the cleanest for his bandages.

She used the knife to cut the silk into strips and kneeled in front of him with them. He did not complain as she inspected his wounds closer. It was not as bad as she had first thought. His hand was only blistered and boasting an angry red. As long as the blisters did not open up there would be no chance for infection. Still to protect the damaged skin while it healed, she wrapped it in the silk securely.

His forearm, however, was much worse. The skin was broken and bleeding in an area as big as an apple. He had not cooled it down quickly enough and if he used the water from the brook to wash it... infection was likely to follow.

Still, if she could draw out some of its heat and dry the area thoroughly, there might be less chance for the infection to fester. With a twirl of her finger, she brought a cool breeze to blow across his arm and Civyl sighed in momentary relief. He watched her with a curious expression and she finally gave in to breaking the silence. "You have a question for me?"

He seemed hesitant, rethinking the way he would talk to her she hoped. "How do you do that?" he finally asked.

"Move the air?" she clarified with a shrug, "It is my element. It speaks to me and I listen. It also listens when I speak. So right now I asked the wind to blow across your arm to cool it down and dry the wound." He listened intently and nodded as she cut away the useless tatters of his sleeve. "I've talked to the wind for so long that sometimes I don't even have to think about what I want; the wind just knows."

She started wrapping his arm in her white silks wishing that the dress had meant something more and fell into silence while she worked. His gruff voice was barely a whisper but the wind carried it clearly to her ear, "The fire said my name." She looked up at his shining eye, distant in the memory. "It was so beautiful, dancing with joy... I felt like it wanted me to join in the dance, right before it..." he broke off with only a nod at his arm.

Fiora nodded as she tied the final knots. "It is your element," she said gently then smiled at her own memory. "When I was a little girl you *did* dance with the fire, in the Courts of The Wisdom for whoever cared to watch. Lady Darya always said it was for my entertainment, but I'm pretty sure she really liked watching you, too."

She kept her eyes on his arm even though she was done dressing it until the silence dragged on too long for even her comfort. "I should pack," she said crisply as she rocked back on her feet. "Don't want to keep the mountain pass waiting."

He caught her hand with his fingers before she pulled away and she looked into his searching face. "Why did the fire forsake me?"

She knew the question had been coming and was ready to answer it. "Because you used it to kill a man."

Fiora straightened up and stretched then offered him a hand to stand up. He blinked at the offer before deciding to take it. He still groaned in pain at the pull on his arm. This was going to be a long journey... "Can you at least try to be more careful from now on?" she let a smile cross her lips when he frowned at her. Surely she must sound like a clucking hen in his ears, but maybe a little chiding was what he needed right now. She placed her hand on his good arm and made sure she had his attention. "If you ever survive past having The Sight, I want you in *one piece*."

The Listener

By Jewels - Mar 13 2014

Civyl put the remaining embers of the fire to sleep with the rest of his canteen of water. The girl has asked for a few minutes of privacy by the brook and he was more than happy to allow it. He did not want her to witness his current distress. His hands trembled when he retrieved his pack and he took several deep breaths trying to calm himself in futility.

He was shaken; his stomach tied in knots. ...*he had almost killed her*. The physical ache in Civyl's belly was more misery, by far, than his hand or arm. A wrenching made worse by sight of the finger shaped bruises on her arms where he had grabbed her the night before. No more pseudo-guilt over things he did not remember from his former life. True guilt now twisted his insides.

But why did he care?? He didn't even know her. He hated that he cared! He had known the girl would be trouble from the very start and he had tried to leave her behind... twice! How could he have circled around?? He'd kept the sound of the brook to his right, hadn't he? Now that he tried to focus on it, he couldn't be sure. Time and energy had been wasted trying to separate himself from her. Again! He was starting to think it wasn't his sense of direction. He was starting to fear it was something darker.

Was it another enchantment, like her power over the wind? That she could keep him tethered to her even while she slept? It did not seem possible, but then again, neither did the wind answering

a mere girl's request. More than ever he wished to be rid of her. More than a distraction, *she was dangerous*.

He did not hear her footfalls when she returned, but a cough and a stirring of the leaves around his feet told him she was back. He turned to glance as she went right to work putting things back into her pack. He frowned at her appearance, still in the same dress as yesterday. Its fabric hung all the way to her feet ready to snag on any stray branch, bramble, or bush. It would slow them down if she didn't put on some trousers. "Aren't you going to change?" he grumbled hoping she also had something with long sleeves to cover up the evidence of his abuse.

"Worried I'll get your future bandages dirty?" she tried to joke but no laughter found her eyes. The girl would not look at him and he felt a shift in her demeanor. She turned her attention back to packing before giving him a more somber answer. "I... I have no other clothes..."

"What?! Why in all Kavaccet would you not pack more clothes??"

She turned on him with a stiff breeze ruffling her hair. "I don't *own* any other clothes!" she huffed before rolling her bedroll with a bit more force. "If you remembered *anything* about me, you'd know I grew up at the Sanctuary. The Bloom comes into her promise with nothing else."

Bloom, promise, Sanctuary... none of these words held any meaning to him, but he did remember the forlorn words she had uttered the day before. "*But I just came home...*" Could it be the girl owned nothing? "Didn't your family know you were coming? Didn't they prepare?"

She pursed her lips as her chin quivered. Her voice was very quiet. "I did not have time to ask." Another sting of guilt. Oh, how she vexed him! With a few yanks of the chord, she finished securing what she did have. "The pack and bedroll belonged to my father," she commented with a gentle stroke to its rough fabric before hefting it onto her shoulder. "Everything else my mother provided me with."

She looked at him expectantly and he hefted his pack as well. He did not know why but he felt the need to ask, "Your father does not need his pack?"

The wind died to a standstill though her face showed no emotion as she stared at him. "My father is dead." She turned her back on him and started towards the mountain pass at a good clip. He had to rush to keep up with her.

Fiora blew out a breath as the wind dried her tears before they fell. The man behind her followed

without a word and she tried to keep a pace that would give him no reason to speak. Easier to mourn in silence. She missed her father fiercely and the last two years without his encouragement had been very trying. What would he think of her now? Floating through the forest with... a man who might as well be a stranger tromping behind. But quickly she shoved thoughts of her father aside. She had already mourned his passing and made peace with his death. Dwelling on his memory would not change things.

The fact remained she *was* floating through the forest... with a *stranger* tromping behind. The morning had proved it to her. Not when he woke her or when she chided him for ignoring her warning about the fire. No, she had not been listening then.

When she had asked for a few private moments before packing he had not made a fuss and even seemed relieved. Out of sight and down the bank, she had walked straight into the water gasping as the chill woke all her senses. The deepest part of the brook only came up to her knees but it was more than enough to dunk herself under. She held her breath for a few minutes letting the water flow over her limbs and cleanse her for the upcoming day. Fiora wondered if the water would carry news of her passing to the Lady in her Sanctuary – home – which now felt so very far away.

Rising from the water, it clung to her weighing down both hair and dress as if asking her to tarry longer. But there was no more time to enjoy the luxury of the water's caress. She found a rock to stand atop and lifted her arms. A whirlwind of air rushed about drying her off and Fiora closed her eyes. This was her favorite part of the day; when she could just listen.

But today she had not like what she heard. The wind whispered across her skin things that did not make sense. Civyl was retrieving his pack from beyond the clearing. When had he set it there? And why? It was in the wrong direction. The air also brought her a description of the stick he had tried to wield, the smell of oil suggested a torch. What need had he for taking the flame with him? Then a breeze brought news that the ground to the north had been recently disturbed by long-strided footfalls. If she had woken to find Civyl gone, the trail would have made more sense, but had he left and returned instead? For what purpose?

The most disturbing piece of information that the wind had shared was an answer to her direct question. She had asked it where the snake Civyl had scared off was so she could avoid it with a wide berth. But the wind could not find the snake or any evidence of its retreating path. Nor did it whisper *any* sign of *any* snake within an hour's walk. Either the snake could move without disturbing the ground or there had been no snake at all. She shuddered to hope that a snake was capable of such movement, but she did not even know what to think if the alternative were true.

As the last bit of moisture had been carried away to feed the clouds, Fiora dropped her hands with a sinking feeling. Confusion swirled in her mind and her heart as she had come to a

realization. The man in the clearing – who had woken her with the sound of his knife in her ear – was not *her* Civyl.

No, the man behind her now was a stranger and she should not trust him to honor her as Civyl would. *Why then*, she scolded herself, *do you blindly let him walk behind you?* But she did not need her vision to keep an eye on him. Better for him to think she could not see what he was doing. Fiora opened herself up to the words of the wind as she moved forward and just listened.

Nine Days

By Luca - Mar 19 2014

Light flowed over the old, worn tables in these new south western classrooms. Unlike most of the original hard stone construction from the first foundation four hundred years ago, this one was part of an expansion in the last fifty years. It also had the unusual characteristic of being easy to see in. On the other hand, basking in so much light in an enclosed space such as this had an unwanted side effect: Extraordinary heat. Consequently, when students finally had access to adequate lighting, they had to ask themselves if it was really a good thing. The old foundation classes filled up first.

Ren Therin did not allow his students to open the windows for fear that the wind rolling down the mountains might carry his papers off to another world. Though it was stifling, old age seemed to have given Therin the characteristic of being cold-blooded and the heat was an advantage to him. And so the windows remained shut. The latches had not been moved in so long, Luca began to wonder whether or not it was possible for them to open at all anymore without breaking. It seemed likely that nothing was going to change, given the broken statuettes of letters on the window sill. They had been there since last year and probably much longer. *If they remain there much longer, they will become a national monument*, she thought.

On the other side of the room from this ancient artifact, sat Therin behind his extravagant desk. It wasn't extravagant from its intricate carvings or from the origins of its wood. No, it was extravagant for no reason other than its enormous size. Sometimes it seemed like Therin did whatever it took to never be in close proximity to his students. He, therefore, enjoyed having this desk very much, as it acted like a fortress that was unreachable from the grubby hands of untrained mages. An odd preference, given that he was an instructor at this school and the head of the Defensive Magic division at that. You would have thought that a teacher would be in the business for the enjoyment of teaching, but it was hard to say why Therin taught. He didn't appear to be doing it for the money.

Being taught by the head of the Defensive Magic division, that unsurprisingly made this a Defensive Magic class. That was a politically correct term for learning the art of magically tying people up and electrocuting them, among other things. That said, "Setting People on Fire: Level I" might attract people for the wrong reasons.

"And it's my job to handle that, so pay attention if you want to pass," Therin's voice carried clearly throughout the room, but he made no attempt to move around the space. He would stand if it was necessary for a demonstration but, for the most part, students were safe from being stared down or otherwise harassed.

"I don't think I appreciate his lack of effort," Kyle said. "Him sitting down like that."

Crisis, why is he here? Luca thought. *Why is he here-here?* Indeed, even though Kyle neither liked nor got along with Luca, he had chosen to sit next to her for the duration of this class. Kaegan said it was just a weird attempt at flirting, but Luca knew that Kyle was nothing more than a benign tumor.

"Consequently, at this point during the year, the college analyzes the potential of all students between the ranks of two and five to determine whether or not it is prudent for them to continue their studies here." Therin continued as his right hand drummed the desk.

"He said that he teaches this class late in the day and is worn out," Kyle continued trying to talk to an uninterested Luca over the sound of Therin's voice.

Unbelievable! Luca mentally screamed. *This is important and I don't know enough about magic to send a bolt of energy through his skull!*

Nonchalantly, Kyle continued: "But, I think he tells people he's 'saving his energy' when he's teaching his morning classes and sits then too." Luca shifted in her chair. She didn't much care for Therin either, but wasn't about to agree with something that Kyle said. Even so, if she did have a problem with Therin, it wasn't because of his preference to sit.

"Therefore," Therin said a bit louder, glancing over at Kyle, "from this point, you will have nine days to prepare yourself to qualify for a seat as a third rank." He paused and flipped through some of the pages of his notes, read for a second, and looked back up. "Third rank," he repeated with more confidence. Kyle began talking again, but Luca already mentally set him to 'mute'. The instructor continued on to a review strategy or something. But, at this point, that didn't matter either.

She already knew what the test was going to be about: spell casting. *Nine days.* She looked out

the window by her desk and picked up a piece of one of the broken stone letters off of the window sill. They were probably older than she was. She considered how many faces they had seen in this class before her. *Nine days to actually do magic for real.* She squeezed the letter in her hand. That will have to be good enough.

Arrival

By Sylae - Mar 19 2014

The *Star of Dawn* plows through the unending waves, sailing hard to the northeast. Talryn stands at the bow of the ship, gazing out at the empty ocean surrounding them. They'd been sailing hard for ten days, trying to catch up with Bortan's ship, which had a significant lead.

Just before they had made sail and departed Pyrus, word had reached them that an unidentified commercial ship had slipped past the navy, sailing towards one of the many waypoint markers dotting the ocean. Both Jhyl and Talryn had concluded that it would be travelling between these waypoints. Merchantmen like the one Bortan had commandeered did not carry enchanted Leyflow devices to calculate the location of Pyrus, and thus had to stop at these waypoints, which moved periodically, to obtain new bearings.

Although they'd narrowed the gap, Bortan still had a full day's lead and had had the wind's favor for much of the journey. Talryn had become increasingly aware of the fact that this was a fight he would likely need to take to land. Three days ago they had stopped at their last waypoint, a static beacon manned by a lonely old man who had confirmed that the only other ship had sailed by a half-day ago without stopping.

Talryn squints at the horizon, searching for any sign of the mainland. The horizon here is much lighter than the deep blue of the oceans, indicating it is nearby, but that doesn't ease Talryn's mind. The night before, Jhyl and Talryn had agreed to split off, Jhyl searching the coastline's many nooks and bays for any sign of the ship, and Talryn investigating at the only deepwater port nearby, a small town called Autumnsford.

Jhyl steps forward and leans against the rail next to Talryn, "Autumnsford is still a couple hours out," he says in his thick accent, gesturing off to the northeast. "I've decided to head up the north coast after dropping you off, Talryn. If they had anything to do with Eiloa they'd be heading that way," he gestures.

"You are probably correct, Captain," Talryn replies. "If we are only two hours out, I'd better head

belowdecks and stow my things." He nods and walks aft to the ladder and then to his cabin in the ship. Beyond some papers lying on the desk, and some clothes, it does not take him long to pack everything away. He straps his sword onto his waist, slips one of his smaller leystones into a pocket, shoulders his pack, and heads abovedecks.

No sign of the ship anywhere. Talryn screams internally as the *Star* swings into the harbor, parley flag waving below the banner of Pyrus on its mainmast. On the far side of the heavily-forested harbor, a town sits, clinging to the land next to a river. Three large stone piers stick out into the harbor, half-full of foreign merchantmen and fishing boats. The *Star* eases up to the largest pier as its sails are pulled shut, two men leaping off the port side with padded bumpers and ropes to lash the ship in place.

The gangplank descends and Talryn walks down to the pier, his stomach lurching as he steps fully onto the land. The pier is bustling with activity, but shortly two soldiers bearing an unknown emblem, presumably that of Autumnsford, step forward, followed closely by an angry customs inspector.

Talryn steps forward, "Good aftern--"

"What is the meaning of this?" The angry man screams, interrupting Talryn, "You think you can just sail military vessels into port now?"

Talryn sighs, "I am an Eye of Pyrus sent here searching for a man by the name of Bortan. Have any ships docked in the last day bearing the ensign of Pyrus?"

"You bloody well know there has!" the inspector screams, "and I won't be having any of this nonsense from you too! Now tell me why there is a naval ship from a foreign country on *my* dock!"

"Because we had three choices of piers and we accidentally chose the one manned by the village idiot," Talryn growls at the man, "We are not some invading force here to cause trouble, I'm just trying to catch a criminal and we'll be out of here in half an hour. That Pyrian ship that was here earlier, what direction did it go and did it drop anyone off?"

"I..." the customs inspector pauses, then shakes his head, "They dropped off three men, and told us to turn any other Pyrian vessels away. I don't know what direction their ship went though. Ar-
_"

"Thank you for your help, sir. That's all I will be needing." Talryn nods to Jhyl up on the ship and pushes his way through the crowd on the pier.

The Tether

By Jewels - Mar 26 2014

The sun was high over their heads before Civyl felt the first pangs of hunger in his belly. He glanced at the girl who strode relentlessly forward without a word. Never too fast to keep up with but never too slow for his urge to press on. Something had definitely changed in her demeanor towards him. Perhaps just the sting of being reminded her Father was dead but this seemed a long time to brood.

He was about to suggest that they stop for noonday meal when she stopped dead in her tracks. He swerved and stumbled to avoid running into her, an exclamation of disdain poured instinctively from his throat, "*Forsaken Promise*, girl!" Irritatingly she completely ignored him and stood stoic and silent with the wind that spun gently around her the only sign of movement. With a growl, he straightened up and moved around her. "If you're not going to give some warning maybe you shouldn't take the lead." She did not respond to his outburst. She didn't even look at him. He turned to stare her down, "Hey, are you listening to me?" Nothing. She didn't even blink. Civyl leaned in closer giving her arm a shove, "Girl?"

With a whoosh that sent leaves flying skyward her head snapped up to the treetops and Civyl stumbled back a step. When he looked again, her unblinking eyes were glazed over with swirling clouds and silver streaks. Her lips parted in shallow gasps of fear or awe or both. He gave both her shoulders a gentle shake, "Hey, snap out of it," but no amount of noise or nudging would rouse her.

Dew-soaked Tinder! What new sorcery was this... and how long would it delay him?

Fiora had never listened for so long. She had never had the opportunity. Every day had been scheduled for her with a variety of studies including cultural humanities, etiquette, negotiation skills, geography, plant identification, elemental respect, fire waking, water purification, earth abundance, and – for one small part of the day – wind reading, which wasn't even the same as listening. Everyone can learn to read the wind, but the wind speaks to only those born in its season. That did not touch the time spent learning and appreciating the arts or learning to defend

from and defeat an enemy. No, it was a rare occasion that she had the luxury of listening to the wind for a full tick let alone half a day. At least that was one thing she could be grateful for now; limitless listening.

So in tuned with the whispers on her skin, she had closed her eyes and trusted them completely to carry her onward. Like basking in the embrace of a loved one's arms – being few and far between in her life – Fiora let herself enjoy the ever present company of the breeze. If she never had to do anything else, she would be happy. With a sigh of contentment she thanked her element and offered a heartfelt homage, *May I never be without your touch.*

Fiora, Fioooooora... Fiooooooraaaaa. Her name breathed across her cheek and tickled her toes. She couldn't stop the corners of her mouth from lifting. It seemed the wind was just as happy to be with her. As if in response to her smile, it whispered her name again up and down her arms causing her to shiver. *Fioooooorrrrrraaa...*

Her eyes popped open as the wind took bodily form in front of her with a smile. She had never seen her element like this before and was awestruck. She couldn't look away and she didn't want to. It consumed all her senses; there was only the wind – nothing else. It teased her hair and ruffled her skirt as misty hands reached out to take hers. *Who are you?* she asked.

But the wind only laughed – an airy rustle, *Youuu knooooow mmeeeee.*

Still unable to take in what was happening, she asked a different question. *What does this mean?*

Again the wind laughed as its hands brushed their way up her arms, passed her shoulders, and cupped both sides of her face. There was a light in its eyes that shown with silver as it brought its face intimately close. She was not afraid. The wind had cradled her since she'd been born. It was the one constant that she could always count on. She *did* know the wind and it knew her, better than she knew herself. *...veeeessssaaaal...* The word was a kiss that parted her lips and she did not resist.

The wind rejoiced with a whoosh as she breathed it in. It filled her lungs and her limbs and her soul until there was no difference between them. They were one. *They were the wind.*

He took the otherwise wasted time to eat a quick lunch and visit the brook for a drink and a wash. She still had not moved from her spot after a good twenty ticks and Civyl was losing patience. The pull of the mountain dug into him like a fishhook on Mount Enundale's line and his gaze turned to his goal. He wasn't going to wait for her.

Civyl took off towards the mountain being careful to keep the brook's babble close to his right. Maybe if she was otherwise occupied – and he paid careful attention – he'd be able to slip away from her hold. The further he got from her, though, the more difficult it was to concentrate. While the sound of the brook never left his ear, he did not notice that it had switched sides until he wandered right back to her again. *Could he not be rid of her?!*

He turned on his heel angry with himself for not noticing sooner, and took slow and deliberate steps away from the girl counting his paces. Each one seemed harder to take. With each one his anger at her grew. Weights were being added to his legs until at almost one hundred he could not lift them for another step. There was no doubt in his mind now. An enchantment held him and he could not leave her behind.

Furious resignation set in as he closed his eye; he was stuck with the girl. When he opened it again, he found his feet beating a frantic pace back the way he had come. Without the conscious effort to leave, his body unconsciously returned to her side. It was infuriating but what could he do?

Kill the girl...

The thought was so abrupt it caused him to stumble. His knees hit the dirt close enough to see her bare toes peeking out from under her gown. Was that really an option to him? Did he really want to go that far? A hunger that warned of starvation pulled him towards the mountain again. She was a burden *forced* on him by invisible chains. His indignation rose and his sense of justice demanded resolve. If it could free him for his quest... *Yes! Kill the girl...*

He picked himself up and brushed himself off. She still stood as statuesque as before with her head tipped up exposing her vulnerable neck. It would be so easy to kill her. A knife across her throat and he would be free of her. "Why do you taunt me?!" he yelled at her unmoving form. "You are a burden to my quest! You hold me back from the mountain!" he closed the gap between them a fiery fury searing through his veins. "*Say something!*" he shouted, but she did not.

In a blink he found his fingers wrapped around her neck, heartbeat thrumming a rapid pace under his touch. Civyl's mind echoed the hate filled thought over and over, *Kill the girl... Kill the girl!* Rage blinded him as his fingers began to squeeze. Soon he would be free. She gurgled as her lungs tried to fill with the element he was denying them and he clamped down harder.

He would be rid of her once and for all!

The Manifestation

By Jewels - Mar 28 2014

She was flying. She was the wind, blowing across the land faster than a bird could soar. She did not have any agenda nor did she care to have one. Free to go wherever she might, Fiora only enjoyed it. Trees whipped by underneath her too fast to identify the type. Flatlands gave way to foothills as she crept higher to play with the clouds. The mountain pass of Enundale loomed, currently free of the shadow of its snow-topped peaks. Whether it be her curiosity or some other reason, she slowed to stir the fallen leaves at the place where Civyl so urgently felt he needed to be. There was no sign of why the place might be important. It looked to be a rather disused path. Indeed, she could not recall hearing of any other Kavaccetian that had made this trek. Hopefully when they arrived the reason for coming would be made clear.

Fiora took a moment to take in the lands beyond the mountain. Most maps in Kavaccet ended at the range of Enundale, as if there was nothing on the other side. The first time she had asked The Wisdom about it, she was told that there was more than enough on this side of the mountain to give her a lifetime of learning. Had the Lady known then where Fiora would be led to go? If so, she had given no indication.

She turned her attention back towards Kavaccet – back towards home – and was sad that she could not see her city at the end of the mountain stream. The forests were too dense around it or the buildings too small to distinguish from the other dots of color on the horizon. Too far... she had flown too far already. With a pang of home-sickness she wished she could go back; perhaps stir the air around her mother, or better yet – another listener who could convey her message of missing her.

Fiora took off at gale force but would have screamed if she still had lungs to do so. She was going in the opposite direction. Down the far side of the mountain she flew, farther and farther from everything she had ever known. All sight of Kavaccet was swallowed up as she was hurtled into a strange land with strange trees and strange animals... or was she dragged?

The rest of the wind did not seem concerned with their current trajectory, though. It turned her around to face their destination. *Cooooommme... sseeee...* it reassured, although her uneasiness did not leave completely, especially when the wind picked up speed. Too fast... she flew too fast to make out more than a blur of anything on either side of her. Not that she would have recognized anything, but the sense that she would never be able to make her way back steadily grew.

She couldn't count the ticks that passed, it seemed to last half a day, but the sun had not moved

much from its height when the wind finally brought her to an abrupt stop at the lip of a rocky cliff. Hovering just at the edge of the precipice, she felt like screaming again. *Sssshhhh*... the air hissed around her, though she did not think she could make a sound if she wanted to. It crept over the edge in a thin ribbon that stretched her senses until it found a crack in the wall half way down and pushed its way in.

When she finally emerged in a hollow cavern, there was little light to see by, but the wind mingled with the rest of the stale air bringing her a different type of sight. A cloaked man stood before a huge polished crystal wall. From floor to ceiling, it was over three men tall and had not a single crack on its surface. Unnatural but also beautiful – reminding her of the smooth marble of the Sanctuary floor – until the man pulled a jagged stone across his palms, drawing much blood. He started chanting words she could not understand as he wiped his hands on the crystal in front of him and the blood sizzled and boiled with power. The iron stench of it permeated the chamber and burned her senses while the surface of the rock began to waver as if turning to a liquid itself.

His strange chanting stopped momentarily but only long enough for his lips to form new, recognizable words. *“Kill the girl...”* This sinister hiss echoed off the walls and sent a discord vibrating through her essence. He repeated the phrase many times – sometimes a whisper, sometimes a growl – and with each hate-filled command her sense of dread increased.

In a blink, he plunged his hands into the blood smeared rock and it was like he had reached across whatever distance separated him from her. Hands wrapped around her neck. The wind reacted with a vicious blast but the man stood anchored with his hold on her as his cloak whipped wildly around his body. *“Kill the girl... Kill the girl!”* He screamed the command again with a wicked smile and tightened his grip.

She was the wind – made of the very air – but she could no longer breathe.

This stranger wanted her dead... though she did not know who he was. He was about to kill her... though she did not know why. She would never see Kavaccet again or her mother or The Wisdom... or Civyl. One last time she wanted to scream but even if she had her body with her, she knew no sound would be able to come out. Still, as if brought to life by her desire, a scream started to echo against the inside of her being. It found its way into the wavering crystal as its volume and pitch rose. The reddened crystal around the man's hands cracked and shattered into a million flying shards as she was released to be one with her element again. The wind quickly retreated the way it had come as the man's enraged curses filled in the spaces where she had just been. Whatever angry message he howled, she knew it was meant for her.

He had removed over a dozen imbedded shards from his flesh already and over a dozen more

waited for his attention. *Blasted Bedrock! He had been so close!* But he had not expected her to come. No, that had been a surprise; for her to find him so soon. The girl was more powerful than he had thought. ...*powerful and dangerous!*

With a sigh he glanced up at his Lucent Divide... the gaping chunk of missing crystal would take him a week to re-grow... *if* he didn't sleep. Which meant it would be over a week before he could try again. They might be at the pass by then. He cursed himself with a growl; he should have gone with the knife instead. It would have been so easy to kill her with a knife... one slice across her throat and he would have been free of her.

He could not allow them to reach the pass... He *would* not let them stop him!

The Manifestation would cleanse the earth!

The scream that rent the air reverberated inside his head and shook him to the core. With a snap Civyl released his grip and stumbled back falling to the ground with a huff that cut the shriek short. *It had been his own.* Labored gasps sounded above him as he stared unbelieving at his hands and the bandage she had so carefully tied for him... his promise... *forsaken promise...* The curse he had uttered earlier came back to haunt him. The words had been familiar to his tongue but foreign to his ears and their meaning now took on a new light. She was *supposed* to be his promise and for the last day he had indeed been trying to forsake her. From his own mouth had come the blasphemy of his vile intent. What kind of monster was he? She was a burden, yes, but to kill her...? How could he even consider it? He did not deserve her.

Another thought caught in his mind that should have eased his discomfort though it did just the opposite. She was not really his promise at all. She had been the promise of the man he used to be. He had no right ...*or desire...* to claim her. At least that is what he told himself.

The ache of the mountain was on his back. He had to keep moving. Struggling up Civyl forced himself to look at her, still unchanged from before except for her neck where blotchy red marks were deepening their hue as he watched. Something inside him shifted into place as he made a conscious decision. *He would not hurt her again.* Never again would he allow *any* harm to come to her if he could prevent it. His next breath was a cleansing fullness as if chains constricting his ribs had suddenly fallen away.

He did not know if she could hear him in her current state but more for his own benefit he addressed her. "Fiora..." her name rolled comfortably off his tongue, like he'd been saying it his whole life even though he could not remember ever doing it before. "I'm sorry," he continued not knowing where else to start, "for so many things. I do not know what it means for you to be

my promise and I would not claim any hold on you, but until I return to being the man I was or death sweep my spirit to dance on the sun... *I am your promise.*" A gust of wind that knocked him a step closer to her was the only reply he got. If she had not heard him, the wind and he would remember his vow.

Still the mountain called but he had a plan. If he could not leave her behind, he would just have to take her with. "Come, we must press on while it is still light." Bracing himself to carry her weight, he bent her over his shoulder. For a few moments he was surprised; she was light as air and did not weigh him down at all. It suddenly made more sense how she could walk with such fluid movements... There was a cushion of air between her and his shoulder.

The Red Fox

By Luca - Mar 29 2014

Although the skies were clearing, the last few days of rain had left its mark on Isaiah Wifall's training field. Mud and muck sloshed around as the students fought on another, saturating their clothing and splattering their faces. At this socioeconomic level, that was anything particularly important.

"Good, good," said Wifall as he sat on an old cedar stump, his voice trying to reach above the sounds of slapping wooden swords. "I now feel as though you are all skilled enough fighters to kill domesticated oxen."

Malike was opposite of Irwin Mason, who was struggling to cope with the setting sun in his eyes, through the breaking clouds. After all of the practicing today, he was definitely showing signs of fatigue, moving in this mud. If Malik was bothered by those things, it wasn't evident. Actually, not a lot was evident based on his facial expressions alone. Even now, as he was fighting with Irwin, he lacked all facial expression. Through he was putting immense force into this blows, his lips didn't move, his eyebrows didn't flinch and his breathing seemed normal.

Irwin was just the opposite: panting and sweating from the fight, standing slightly hunched over, unable to fully support himself. Although he was much faster earlier in the day, at this point, he was having trouble keeping up with Malik and seemed to be at his limit. He took a breath and lunged toward Malik with a clean slash from left to right. Malik tilted his upper body backwards to dodge, supporting himself with his left foot, while leaving his right one behind. In one fluid motion, Malik used his right foot to kick out Irwin's leg and struck him across the face with his wooden sword. Both bodies seemed to spin in midair. Irwin landed face down in the mud as gracefully as one can do such things.

Malik remained in the same position his last attack left him in: Sword arm extended outward, level with his shoulder, legs firmly planted like a tree trunk. It was hard to tell why. It seemed like he was waiting for Irwin to get back up and fight him again. However, it appeared that Irwin was preoccupied with being unconscious.

Wifall got off his old cedar stump and started collecting his things. "Alright, I guess I've seen enough of this fight. Mason is clearly dead." Wifall was actually impressed, but wasn't about to show that and make Malik feel like he didn't need to come back next week.

Irwin twitched and picked his head out of the mud. "I'm not dead, I just haven't been drinking lately," he groggily replied with a dirt covered face.

"Well, you can start now," Wifall said with his pack slung over his shoulder and the training swords that wouldn't fit in it held by his free hand. "We're done, go home." His voice was between tired and depressed. His students were making pretty good progress, but this still probably wasn't how he expected his life would have turned out after all this time. Teaching classes in what he would describe as "dignified poverty" instead of being celebrated for his service to a nation that no longer exists.

The students were picking up their belongings and heading back to the directions of their respective dwellings. Kaegan, too, was reaching over a boulder by the pit to get his pack. The old soldier was already well on the way back to his small cabin just inside the beginning of the Advin Forest by the training field. "I guess it's time to go home," he said looking away from the departing people to glance back at the sun, singing out of sight, behind the tree line. Kaegan set off through the field and down the road that lead back where his home was these days. Beyond that tree line was the western shore. And after that...well, he wasn't quite sure. He heard stories of some fancy mainland past hundreds of miles of sea that he told himself he was going to live in and be a big shot one day. Ow!

Kaegan bent down to rub his knee. Earlier in the day, Malik got in a solid hit with his practice sword when Kaegan was busy struggling with the mud. He got back up and looked to the north east. This wasn't going to be a fun trip. Eyre was miles away and he was going to have to walk there on this bad knee in the dark. He looked back at the glow in the western sky. The sun was, apparently, done for the day. The Red Fox Inn was only a half mile away. "I might as well just pick up in the morning. It's not like I have class or anything tomorrow," he said as he hobbled down this old dirt road.

The Red Fox Inn served only one purpose: To house travelers from Eyre to Autumsford. Since Autumsford was the largest sea port on this island, as well as the closest, it was ideal to use as a source of supplies for the school, which did a great deal of scholarly works and services in and of

itself. So travel was frequent enough to generate a suitable living for the old merchant couple who ran it.

The glow of the lanterns in front of the entrance was becoming visible. Kaegan wished he talked to a few more of the visitors to the school when they needed enchanting services. All of them spent the night here since Eyre didn't have guest quarters for people with requests like that. The fact was, Kaegan knew very little about the quality or hospitality...or security of this place. There probably wasn't that big of a risk, he assured himself. In any event, spending the night was his only option. The more Kaegan walked on that knee, the more he thought he would be better off if he amputated it right here in front of the inn.

Kaegan walked up some old wooden steps and pulled back on the heavy door. It was triggered to ring a bell, but there was already an older gentleman in a red and black striped shirt sitting behind the counter with his hand holding up his head. He straightened up a little more as Kaegan approached the desk.

"Welcome to The Red Fox," the greying man with thick glasses said as he began looking through a pile of papers. "Have you reserved a room, by chance, for tonight?"

"N...no, I was just in beca" Kaegan started but a woman came out from the door behind the desk.

"Oh Trevor, you know he's not one of our regulars," she said picking up a much thicker log book from further down the counter. She was a few years younger than the man, but still had grey in her hair and wore a similar style of stripey clothes in blue and grey.

The old man looked over his shoulder as she moved about "Well, I just thought I'd check, I'm not down here as ofte-"

"So, it'll just be five silver for the night since we have a couple of days before the next merchant group arrives, " she was now standing in front of Kaegan furiously writing down the next entry in the log book, she occasionally glanced up to make sure Kaegan was listening. "If you want anything to eat or drink, you can come down to the kitchen unless the hatch is closed. That means we're sleeping. But we'll do breakfast bright and early for only two silver more."

"Uh, yeah, thanks. I'll just take the room." He fumbled around for the spare money he kept in his pack and handed it over the counter.

"Right up the stairs and the second door on the left." She passed a key across the counter. "Don't set our inn on fire, we're old." She smiled and left through the same door she arrived from. The

old man propped up his head with his hand again and looked out the window. Kaegan headed up the stairs and into his room.

Court

By Nalyd - Mar 30 2014

The Tyrant Sulla sat in his simple wooden throne, upright and attentive. His eyes, so often forced to droop and water, were for the moment fixed on the task at hand. And the task at hand was court, in both senses of the word.

"... and as the documents I've provided your scribes prove, Tyrant, that entire tenement block was owned by my grandfather before the sacking. And it may have been vacant, but it wasn't abandoned, as the repair orders I've also provided prove. These squatters. . ."

As much of Orthaeum had been depopulated after the sacking, large portions of the city were simply vacant. Flooded, burned, collapsed, or simply uninhabited, dealing with who owned or could use these buildings was a constant source of lawsuits. More than a few poor squatters had been forced to sell themselves into slavery for choosing the wrong ruin. But then, more than a few impoverished landowners had seen their claims evaporate as well. Lower officials could handle most of this, but every once in a while, some new thorn would sprout from the legal thicket and Sulla would have to decide the will of the State.

"... a fine story this miser has constructed, but the repairs taking place were on the other side of the city block, in an entirely disconnected building! Whether or not the property was bought or sold as one package, a deed cannot build walls where there are none. . ."

The accused's lawyer took a deep breath to continue ranting, but Sulla raised his hand and watched the young man go ashen and sputter out. "I've heard enough." The courtiers all around fell silent as Sulla leaned forward in his throne, pointing towards the accused. The scruffy laborer look around like a cornered rat. "The will of the State is with the accused. They will suffer no punishment. As you have neglected a significant portion of your property, that portion will be divided from the whole and returned to the ownership of the State, which does not seek to remove any residents at this time. This judgement will stand as law in all courts. Gods' will be done." The scribes to either side of Sulla's raised dais scribbled furiously, the lawyers clasped hands and left, and the accuser and accused melted back into the crowd. A minute later, Sulla's chancellor stepped into the vacated space and shouted over the din of voices.

"The honored Erizon Nepenthe daughter of Zona is to make a plea before the Tyrant!"

The several dozen courtiers, petitioners, and officials continued to mill around and talk, but Sulla could see - barely - someone rise from a seat in the back and make their way forward. The crowd literally parted before her, as the invisible hands of the dead cleared her path, nudging and shoving people out of her way. Nepenthe was never shy about her power. Sulla sighed to himself - Nepenthe tended to put on a show whenever she had a public voice, which Sulla could respect, but how good the young woman's showmanship was unnerved him. Nepenthe unnerved Sulla in general, but the reminder that she had the favor of his court made him especially uneasy. Any woman that would tear out her own eye at the age of sixteen had a frightening amount of determination.

Nepenthe stopped before the dais, giving a small bow, and waited for the crowd to quiet down.

"Make your plea, Nepenthe."

She gave another small bow and set to pacing slowly before the dais. "As you and your court may or may not know, Honored Tyrant, the dead are not what they once were. When Arvernus' vault was breached, the spirits housed there, held by the god for the needs of all Erizon, were scattered. Now it falls to an Erizon not only to bargain with the dead, but to find them - and this scarcity does not aid our bargains. I might have a few more fingers, otherwise." Nepenthe's tone suggested she might wink here, if she could. There were a few titters from her audience. "Now, you may say that this convenience is just another thing buried under the rubble. And I would agree - we cannot recapture the majesty of our dead gods. Not entirely. None can marshal the whole of the dead as Arvernus did. But we can lure them far better than we do now."

Nepenthe had a habit of turning between addressing the court as a whole and Sulla himself. It irritated him. It's not as if anyone here but him could decide her plea.

"The dead are creatures of habit. They lurk around what little they can recognize or remember from their lives, and if left to wander, will only stray from their chosen territory in times of great turbulence. They strayed from Arvernus' vault in such a time, and when they returned, it was not as they had remembered, and so they wandered. If we were to rebuild the great vault, they would return to it, at least some, and our Erizon - who do so much for fair Orthaeum - could abandon the heathen rituals they now use to lure spirits, and strike stronger bargains when they do. I ask for the monies of your treasury and the hands of your men to reclaim some small piece of our lost glory."

There were nods and murmurings of assent - even some awkward, scattered applause - in Sulla's court. Nepenthe just stood before him, smiling. Sulla scowled in return. Orthaeum's fortunes were not as dire as they had been a few short decades ago, but his treasury was perpetually stretched thin, and rebuilding the monolithic vault of Arvernus, made of exotic stones, would

strain it all the more. The stonemasons and laborers hired would empty it. His steward bustled onto his dais, whispering estimations of cost into his ear.

Still. It was a good idea. The Erizon were one of the few remnants of the old gods, and every passing day seemed to invest them with a kind of holiness. Not to mention the tireless dead they commanded to farm fields, sail ships, and perform any number of other labors.

Good idea or not, though, as is, it was beyond the reach of the State. Sulla waved off his steward and sat back in his throne, rubbing his brow, before speaking.

"The merits of your petition are clear, Nepenthe. But. . . as the benefits will not be solely that of the State, the burden cannot rest solely with the State. I will provide for you the materials, at no cost, for this endeavor. The labor and any attendant costs will be the responsibility of you and your fellow Erizon. Convene your Society and work out how to fulfill that responsibility on your own. Use spirits or your own gold or both, I don't care. I place you, Nepenthe, in charge of this project, as a representative of my State. Gods' will be done." Sulla's scribes set to formalizing his judgement as his steward tutted disapprovingly by his side. Nepenthe simply smiled broadly and bowed, backing into the crowd. Sulla's chancellor stepped forward again, shouting

"That concludes this day and this session of court! The Tyrant will be taking advantage of his good health to travel to and plea with new gods for patronage for our city! Court will reconvene in four weeks' time!"

The Knowledge

By Jewels - Mar 31 2014

Fiora blinked open her eyes to a quickly graying sky. What had happened to her? Where was she? *Where was Civyl?* She sat up on her elbow with a start pushing her covering to the side. She scanned the area while she queried the breeze. Heavy footfalls sounded behind her and she spun to see him walking towards her from the brook. His brow was creased with a frown but his voice, while gruff, was kind. "You are awake. Good." He walked across the small clearing and returned with outstretched hands. "Drink. Eat. You must keep up your strength." She took the full canteen and the overflowing cloth finding it piled with fresh Junt berries, stripped Crinip greens, and sun baked Hani fish. He had obviously been foraging...*and* fishing today.

He retreated to the other side of the small clearing before sitting down. "I am sorry..." he started then hesitated as he gave her a worrying look. He cleared his throat and looked away before starting over. "I am sorry it is cold, but I did not wish to tempt fate with the flame again." He

waved a hand at the pile of sticks and kindling between them. “I didn’t know how long you would... sleep, but I prepared the tepee for when you woke.” Fiora nodded at him, glad for his thoughtfulness and attempted to thank him for it, but her first try was nothing but a scratchy croak that he cringed at. “Drink,” he insisted, “please. You are surely parched from your time of fasting.”

It was true. Now that he mentioned it, she became keenly aware of her thirst. Unstopping the canteen, Fiora put it to her lips and let the cool liquid run down the back of her throat. It was both refreshing and painful at the same time but each swallow eased the ache a bit. “Thank you,” she finally managed putting the half-empty container down. She set the food aside, though, and neared the pile of tinder. “I should wake the fire first, before there is no light left in the sky to work by.” He opened his mouth as if to protest but – looking at the sky – thought better of it and nodded instead. She picked up the flint and steel he had left next to the pit and went to work striking sparks to end the element’s slumber. “What happened to me?” she ventured hoping he could help fill in the blanks as fuzzy memories came back to her.

He grunted from his perch before forming a coherent answer. “I know nothing of enchantment but what I have experienced since starting this journey.”

“Why do you call it enchantment?”

“You slept on your feet,” was his blunt reply. When she looked at him expectantly for more, he continued. “The sky was in your eyes and you would not be roused. It was not a natural sleep.” Fiora nodded though it didn’t mean she understood what it meant. “What did it seem like to you?” he asked without looking at her.

The first flames began to stretch their limbs in her tinder nest and she took the moments of coaxing it fully awake to think about how to answer. “It was a dream,” she decided, lifting a hand to rub her neck at half a returning memory. The tenderness beneath her fingertips made her wince. “...a very real dream.”

She caught him staring at her with a scowl and dropped her hands back to the work of building the tepee higher as she tried to explain it. “The wind – when it speaks to me, it’s like I can see without eyes. Images of things that are happening around me flicker in my mind.” She paused for an illustration letting the wind whisper his posture to her though she wished she hadn’t. With a quiet voice she pointed out what she noticed. “Like the way the corner of your mouth is twitching... because you’re upset with me. I’m sorry, Civyl. The delay mu-“

“Stop it!” he snapped and her startled eyes found his volatile face now lit with the wavering light of the growing fire. With a huff he turned his anger away before adding a firm request. “*Do not* apologize to me.” Fiora didn’t understand his vicious mood swings or the reasons behind them but she nodded anyway.

Almost done, she placed the largest of the sticks for the flames to feed on. “The dream...” she went back to her answer to cover the awkward tension she had caused, “it was like when the wind speaks images to me. Only it wasn’t about anything close to me. It was across the mountains. I saw things I have never seen before.” He was looking at her again, anger replaced with curiosity, but he turned to appreciate the flames instead of asking more questions.

The crackling warmth was a welcome sensation and Fiora sat as close as she dared while pulling the provisions he had offered closer. She tried one of the berries, tart from being picked out of season but the grumbling in her belly overruled her tongue. Famished... for missing noonday and evening meals she supposed. He let her eat in peace, busying himself with gathering more firewood for the night.

When the last crumbs had been eaten and the canteen emptied she stared at the fire. It danced the way fires normally dance when they are awake. Nothing like the display of a fire wielder’s ballet, but mesmerizingly beautiful none the less. It lulled her back to a time that was more certain and she almost believed she was there when he broke the silence with a gentle question. “What did you see in your dream?”

“Just what one would expect from a dream. Many different images, strange things... impossible things.” Staring at the fire helped her see some of them again though she knew she’d never remember it all. “Trees made of spiky green thorns instead of leaves, flowers of white cotton destroyed by a single puff of breeze, and animals... wild things that were in none of my learning books. There was a bird unlike any I’d ever seen before. Its head was big and round. The eyes were two shining circles placed together on a flat face while the beak was short and hooked down. Very odd. If it had not been for the wings, I would not know what to call it.” She neglected to tell him that she had found the animal lying dead on a stone table or that the stench of it haunted her even now.

“That does sound odd.” She smiled that he was trying to make conversation. “What other odd things did you see?”

She laughed at the memory of the most absurd. A vibrant memory if for nothing but the contrast of the endless waters she had wandered over before and after with only a sunrise and a sunset to break up the monotony. “A city – an entire city – surrounded by nothing but water for a day’s march or more in any direction. The air was tangy... it burned a bit. The buildings, they moved up and down with the waves. As if the whole thing were resting on top of the water. It was so ridiculously impossible! Can you imagine? *A city that floats?*” He allowed himself to laugh with her and the rumble within his chest made her realize how much she missed hearing it. She ventured a quick glance at him only to find him openly staring. For some reason it made her uncomfortable so she went back to staring into the fire. “The images were so real... just as real

as anything else the wind has ever told me. Do you think it could be true? That something like that exists?"

"Highly doubtful," he grunted. "It is hard enough keeping a boat afloat on the water. One house alone would be sure to sink. A whole city? Who would even dare to live there?"

"I suppose you're right. I really hope that everything I saw was only a dream." She cringed at herself for saying anything, knowing the nature of the question to follow.

Civyl did not disappoint, "Oh, and why is that?"

Fiora sighed resigning herself to remember it for him. "Because some of the things I saw were not very nice at all." She stared into the fire seeing the images again as if she were really there. "A village... it was burning - had been burning for over a day. The sky was black with clouds of cinders and I got lost in it. I felt like I was choking on the smoke of charred flesh." Her nose burned with the memory of the smell and her hand flew to her nose as the vision of the village kept replaying. "It was so awful, Civyl. Everywhere I turned... So many dead!" Her voice cracked with emotion. "...the men, the women..." Her tears started to fall, "...*the children*..." She had not seen death before. Even her father's remains had been hidden from her, but the images in her mind now were so vivid... so detailed... so gruesome she began to shake. "They were murdered so brutally..."

"Fiora!" The visions cleared at his urgent voice so close to her ear. He had moved to her side without her noticing and his hand rested on her shoulder. "Are you alright?" Between hearing her name on his lips and the genuine concern he stared at her with, she could almost believe that nothing had changed between them. Almost.

Self-conscious of his sudden nearness and how much she wanted to lean into his comfort, she pulled herself back instead and swiped the tears from her cheeks. "Yes, well, I've never seen anything even close to that before. It was... not something I'll forget easily."

He seemed to pick up on her posture and sat back on his heels, dropping his hand. For a moment he seemed lost – vulnerable in his indecision – before he sat to the side and offered a quiet condolence. "A maiden should not have to witness such things."

She laughed a bitter agreement to his obvious statement. "*No one* should have to witness such things." His statement replayed in her mind, though, seeming more significant than her quick reply had made it out to be. *Maiden*? When had she become more than just a girl to him? The way he had been acting – trying to be kind while a storm raged underneath... Something was different. Something had changed. The wind could not tell her his thoughts, though, and Civyl did not seem to be offering. She moved on to keep the conversation going. It was nice that he

was willing to talk. “But as bad as that was, it was not the worst.” She brought her hands up to her neck again, testing the tenderness, and wondered how only a dream could have caused her real harm.

Civyl seemed uncomfortable and shook his head. “Please do not recount such images for my sake.”

But it was helping her process what had happened by talking about it and she didn’t want to stop. “It was worse for the experiencing, but not for the remembering I think.” With pursed lips he gave a single nod as he stared down at his hands. Whether it was permission he was offering or not, she spit out the nightmare her ‘sleep’ had started with. “I dreamt that a man tried to kill me.”

He stared at the fire with fists balled and jaw clenched throughout her recounting of the event. He was afraid that if he looked anywhere else, she might see the truth – read his guilt in the bruises on her neck. Her story was an impossibility. It couldn’t be true that a man on the other side of the mountain would be able to even know about her, let alone try to kill her. Yet she had described things she couldn’t have known. *Kill the girl...* She had said the man repeated the phrase many times just as *he* had thought the phrase many times, but he had never said it out loud... had he? What he *did* remember saying was not a part of her story until the scream. *His* scream. She said the danger had been broken by *his* scream, but the danger had also been made real by *his* hands.

He could not decide if he even *wanted* her visions to be true or not. If they were nothing but her unconscious way of dealing with near death, of his own volition he had almost killed her. But if they were true... if someone else had used an enchantment on him... While relieving that he might not be such a monster of a man, it was also worse. It meant he was nothing more than a marionette to be manipulated. What was to stop him from succumbing again? Actually, he realized, he *was* a marionette, with or without some sorcerer using him. Did not The Sight have him? Did not the mountain constantly pull him in? And did not some other string also keep him tethered to her side?

He had no free will. If he did he would not have left Kavaccet. The man he was before would have made a home with the g- He forced himself to think her name. The man he was before would not have called her a girl or thought of her as one. He would have made a home with Fiora instead of trying to forsake her.

She had fallen quiet with the end of her story and the silence finally drew his gaze to her. Lost in thought while her fingers stroked the dark evidence that there was more to the story than she could recall. She caught him staring and dropped her hand with a sheepish smile. “It’s sore, like I

can still feel where his hands were.” *His* hands... She cocked her head towards him. “Is it silly of me to believe it was more real than dream?”

He should confess... He should tell her why she would find real bruises in the reflection of the brook the next time she washed. But he was too much a coward to face her anger or fear. What if she refused to travel with him? With the mountain and her tether both firmly anchored, he didn’t want to take that risk. Newly angry with himself, his short answer was more gruff than it warranted. “No.”

He didn’t want to discuss it anymore and wished to retreat to the opposite side of the fire. “We should sleep,” he added more gently as he stood up. First, though, he would have to retrieve his bedroll. It was tangled up with her own where he had left it wrapped around her. She gave him a curious look when he walked behind her to get it. “To keep you warm,” was the only explanation he offered. He was not about to detail how he had planned to add his own warmth if she had not woken in time to also wake the fire.

“Sleep. We have much ground to make up tomorrow.” The call of the mountain had grown to a stabbing ache since the clouds filled her eyes. He could sense that he was falling behind. He feared he might not make it on time now, but he did not share his fear with her. He would not burden her with details of the three days he had carried her or the fourth when he had not traveled at all. He had needed to take time to gather more provisions anyway and his full pack testified to his good use of the day.

He shook out his bedroll on the opposite side of the fire while he listened to her straighten her own. He doubted he would be able to sleep well tonight. Just like the previous nights. For the last three nights, he had laid next to her in the dark, fearing she would be too cold without a fire. Sleep had mostly eluded him as he fretted about wasting time or taxing her with forced travel or that she would not wake up at all withering away from starvation, or worse... that she might wake during the night to find herself in his embrace. He was glad he had been spared that awkwardness.

Tonight he would also worry... about failing his quest, about failing her, about her dreams and the possibility of being manipulated into a murderer. He would think about all the things she had talked about wondering if they might be more than imagination, which his growing dread was already deciding that they were. But more than anything else, he was sure, what would keep him up tonight would be the *lack* of her presence at his side. The other nights it had been her steady breathing under his fingertips that had finally lulled him to peace enough to sleep. There was no hope for sleep without it tonight.

Luca's Nightmare

By Luca - Apr 13 2014

OOC: Important to note, as the name suggests (and the story mentions), most of Luca's sequence takes place in a dream. It switches to Kaegan when the events are similar. The ido is pretty much a tanning bed in appearance. Isaiah Wifall is "Donic" as Nalyd coined, but speaks with what is, to us, a Scottish accent.

He opened his eyes. The bed wasn't quite as comfortable as he had hoped it would be. Kaegan shifted around, trying to get comfortable. The sheets felt stiff, seemed like it was the housekeeper's style of putting them on. Just a bit too tight. He exhaled and turned on his side, looking up at the moonlight through the window. Who knew what time it was? He moved his leg under the sheets. It seemed like giving it a few hours rest was helping, but it was still sore. It would probably remain sore for a few days. That's how these things go. He closed his eyes, trying to go back to sleep. There was a crash off in the distance. Was that glass breaking? Kaegan turned over and looked up.

Actually, there was smoke in the room! He hadn't noticed it before because he wasn't fully awake and the inn burned wood for heat at night, but this was definitely more than a fireplace. He peeled back the sheets and took a look out of his window. There was a display of bright orange and yellow coming from beyond the corner of the inn, with plumes of smoke wafting about the area. He only had pants, but that was good enough. He grabbed his pack from the night stand, threw open the door and hustled around the corner and down the stairs, coughing at the increasing smoke.

Shock. The main room for the lobby was in flame. There was thick smoke hanging in the air, Kaegan dropped to all fours, coughing and unable to remain standing from dizziness. He looked back up at the room. Broken glass littered the floor, a table was over turned, and some picture on the wall had been knocked off, burning slowly as the flames moved in closer. How the hell had he missed all of this?

"Boy." A voice from behind the counter faintly called out. Kaegan looked around the corner of the counter he had dropped down by. He was still coughing, but the air was better down here. It was Trevor Holford, the old man from last night was collapsed and bleeding by the barstool he was sitting on. He was fumbling with trying to get a key on a broken leather strap into a small lockbox with his right hand. His left arm had streams of blood running down from what was, apparently, a stab wound. Kaegan crawled over and helped him open the box.

Trevor lifted up the lid and took out a long silver key. "Take this...go into my bedroom," he said

directing Kaegan to the door next to them. "There's a chest...my sword is inside". His arm dropped, but he was still conscious. He had a look in his eye that was sad and disappointed. Life was hard and it would continue to be hard to the bitter end. Kaegan nodded and grasped the key and pushed through the door to the bedroom. It was dark but there wasn't as much smoke. He attempted to stand, though not upright all the way. The chest was in one corner. His wife was in the other. She was on her stomach, collapsed and did not appear to be breathing. By the blood, Kaegan probably couldn't change that.

He stumbled over to the chest and tried getting the key to go in for a few moments. A beam crashed out in the lobby from the stress of its own weight. A wave of smoke pushed into the room and glass shattered from being superheated. The chest unlocked and a sword in its sheath were visible underneath some bound ledgers. Kaegan grabbed it and darted back through the door. He stopped in front of Trevor, who was becoming groggier with each passing minute. Kaegan lifted up one of his arms and threw it over his neck and attempted to support Trevor and get him to his feet. His muscles were limp.

"Come on, you've got to give me *something* here," He said throwing his remaining strength and oxygen into lifting him up. Thankfully, the man was old and thin. It was difficult, but not impossible. Kaegan slid along, crouching down as much as he could without dropping the man or falling over. He grabbed for the handle to open the front door, bursting off of the porch, and tripping and falling into the road. Aside from the wounds he already sustained, it didn't look like Trevor took any damage. Kaegan looked back up at the burning inn, roof collapsing into itself, as a dark figure closed in behind them.

Luca collapsed on the bed in her room. Another twelve hour day of no progress. Her face planted in her pillow, she considered what her next move was going to be, but it was looking more and more hopeless. Maybe I'm too tired to even be depressed... She turned over. Even though students' quarters were located in the original foundation and there were no windows, she could still tell it was night. There was always a certain feeling in the air at this hour. The energy given off by the other students in the rooms around her was turning weary and reminiscent. It was a strange phenomenon that occurred like clockwork every night around this time. It was as though one student would go to a window at some point and that student would set everyone else off.

Luca never had a trouble getting a feeling for the energies of others. She also knew that this skill was closely related to actually doing magic. That just made her even more frustrated because she couldn't understand what the next step was. Out of her room, down the hall to the left, she heard Malik's door close. *Good*, she thought. *That means Kaegan is back. He's probably eating or something, that useless slob.* For her, it meant that it was alright to go to bed now.

She picked up her legs and flung them over to the center of the bed in a somewhat normal

sleeping position. She sighed and looked up at the stone ceiling. There were probably things that she was forgetting to do, but all of that could wait. She closed her eyes and faded away. Time passed and she was carried off in complete sleep. But that feeling of weariness and reminiscence began shifting towards something darker, further into the night. Something with more malice. She began to dream of conflict. To dream of fighting and fire. And, though they may have been close, it wasn't her brother she dreamed about...

Everything was white. Some bizarre plane where everything was light and nothing else existed. Luca looked around for some kind of recognizable object. Where in the world am I? Nothing. There was just a subtle humming and her long naked body. Crack! The lid opened all the way, splitting the chamber horizontally. Though feeling somewhat dazed, she sat up in the bed of light. Mia came over from the console. Of course her assistant would have overseen the transfer personal. Luca remembered now. Even though Mia was new to the position, she was eager and competent enough to be trusted with a job like this so soon.

"How's the fit?" she asked as she brought Luca's clothes over.

Luca opened and closed her hand a few times. "It's good," she said, "much more receptive, better looking, and who knows, I might not suddenly die now."

"Praetor, you should speak so casually about that!" said Mia, taken aback.

Luca got up out of the chamber and began putting on her white robes. "I'm not." She paused and thought for a moment. "Well, I suppose I am, but everything is resolved so now I can joke about it, right?" she looked over at Mia. "Don't worry. Everything is fine now. The only thing you should have to worry about for the rest of today is the paperwork for that stupid ceremony." The two walked out of the ido chamber toward the suskian port. "I swear, Donovan has brought so much bureaucratic politics into our system..." They walked down a long hallway with massive windows on either side that overlooked the clouds, far below them. It was gorgeous architecture wherever they went. Gilded gold trim on light crown molding, richly colored carpets, and light marbled walls. The designers obviously intended their guests to be amazed by everything that was not an opening for the views of the world below them.

The windows revealed a junction approaching, with a door that led on to the right for about two feet and then stopped abruptly. Beyond, on the outside, there was a stream of light that shot out to a destination too far away to be seen. "...and so soon after Joni died...so many changes that aren't for the better. It makes me wonder if everything is going to be okay," Luca said sadly.

"I'm sure it will be, my lady." Said Mia as she pressed a button at the end of the dead-end

junction. A door opened, exposing the open air, but there was a blue light surrounding a small area outside of the floating building they occupied. Opening the door only seemed to expose them to that transparent light room, not the entire atmosphere below them. Mia and Luca stepped in. "After all," Mia continued, "you're being raised to Ward. You'll play the most important role in the Awakened next to Lord Whitekeep." She pushed a button of light and doors of blue energy closed and locked them in the chamber, which shot off along the blue rail into the distance.

Luca looked down at the clouds passing quickly below them. Mia looked at her and considered saying something else, but Luca was clearly preoccupied with her own thoughts. Mia sighed and waited for them to arrive at the station.

Beep. The chamber doors opened at the same time as the suskian port did. The pair stepped forward into a respectably sized rotunda in the same beautiful style of architecture. Solid white marble, and gilded golden cross patterns that ran up to the top. The center featured a round skylight that lit up the entire room with natural lighting. When it was first build, Luca honestly felt a little nauseated by the sort of heavenly appearance of these strongholds-in-the-sky, but she was used to it by now. She counterbalanced the lavish furnishings by spending time with the mortals on the ground.

At one of the poles of the room, there was a small desk with a boy writing notes and doing work for the judiciary. Luca recognized him as Andre Mejia. Luca and Mia approached and the boy looked up and smiled. Ever since the ido was created, it became very difficult to tell people's ages. But since very few people became Awaked after The Ascension, it was a good bet that Andre was within a few hundred years of Luca's age. However, he was content with his job and never sought to obtain any higher power.

"Good morning Lady Kieran, good morning miss Hadley. I'm sorry for any confusion, but your final decree will take place in Marblecrest," said Andre, pointing to the other end of the rotunda.

"Really? Sudden change in location?" Luca said looking around the room for a group that could have taken her council hall.

"Yeah, you see, we just have this hearing on the upcoming Munlu..." He said using his index finger to point to the section of the log book.

"Already, huh? Well, I guess it can't be helped. It's not a big deal. Thanks, Andre," Luca said as she headed to the other end of the room. "See you after a while, Mia."

"Sure thing. Oh and congratulations!" Andre said, practically popping out of his seat.

Luca pushed through the large double doors that led to the extended hallway ahead of her. This is why she never liked this council room. It was much darker than the other one and more out of the way of convenience in reaching. But this was her territory now, so she had better get used to marching around in it. It was still an eerie place. She reached the other end of the hall and pushed forward the dark silver door to the council room. Light broke through in streaks as she entered the chamber and walked to the center seal on the floor.

It was a large room about 50 feet across. Along one of the walls were the raised seats of the three members of the judiciary. Two Wards and the Autarch. The center seat was raised slightly. This was the space for the leadership of the Awakened. She expected today to only see two of those seats filled, because the other one was hers. She sighed. She just had to get through this pain of an installation. The door opened behind her and a nobly dressed man with a sword at his belt walked through. It was Jurian Ardal, the other Ward. This was most peculiar of him, not entering through the administration door, behind the council chairs.

"Well, Jurian. What strange events are afoot that you've got my meeting moved and you're acting like a common *door-user*." she joked.

Jurian scoffed as he walked closer. "You were almost there....we almost let you have the upper hand and get away with something that would have been very bad, indeed." He continued to walk forward and developed a sort of psychotic grin on his face. There was a metallic impact sound that filled the chamber. Luca knew that sound, she had heard it before. It was the lock for the council room, triggered remotely from the control center. Half a second later, Luca could hear an explosion coming from the Rotunda, or maybe the council room where the Munlu meeting was being held.

"Jurian, what the hell is going on here? Answer me!" she rang out.

Jurian drew his sword and charged, making a slash aimed at decapitating the woman. Luca cast out her left hand and beams of light materialized her own sword that she raised in the nick of time to block it. She pushed back and the two separated flying back and landing a dozen feet from one another.

"Is this *his* work?" she yelled "Have you defected to bring down Whitekeep?" She held her sword confidently in front of her, ready to sidestep and attack. She knew that she had a good chance of defeating Jurian if it came right down to it....but that explosion. She could hear more sounds of fighting beyond the doors and down the hall. It was so loud it made it through these sturdy walls. It was a time like this when the Awakened needed the power of the Wards, but with them both fighting in the council room, it would be up to the Praetors and Donovan.

"You have no idea the number of people you have alienated. You and your aristocracy. Your time of playing god has ended. Now it is our time!" he roared and launched.

Luca wrapped her free hand around the blade of her sword. "*Vanquish: Dawnbreak!*" She gripped tightly and slid her hand to the end of the blade as it burst out with light.

Kaegan was surprised when he looked up to see the face of Isaiah Wifall with a drawn sword standing over the two of them. His expression was grim, but expectant.

"Are you just going to sit there like a knot on a log or are you going to get off your ass and come with me?" Kaegan's mouth was open, but words didn't seem to be coming. He was still collecting himself from waking up in a burning building and pulling a half-dead man out of it. "Come on, we don't have a lot of time here." Wifall reached down and picked him up. A little more gently, he tried to get Trevor to his feet. He looked longingly at the inn, then turned to pull Trevor down the road, Kaegan on the other side.

"Nobody gets out!" a burly man said emerging from the flickering shadows with four other thuggish brutes on either side of him. The sleeves to his shoulders were ripped off and his hair was shaven on other side of his head above the ears. He was definitely a militarily man with a grudge or a debt...or both.

"Dean," Wifall said, removing Trevor's arm from his shoulder and gripping his sword tightly "Are you responsible for this?"

"We're just lending a hand. All everything is going to look like this shack in one year's time," he smiled. Kaegan now realized he had a black mace in his hand, its spikes casting demonic shadows with the flickering light from the fire he started.

"Damn you, bastard," Wifall said quietly and then, despite his age, he leaped forward with his sword and stabbed, not Dean, the man he was talking to, but the thug on the left side of him. He pulled out and rolled to the right, behind the group. In the same fluid motion, he slashed the thug on Dean's right side. Dean swung his mace towards his right to hit where Wifall was standing. He blocked with his sword, but must have misread Dean's weapon before he first attacked, surprised by the momentum of the colossal force the weight of Dean's mace allowed him to build up. He was knocked down and pushed back several feet to the stone wall surrounding the corners of the inn. A hard hit for someone his age.

Kaegan set Trevor down and drew his sword. *Don't charge in. Do it right.*

Luca twirled her body in the air, spinning her dual swords, glowing with bright yellow light, like a tornado of blades. The sword in her right hand connected with Jurian's black quarterstaff. His weapon had also transformed and glowed with dark green energy. She threw her left arm out to strike the other side of his staff with her other sword and spun counterclockwise to push him back another dozen feet. The energy emitted from both of them was immense. In this duel, a missed block would cause one of them to take a strike that carried the same energy as being hit by a train. Though their own power would absorb much of that impact, it was no less very dangerous to fight at this level.

"*Hibana!*" Luca shouted as she pointed one of the dual swords at Jurian. The yellow glow changed to orange and three fireballs shot out of the tip in scattering directions. Jurian's advanced agility allowed him to dodge all of them. He leaped into the air to come down hard with his quarterstaff. Luca crossed her swords, left vertical - right horizontal, and pushed back in anticipation of Jurian's strike. The dark green pressure crashed upon her own yellow light as the two's inner strengths battled to influence their weapons.

Luca slid her left sword down and slashed at Jurian as she sidestepped the force of the blow that she couldn't hold with just one blade. She got a cut and blood splattered on the lavish marble floors that fought over. Jurian twirled his quarterstaff and threw its end into Luca's shoulder, nearly shattering bone and dislodging her right arm from its socket.

Dean threw the butt of his mace into Kaegan's shoulder, nearly shattering bone and dislodging his right arm from its socket. Kaegan cried out and darted back. He switched his sword to his left hand, even though he wasn't as competent with it. It was better than an arm that hardly worked. Dean's leg was bleeding from where Kaegan slashed him, but it didn't look like it was affecting him, there were streams of blood, but fro- Here he came again.

Raising his mace on high, Kaegan rolled to right and threw out his left arm, hacking the man's back. But he had some sort of thick plate under his clothes, so it wasn't a hit. Dean recovered and swung to the right as Kaegan tried to get out of the way. The end spike of the mace was long enough to reach him and tore open his side with a quarter inch incision into his shirtless top. If he didn't find a way to kill this guy soon, he was done. He picked himself off the ground and spun his sword around, aimed at a charge.

Luca picked herself off the ground. She wasn't familiar with that technique, it definitely caught her by surprise and she was frustrated for that. She spun her bident spear to the left and stopped it to point at Jurian. "*Hibana!*" she rang out again. This time, only one fireball shot out, but it was much larger and more potent. Jurian was unable to dodge and was shot back at a high velocity, hitting the far wall.

Luca's wings of light streams opened up and she launched towards her target in a finishing lance.

He launched towards his target in a finishing lance. *Impact!* It was Isaiah Wifall with a bleeding headwound holding a sword that pierced Dean's upper spinal cord. His mouth was agape as he dropped his mace, inches from Kaegan, who was pushed down on the ground and about to receive his death sentence. Wifall forced his sword out of Dean's side, slicing him open and casting him aside. Panting, Wifall dropped to the ground to regain his energy. His heart probably hadn't had this much action in years, but the fight was done now.

"Are you alright, sir?" Kaegan asked. The two men were bloody and beaten, neither was probably adequately prepared for tonight.

"Alright," Wifall said, still breathing heavily. "Maybe you lot...can do more....than kill oxen." He looked over at the burning inn. Most of it had already been reduced to a single story burning heap. He turned back across the road at where Trevor had passed out. "We need to get him some help or he'll die."

"It's okay, I can heal him. It will just take me a while to get him stable," Kaegan said as he slowly managed to get up and walk over to the old man. Kaegan knelt down and placed his hands over Trevor's shoulder wound, concentrating on the right mental incantations to bring about wound reversal. His hands lightly glowed green.

"Magic?" Wifall snorted "What bullshit is this? I take back what I said, you aren't even worthy of having a blade." Wifall got up and started cleaning the blood off of his weapon.

"Hey, that's not fair, I killed one of them," Kaegan responded looking back. The light from his hands faded slightly.

"And I killed all the rest! And pay attention to what you're doing or we'll be here all night!" Kaegan looked back at his task and the glow of his hands brightened again. "You're lucky I got

here when I did. I knew something like this might happen tonight...I was hoping you all would be back home before this whole mess started."

Kaegan looked at him again. "Sorry, but....how did you know this inn would be attacked?"

Wifall crossed his arms and scoffed again. "It was Bortan's work. And it's not just this inn" he said looking off to north east. There was another faint glow of fire off in the distance.

"Luca..." Kaegan said.

There was a massive explosion that tore open the entire council chamber. It wasn't caused by either of them, but it was obviously going to determine the battle now. Jurian was sucked out, with the wounds he sustained, probably to his death. Luca had been knocked down to the ground, but she was starting to get to her feet. She needed to get through these doors and help with whatever was going on back in the rotunda. Her Release was still active. She pointed her bident spear at the locked council doors.

Something was wrong, there was an ignition sound traveling rapidly from the east side to the west side. "What the hell is this?" she said, looking up at the ceiling where it stopped.

Another massive explosion erupted, shattering the rest of the chamber and casting Luca out into the atmosphere. She was knocked out, not quite unconscious but unable to move, descending towards the layer of clouds rapidly approaching. She opened her eyes slightly and saw the remnants of Whitekeep. Sections of the floating stronghold were exploding. Some, like the room she just came from, were losing stability and falling towards the ground, like she was.

As she fell further down, the visual barrier began making the stronghold become faint and, ultimately, invisible. She passed through the layers of clouds and emerged on the other side. The ground became visible. Turning her head slightly, she saw the world she was falling into. Brick and mortar buildings, early attempts at textile factories, and men in business suits. How would she catch herself without alerting them. Would she just fall and die? After all these millennia, would she die like this?

An answer was laid before her. A long blue curtain of light from the ground to the heavens was sweeping across the land as far as the eye could see. It was the Munlu, she had seen it hundreds of times before. Maybe someone set it off accidentally, or maybe Donovan thought it could be altered to suppress the attack. Whatever the reason, the light passed through her and the ground

below, and in the blink of an eye, the entire city she was falling into was erased and became a forest. All of the developments were gone. She knew what she had to do.

She moved her hand to point beyond her head. With a full incantation, she had a chance at having this work. "*Luminous star, watchful eye, cast down the Guardian of the Sky!: Radiant Shroud!*" Her hand shot out with yellow light to the trees below her and created a net to collapse in.

"I did it! I finally cast a spell!" What? She never had any problem with that before... Where was she? *Who* was she? The image of trees vanished and gave way to a sea of black.

Luca darted up in her bed.

She looked around and rubbed her face. Everything was normal. Her room was in order. It was probably early morning. "What a horrible dream...". *At least that isn't my life.*

An explosion rang out, shaking the entire foundation. Dust fell from the ceiling.

"The school is under attack." She realized.

The Death

By Jewels - Apr 17 2014

She had hoped sleep would be an escape, but Fiora had been wrong. Instead it was a prison forcing her to revisit her visions time and again while exhaustion kept her from waking. Respite would come intermittently from the rumble of a thunder cloud that would chase the nightmares away. The cloak of the cloud would descend around her allowing a few moments of true rest. Whenever the cloud left, though, her nightmares would return. It was a blessed relief when the thunder rolled in closer – clouds billowing around her, thick and heavy – and did not depart. The rumbling comfort opened the way for the wind to fill her dreams instead.

Quiet surrounded her as the mist whispered its stories, not of years past like the folktales in her school books, but of the small wonders of today. In her dream, the wind stood before her again, playful... unburdened, as if nothing that had gone on before crossed its mind. The wind was a

constant – ever present – seeing all but leaving the past behind it. It did not look back; it held no regrets and only moved forward in whatever direction it chose.

How freeing... to only be concerned with the now. It danced around her with a childlike innocence one moment and unashamed familiarity the next. Fiora rested in its presence until the sunlight started to burn away the thunder cloud and warm her face. A patch of blue sky shown through and the wind tugged her towards it. *Veeessssaaalll...* It brushed its desire across her skin as she took it in with a full breath.

Fiora was flying again, this time south – back towards home. Keeping to the brook she followed it so fast the waves from her wake splashed five feet high behind her. In mere ticks she was back in Kavaccet staring up at the Sanctuary that had been her home. She flattened herself against the cool marble imagining it back under her toes. Oh, how she missed this. Without another thought she blew in through a window floating from room to room. Many sisters in waiting were still asleep, tucked into their beds. Fiora brushed each of their cheeks in greeting but did not tarry with them. Instead she found herself at the door of The Wisdom's private chambers. In all her years there, she had never gone inside. But this was still a dream, wasn't it? Letting her curiosity override her hesitation, she slipped in under the door.

The first chamber was breathtakingly beautiful. The far marble wall was covered with a slow falling waterfall, constantly trickling down. Fiora couldn't tell where the water at the top came from or where it went to at the bottom. A fantasy of her imagination, surely. In the center of the room stood a circular hearth filled with sparkling gems instead of firewood. The impossible fire crackled pleasantly in the center, warming the air around it and lifting her towards the ceiling when she neared. Wind chimes hung above the fire and she could not resist making them sound. Oddly enough, there was no opening in the room to allow the morning breeze to play their music. Try as she might, Fiora could not change her vision to include the open window the room lacked.

The sound of footfalls grabbed her attention and she drifted down a hall to follow. To her right, an open door revealed an ornate bedroom touting a four poster bed draped in waves of blue silk. Further down the hall to the left another door stood ajar and the footfalls echoed from inside. Sliding in, Fiora kept to the wall and crept along the ceiling to observe. Marble steps climbed down into a pool that took up most of the room; it was too deep to see the bottom of it. A crystal chandelier hung over the center of the pool, raining down sparkles of light that filtered in through windows in the ceiling. Lady Darya stood at the top step in the same silk as her bed which soon fell to the floor as she shrugged it off.

Fiora shrank back, newly self-conscious of her intrusion as the Lady walked gracefully into the water. *She should not be here.* It was too familiar a moment, but as Fiora started backing out, the Lady turned her head with a searching eye. "Has The Knowledge come to us at last?" Her voice echoed eerily in the otherwise empty room. Fiora was afraid to move as she watched the water

curl up the Lady's outstretched hand. "The Wisdom tells me it has. Come, daughter of promise, do not be afraid. Make yourself known."

Fear fell away for her curiosity. Of course The Wisdom would know she was here. The Wisdom knew all. With a new surge of boldness, Fiora sped towards the chandelier tinkling the crystals together in a quiet melody. The Lady lifted her head and smiled. "Fiora Sae Grue, Knowledge of the Air, I am glad that you have graced me with your presence." Hearing Lady Darya address her in such a way was bewildering. The Knowledge? She couldn't be The Knowledge. She was too young to be the chosen of air. *It is only a dream*, she reminded herself. *Another wind swept dream...*

The Wisdom spoke again, this time with a gentle chiding. "But shouldn't you be with your promise?" Fiora dropped down to blow a breeze across the lady's shoulder in response and she laughed. "Ah, I have missed you, too, but it has only been five days." Five? It had only been two. The inconsistency seemed out of place but she ignored it. "You must not allow yourself to become distracted from your charge."

The water swelled up around the Lady like the lay of the land. Their town on one end of the brook and the mountain on the other. A small ball floated into the Lady's hand and she placed it in the center. Fiora circled it understanding it represented her and Civyl. "Beware, dear Bloom, for danger comes from all around. It plots from over the mountain..." with a motion of her hand, an avalanche of water tumbled down the mountainside. "...and it follows from behind." With her other hand, a tidal wave rose up from the town and both barreled down on the ball in the center.

An unexplainable sense of dread crept into Fiora's mind with the advancing waters. Without knowing why, she rushed to surround the ball in a cyclone of air that deflected the water from both sides and the Wisdom spoke with the authority of the ages. "Return to The Sight, Knowledge of Air, and be his promise in this critical quest." [i]But what IS the promise? she wanted to ask. "Stay with him, Fiora. Only together can you save us all." *Save us from WHAT?* But The Wisdom did not answer her question. Instead she calmed the waters and lifted the ball. "Hurry, dear one, you are being pursued."

Civyl couldn't sleep so he watched the flames dance instead. There was an ache in his chest that he could not explain; it was both brought on and comforted by the wavering lights. He wished he could remember what it was like to dance with them. His thoughts were disrupted, though, each time Fiora's dreams would torment her. Only his hand on her shoulder and his voice in her ear seemed to quiet the whimpers and cries that returned each time he went back to his bedroll. The instant he decided to lay down next to her, her fists grabbed a handful of fabric and she buried her nose in his shirt. Her features calmed and her breathing steadied to true rest. With a sigh, he wrapped a protective arm around her and actually managed to fall asleep himself.

He woke up first, the stab of the mountain's pull not about to let him waste any daylight. Gently he rolled away from her to get himself ready for the day. One last check of the snares rewarded him with two hares and a grouse. He clipped them to his belt planning to clean them the next time they made camp. He returned to the clearing and started packing his things when Fiora woke with a startled gasp, looking around with wide eyes. "What's wrong?" he asked.

After a few more wary glances she answered, "Nothing. Just wish I could sleep without dreaming."

"More nightmares?" he asked with sympathy.

She squinted at him curiously, "Something like that."

She pushed her covers back and stretched before he caught himself staring again. *Such a distraction...* But one he had to put up with. When she wobbled to a stand he was reminded how little she had eaten in the last four days. If she was going to walk with any speed today, she would need to keep up her strength. He dug in his pack for some more fruit and the last of his salt pork bringing it to her. "You should have some breakfast before we head out."

She smiled and took it but set it down on her bedroll. "Sure, right after we wash."

Civyl frowned. "We don't have time for propriety."

She leaned in and wrinkled her nose at him, "You stink. Make time." She smirked as she stepped back and gave herself a courtesy sniff. "Phew, I stink too. Come on." She tugged on his left arm. "The water will cleanse us for the day and it will only take a few ticks."

He allowed her to drag him to the water's edge but yanked free when she splashed right into the brook. "Whoa, don't get your clothes wet!"

"But they need cleansing too," she stated as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

What was most obvious to him was that she did not understand the cons of traveling in wet clothing. "If you want to walk in a sopping wet dress that's fine, but I'm not getting my trousers wet."

No sooner had he said it, than she had drenched his pants with a well-aimed splash. "Too late. Now get over here and wash. You can take the bandage off your hand but don't get your arm wet. That should stay dry. I'll rewrap it when we're done."

With a pain in his side he reiterated his complaint, "We don't have time for this." But even as he finished his sentence, he found himself removing the wild game from his belt and wading in anyway. She dunked herself under the slow moving water and he followed suit as best he could while still keeping his bandages dry. He had to admit... it was refreshing. The cool water soothed his sore muscles and the blisters on his hand. Even the pain in his side subsided for the moment. Did the mountain agree, then, that cleanliness was worth taking time to observe? It seemed absurd, but he wasn't going to complain about the respite.

All too soon she stood and helped him up. Standing him on the bank, "Arms out," she instructed.

Another waste of time... "Why?" She only answered with a stern look and he relented, "Fine." She stood in front of him and did the same closing her eyes. The whirlwind that wrapped around them next was a startling pleasure. It whipped at hair and clothing with vigor and he closed his eye against the force of it.

Five ticks and their clothes were as dry as they had started. The wind died down to just a breeze that ruffled his hair and he opened his eye to her satisfied smirk. "Now, for breakfast," she announced. "I'll start cooking the eggs."

"Eggs? What eggs?"

A gust of wind in the trees knocked a next over into her hands and she lifted three bluish orbs out of it. "These eggs." This time he shared her smile. The mountain could wait for eggs.

As she stoked the fire and started cooking, Civyl packed the rest of their things, making sure to return his morning's catch to his belt. The eggs fried quickly and the added protein renewed him. With the last bite he was ready to go and the pull of the mountain was hooked back into his side. "Time to go," he said as he stood and brushed off his hands.

"I still need to change your bandage, though." Civyl glanced at the dirty scraps that covered his burn. He did not relish the thought of opening it up. He had been ignoring the increasing pain of its use, which likely meant it was not getting better. This one was going to take more than a few ticks... "It feels fine," he lied. "And we really don't have time. You can change it tonight after we make camp again."

"But it's filthy! I already have new bandages ready. It will only take a tick to rewrap."

He tried to pull away from her but she was too quick and snagged the bandage loose. It ripped away where it had stuck to his wound and he howled out in pain. When he managed to catch his breath he roared at her. "Why couldn't you just *let it be*!?"

She hesitated but only for a moment. With more care she peeled back the rest of the bandage while he bit back his verbalization. “Tears of Wisdom...” the blood drained from her face as a horror weighed her down. “This is bad. It’s already festering!”

“It’s fine,” he growled. “Just wrap it and be done with it.”

“Fine?! Civyl, we have to get you to a healer.”

With both his throbbing arm and the mountain now twisting his insides, he ripped his arm from her hold and wrapped the dirty bandages back in place. He couldn’t hold back his growing ire. “Don’t you understand?! We *Don’t. Have. Time!* We have to get to the mountain!”

“You’re going to *die* on the way if you don’t take care of that!”

“It’s not that bad.”

“Yes it is!”

“We’re going to the mountain!”

“Civyl, this is serious! It’s only been *one* day and-”

“*It took four days!*” he blurted out watching her face fall in confusion. “You were asleep for *four* days. It’s not spreading fast. It’s fine. I’ll make it to the pass alive... if we get there at all.”

“Four days?” Her eyes swept the ground for understanding. “But-“

“I have barely a week left. I’m running out of time. We have to go. *Now!*”

Head hung down, her concerned voice was little more than a whisper. “You still need a healer.”

Could she not see reason? Impatient with the wasted ticks he grabbed her roughly by the arm.

“You’re coming with me one way or another.”

“Ow. Stop it!” She pulled away. “Let me go!” He yanked her back towards him ready to heft her over his shoulder but the look in her eyes made him pause. “Civyl!” There was different kind of fear in her features and urgency in her voice as her head whipped about. “*Look out!*” Faster than he could process, she shoved him down just as the wiz of something sounded by his ear. The following *thwock* of it hitting a nearby tree drew his gaze to the arrow that had nearly pierced him. Her slight weight pressed down on his chest as she cast about wildly. “There’s four of them!” she hissed. “Stay down!” He was too startled to argue. Her lips moved in quiet whispers as gusts of air answered to her voice. “They have us surrounded! There’s nowhere to run!”

His mind finally caught up to the moment as his quest diminished behind survival. “Do they all have bows?”

“No, just one.” Fiora pointed at the four diagonal directions as she specified. “Two swords to the south. Arrow and sword to the north.” She lifted herself up and rolled closer to the fire while he drew his dagger from his boot. He didn’t like his odds with just a dagger but he couldn’t reach his other weapons without leaving her side. They both scrambled up and backed toward the fire – heads constantly turning to see the threats behind them – as four menacing faces came out from behind the trees.

The twang of another arrow being let loose caused Civyl to duck but Fiora’s hand shot up bringing a blast of wind with it to knock the arrow off course. A stocky swordsman with wide shoulders and tarnished chainmail started snickering. “Can’t shoot a wind witch with arrows, Borris. Everybody knows that.”

The tall archer in lightweight leathers, presumably Borris, sneered back. “You know I wasn’t aiming for her, Chink, but the purdy little thing is protecting her kidnapper.” Civyl and Fiora exchanged a confused glance as they continued to creep backwards as far as they could stand the heat of the fire.

“Kidnapper?” Civyl’s indignant voice rose above their sneers. “What are you talking about?”

The first man, who the archer had called Chink, pointed his sword menacingly at Civyl. “You was lugging her over your shoulder, wasn’t ya? That’s what you seen, ain’t it Demil?”

Chink turned his gaze on his wiry, wild-haired companion who jumped forward with wide eyes and a high, whiny voice. “That’s what I seen, that’s what I seen! He was carrying her and she was out cold the whole day.”

Fiora caught Civyl’s eye again, asking him to let her try to dissuade them. She raised her hands in a gesture of peace speaking with a calm voice though he noticed the swirl of wind pick up over far over their heads. “I’m afraid there’s been a misunderstanding, gentlemen. No one’s kidnapped anyone here. I am his promise.”

The last swordsman, who had been silent thus far, took a step forward while the others took a collective step back. Civyl understood the gesture as an act of deference. This was the one in charge. He had the rugged good looks that would cause maidens to whisper and the well-built physique any grown man could envy. Civyl instantly disliked him. The man’s low scoff held no amusement. “What’s the difference?” He spat to the side. “Maybe a Kavaccetian wouldn’t know

any better, but outside your little province, my dear, maidens are not objects to be given away at some figurehead's whim."

Fiora's face flushed as she retorted with anger. "Lady Darya is the wisest women in all the land!"

"It's no use, Alex," chainmail Chink snorted with a laugh. "She's been brainwashed."

"She's still just a babe," Demil piped up with a crooked grin that highlighted two missing teeth, "Bet you she hasn't had time to question her elders yet, bet you not!"

Borris added his own condescending thought. "Probably lived her whole life under the shadow of... *The Lady*." He sing-songed her title in disdain.

Fiora huffed at their mocking and Civyl noticed the tree tops were swaying with more than just a passing breeze. The increasing air flow stoked the fire behind them rising the temperature uncomfortably at his back. They wouldn't be able to stay here long.

"How old are you, child?" the leader asked her.

Civyl held his breath at the indignant spark in her eye. "Sixty-five," she answered daring him to say anything further.

The man scratched the day's growth on his chin as if it mattered not and asked a follow-up. "And how old were you when you were promised?"

Civyl watched her purse her lips and clench her jaw. She did not like the question making him curious of the answer. She met his eye briefly and a storm brewed beneath hers. Fear? Shame? Doubt? Civyl couldn't tell, but he guessed her stern answer held more conviction than she really felt. "Long enough to know The Wisdom can be trusted with my fate. I am his promise and I'd thank you kindly to leave us to travel in peace." She raised her chin in defiance.

The three men looked to the fourth who lowered his sword point. For a moment, it seemed they might actually leave... until the wiry one scratched his neck. "Hey, Alex... you seein' what I seein'?"

He turned scrutinizing eyes on Fiora and replied with a grim nod. "Aye, I see it." In unison all four men advanced a step and raised their weapons again, training them all on him. "Afraid we can't do that, my dear. You see, promise or no promise, we can't stand for any abusive man to pass through our land."

"Abusive?" she sputtered, "What are-

“The evidence is clear on your skin,” Alex nodded and lifted an outstretched hand to her. “Come with us. We’ll take care of you,” he assured.

Fiora’s hand flew to her neck and she winced. “No!” she yelled with a gust that made the flames behind them climb higher. “I’m not going anywhere with you!” She turned towards Civyl but he would not meet her gaze. It was true. He *had* been abusive.

Alex seemed to read his guilt loud and clear. “Come away from him, my dear. We’ll make sure he doesn’t hurt you again.” The implied threat hung heavily in the air.

But Civyl wasn’t about to let them lay a finger on her. He didn’t trust any of these men to actually have her best interest at heart. Tired of the waiting, he made his move and threw his dagger at the leather clad archer. There was a satisfying thud and grunt of pain as the knife hit him in the chest. More satisfying were the cries of dismay from the men around them.

“Borris!” Seeming wilder than before, Demil rushed to his side as he fell.

“Get him to Nivia, quick!” Alex bellowed.

“You’re going to pay for that!” Chink seethed as he advanced.

He ran up, swinging wide but Civyl managed to dodge the blade. It was not going to be easy fighting without a weapon. On instinct, he picked up the end of a burning stick and brandished it at Chink, but it flared angrily, making both men cringe back. Civyl threw it at him instead, but the fire was not satisfied. The flames from the simple campfire leapt past natural heights, forcing them all to back away.

“What sorcery is this?!” Chink demanded.

“It seems even the fire is against him,” Alex laughed though he kept a wary distance.

Civyl and Fiora took the moment to skitter to the opposite side and keep the rising blaze between them and their attackers. “What are you waiting for?” he hissed glancing above their heads.

“Two fewer opponents!” she huffed back with a glance in the direction of the wounded archer and the man who was helping him onto a horse. By the time Alex and Chink worked out a plan to come at them from both sides, the horse was galloping away.

Alex noted Civyl’s gaze following the departing men. “You’ve made a grievous mistake, wounding my brother. One that will cost you your life today.”

“Oh, so you weren’t trying to kill me before?” he snorted in retort. “Could have fooled me, what with the arrows flying at my head.”

Fiora shook her head at the cynical banter, “Please, just *leave us be*.”

Alex held his hand out to her again as the two men closed in. “You’re not safe with him, my dear. Come away and we will end it quickly.”

“No! I won’t let you hurt him!” Fiora shouted as she put herself between his body and the men’s blades. Civyl hated feeling defenseless. *He was supposed to be the one protecting her!*

Chink laughed at her and advanced, “And just what do you think you can do to stop us?”

Fiora’s gaze narrowed as the wind howled above them. Before Civyl could protest the danger she was putting herself in, she took up an offensive stance and released her fury. The wind that was circling the trees overhead rushed down and knocked Chink full force into a tree. With a crack to his head, he slumped forward and dropped his sword.

Alex was pushed backwards but managed to keep his feet, bracing against the wind. “My dear,” he tried to address her calmly but his anger at her defiance was beginning to show, “We are trying to help you!”

“I don’t need your help!” she shouted, gusting the wind at him even harder. “Just leave us alone!”

The man only shook his head in refusal.

Fiora brought one hand behind her back to get Civyl’s attention and he reached out to brush her fingers to acknowledge it. She made a few quick gestures that he somehow understood. “Got it,” he whispered, though he doubted she could have actually heard him above the windy din.

Alex fought his way forward one step at a time, shouting to be heard, “You don’t understand how this man is hurting you!” Fiora held three fingers behind her back. “He is dangerous!” Fiora held two fingers behind her back and took two steps forward.

With only one finger left up she spat into the wind, “So am I!” Civyl was ready when Fiora dropped her hand and used the same move on Alex that she had used on him days earlier. The wind he had been bracing against disappeared while an equally forceful blast shoved him from behind. She lunged to her right holding up a leg to trip him while Civyl jumped to his left. Alex

went sprawling face first into the dirt just a foot from the fire. His sword was flung at Civyl's feet who wasted no time in picking it up. Alex rolled to the side; a genuine flash of fear crossed his face as Civyl lifted the sword for a finishing blow.

It could have been over then. This misguided group of misfits could have been stripped of their leader and he and Fiora could have pilfered the remaining horses to take them to the pass in half the time... If only Civyl had not looked at her first. She knew what was coming and she was staring straight at it. Whatever ire she held towards this man the sorrow for his death sentence was genuine. That one moment of hesitation was all it took to change the ending of the story. Alex kicked out at Civyl's knee, knocking him off balance. One more kick and Civyl was falling backwards... right into the hungry flames.

The wind died instantly as both screams of agony from the fire and screams of despair from the girl rent the morning air. *Civyl!! NO!!* she lunged forward as if to help him but strong hands clamped down on her arms. Chink had regained his senses. Good.

Alex scrambled back from the fire and the man writhing in it as the flames blazed higher.

The girl still fought to get to the screaming man. "Let me GO!" She bit down on Chink's hand and wrenched her arms free, but only in time to run right into Alex. "Get out of my way!" Instead he wrapped his arms around her like a vice and instructed Chink to bring the horses. She screamed and cried, thrashed and kicked, but he would not let her go. He would not let her watch this death.

Soon enough the sounds of suffering behind him ceased. Only the crackle of the climbing flames competed with her protesting. "It's too late, my dear. The flames were happy to take your abuser. Be happy he cannot hurt you anymore." The statement did not sooth her, though. If anything, it made her fight him more. What a state of delusion she must be in to mourn for him so.

He was glad when Chink returned offering up a damp cloth. After a grim nod Chink held it over her mouth and nose.

It was a nightmare. It had to be. The crackling fire... the smoky haze... the stench of burnt flesh... It was all just another nightmare brought on by her visions of the burning village. Civyl couldn't be gone... or they would all be lost. The man who held her captive tried to speak soothingly but he was nothing more than a demon in disguise sent to lull her into complacency. Fiora fought

him – for Civyl, for the future – but she could not break free. Another smell invaded her senses; sharp as tanning hides but sickly sweet. It choked out the world and brought blessed darkness. It was a nightmare, but it was ending.

...It had to be.

The Life After

By Jewels - Apr 28 2014

Alex let out a jaded sigh of relief when the girl finally stopped struggling and fell limp in his arms. This day had not started out nearly as well as he had planned. Borris was seriously wounded, and the stranger was dead... all to rescue a girl who claimed she didn't want to be. If it hadn't been for the bruising to her neck and the guilt on the stranger's face, Alex would have left her with him. If she'd just gone willingly, no one need have been hurt at all, but she had fought so hard to stay... until Alex's hand had been forced. He hoped it was worth it.

Chink looked like he was doubting the same thing as he rubbed the back of his chainmailed head gingerly. "Ow! I've ne'er seen a girl fight so 'ard to stay with such a villain."

Alex shook his head. "I don't think he was a villain in her eyes, Chink. At least not today. Today, *we* are the bad guys."

There was a huff from his friend that he understood without need for words but Chink growled them out anyway. "You seen what 'e done to Borris! I swears, if that cur hadn't fallen in the fire, I would 'ave torn 'im limb from limb!" Alex shifted the weight of the girl to his left arm so he could put his hand on Chink's shaking shoulders. The big man's face was screwed up in a scowl, moisture welling in his eyes that threatened to crumple his pride. "If Borris don't... if he..." Unable to finish voicing that Borris might not make it, he hardened his features with fresh anger and snarled the end of his threat. "I'm gunna track down 'is wretched spirit an' do it anyway!"

Alex tried to reassure his friend, "Don't worry; Borris is strong and the knife hit nothing vital or he wouldn't have been able to ride out of here. Nivia will see to him when they arrive. I know how stubborn my brother is. Too tough to kill. He'll be just fine." Chink nodded, satisfied in Alex's confidence but in truth, the rhetoric was for more than Chink's sake. If Alex could convince himself that his words were true he might just make it to Nivia's without becoming hysterical.

"What do we do with her now?"

"Grab their packs. We're taking her with us to Nivia. Perhaps the old woman can convince her it was for the best." Because heaven knew he'd had no luck of it.

Chink helped him drape the girl over the front of his horse and they rode north as hard as he dared for over two full ticks. Just the thought of Borris having to ride the whole way made him

shiver with dread. What if he hadn't made it? But every length that Alex had no sign of him or Demil gave him more hope.

Nivia's house – a two story rustic cabin – was hidden away among the trees within a full tick's walk of Brittner village. Far enough removed from civilization to keep most of the rabble away but close enough to be accessible when needed. They thundered into the clearing close to midday. Nivia was outside frowning at them and started crossing the yard. Chink swung off his horse almost immediately closing the gap with long strides.

His anxious voice was almost a plea, "How is he?"

Nivia's brows creased with her displeasure but her voice was calm. "He is lucky. The blade just missed his heart. He needs mending time but he will live. No doubt, a few days rest and he will be back on his bow, though you know I would discourage it before a week."

Chink ran his hands over his bald head, pulling his cowl down in the process. "Thank the fates! I was so worried."

Nivia finally smiled, just a bit. "And he was quite worried about you." Though Chink towered over her, she managed to reach up and pat him on the shoulder. "Went on and on about you possibly getting hurt, too. I had to give him a sleeping draught to calm him down but it hasn't taken full effect yet. If you hurry to reassure him, I'm sure he will sleep much better."

Alex watched him run off to the house before carefully climbing down from his own horse. He steadied it with a hand high on the reigns as Nivia walked to stand next to him. "And what of me, Nivia? Did my brother also worry for my safety?"

"Nope. Not a bit." Her lips had returned to a frown, but the twinkle in her eyes revealed her true mischievousness. "He knows you're too hard headed to get hurt."

Alex broke out into a big smile and threw an arm around the old woman when she got close enough. "It has been much too long, Niv. I wish we were here on better circumstances today." Nivia nodded at him as he looked toward the door Chink had disappeared behind and sighed. "I dare say, that man loves my brother more than I do."

"Aye," she nodded, "and that is why your brother worried over him and not you."

Alex shook his head with a brief smile at her teasing, but his expression soon turned grim. "They have been good for each other, ...ever since..." He broke off mid-sentence knowing his meaning was not lost on the small framed woman.

She slit her eyes and crossed her arms to challenge him. "If you think so, why do you look so stern?"

He waved her off and ran his hand over his face feeling much too weary for midday. "Ach, I am a fool to be concerned. It matters not. I just wish... I..." Alex stumbled over putting his worry to words for her. He stared at the house and pictured his brother as he had been ten years ago. So young, so... free of burden. "He would have been a good father," he finally said letting that be explanation enough.

Nivia placed a hand on his arm and angled her intense gray eyes up at his own. "He may yet, Alex. He may yet. Just you wait. One of these days you will be an uncle and a father in your own right." Alex hoped that she was right about Borris but scoffed at her assumption for himself. "I don't think I am father material."

Nivia huffed and put her hands on her hips. "Who is before they become one?" she objected.

Alex did not hesitate. "Borris. Borris has always been father material even when we were still kids." Nivia clucked her tongue and shook her head; not to disagree with him, but to express her dislike of his mood. He found it an endearing habit.

His stomach rumbled and his horse snorted beside him. No doubt, it wanted to join Chink's mare in grazing on the soft green grass beneath his heels. He stroked the stallion's muzzle a few times before handing the reins to Nivia. She would not be able to hold the horse back if it decided to run, but Alex trusted it enough to wait to be dismissed. "Where is Demil?" he asked, noting the absence of his fiery energy.

"Sent him to town for some fresh ingredients," she answered, "Should be back before nightfall."

Alex huffed a laugh. One of Nivia's ingredients was usually whiskey and Demil in a tavern would have a hard time leaving. "Unless he stops for a drink," He quipped. "Then we won't see him till tomorrow afternoon."

Alex got a good hold on the girl before pulling her off the horse and into his arms. Nivia cocked an eyebrow at him as she released the horse to graze at her feet. "What else have you brought me today?"

"A young maiden freed from the mental bondage of a forsaken promise." Alex's mood turned sour. He couldn't help it. There was nothing he despised more than the 'promises' of The Wisdom and how they ruined other's lives.

Nivia came closer to inspect her, lifting an eyelid and feeling her pulse. Raising the girl's chin, Nivia squinted her eyes at the bruises on her neck. She leaned in to see them better and her nostrils flared. "You have drugged her?" Alex's heart dropped as her eyes widened in shock.

Alex pulled away, readjusting the girl's weight in his arms as he sighed. "She didn't exactly see eye to eye with us."

"So you freed her against her will?!" Her accusation dug into his conscious. "Alex, I thought we discussed this. Forcing your point of view on her is no better. If she was happy where she was you should have left her."

"She wasn't happy!" he argued. "She was a prisoner! Demil tracked him for a full day dragging her through the woods while she was unconscious. He only dared to come get us when he stopped to make camp. He was forcing her to go with him. They were screaming at each other when we got there. I heard it myself!"

Nivia's voice dropped to a disappointed whisper. It was almost worse than her yelling. "And now you've forced her to come with you."

He straightened up trying to seem more confident in his decision than he felt. "It's for her own good. You see the bruises," Alex was beginning to feel his anger at the stranger rise again and he growled his own accusation. "He did that to her! She may be too scared to admit it now, but she will be glad to be free of him once she wakes."

Nivia sighed in resignation, looking again at the ugly, finger shaped blotches that stood out under the girl's fair skin. She clucked her tongue and shook her head perhaps still disliking his point of view but her eyes softened, "Poor child. Bring her in then."

The fire crackled next to her ear as consciousness started to come back to her. The blanket was wrapped tightly around her shoulders as Fiora rolled over. Another nightmare... that was all it had been. Another horrifying nightmare of death and loss and doom for them all... except the wind told her otherwise. She was no longer in the woods lying on a bed of grass and dirt. She was in a cabin on a wood floor next to a stone hearth surrounded by strangers.

It had been real.

Unwanted memories assaulted her; seeing him thrash, hearing him scream, smelling his burnt flesh... Civyl was dead; consumed by the fire that had forbidden him to wield it.

All was lost! She had failed!

Her keening wails filled the four walls and she would not be consoled. Tick after full tick, Fiora refused to be consoled.

The girl would not stop her mourning. She huddled in a corner moaning and crying. She screamed if anyone tried to come near. Every second of the sound scraped at his soul. He had caused this.

Nivia paced in her home with her hands shoved over her ears. Alex had never seen the woman so upset before. Well, at least not for a very long time. When she finally couldn't take any more, she grabbed him and Chink by their ears and dragged them outside before letting go. "Why have you brought me this sobbing child?!" she demanded, "And what did you do to her to break her heart so?!"

Chink straightened up, still rubbing his sore ear. "She was being 'eld captive by an abusive man, Nivia. We took 'er away before he could hurt 'er again."

The old woman returned to pacing and flailed her arms in unconscious gestures to emphasize what she was saying. "Well, it doesn't seem like she wanted to be taken. Return her at once!"

"We can't," Chink leveled his chin at her without an ounce of remorse. "We killed 'im."

Nivia's eyes grew wider than new silvers and she turned her wrath on Alex. "Murder?! How *dare* you bring such evil into my woods!"

"You saw what 'e did to Borris!" Chink tried to defend their actions. "We had to defend ourselves!"

She spun on him pointing a bony finger at his nose. "Oh and I'm sure you did *nothing* to provoke his attack?" She paused but neither man offered an answer. Nivia didn't need them to. "Borris's quiver does not look full. Perhaps this man you murdered was just defending himself from you!"

Alex snapped his eyes shut. She was right of course. They had attacked him first, but they weren't trying to kill him. They just wanted to scare him away. Nivia knew that was how they worked. He finally offered his defense in quiet remorse, "He was going to kill me; I had no choice."

She saw his pain and softened her tone as she rested a hand on his arm. "Not all men are cowards, Alex. Not all men run away from their responsibilities." The statement was a slap in the face despite its soft tone, perhaps because he felt like he had abandoned his own responsibilities so many years ago. Nivia did not seem to notice the extra meaning it held for him, though. "And that girl in there, if she fought you then as hard as she is mourning now..." She paused for a moment to let the girl's wails drive home her point. "You should have left them be the second they both stood against you."

Anger at his past colored his thoughts. Pride in his perceived integrity made him stand up straight to face her. His voice was hard and cold, "I would not force a maiden to be slave to a promise made by a fake god."

Nivia clucked her tongue and shook her head, answering him with quiet reproach. "No... but you *would* force her to live without it." The woman sighed and stared at the ground while lifting her palms in surrender. She was giving up on the argument. "I put her in your charge. You must console her."

Alex blinked. "Me?! She won't even let me near her."

Nivia's voice was sad but firm. "You caused this. You mend it."

She started towards the house, which Alex noted was quieter than before. Maybe the girl had finally cried herself out. He could only hope. Chink turned to follow Nivia in silence while Alex hesitated with slumped shoulders. He had no idea what to do. Those he rescued were usually overflowing with gratitude. Even those who were not happy had not mourned their freedom from captivity. The girl's sorrow was foreign to him.

The silence behind the door when they reached it was an unsettling change and even Nivia paused to take a deep breath before opening it again. Their footsteps on the hard wood echoed in the room. The girl sat in the same corner of the room she had claimed since waking up. She rocked herself with her back to them, not acknowledging their return.

"How about some tea?" the old woman offered, the sound of it too loud. "To help you warm up?" The girl did not respond, but Nivia went on as if that were normal. "Yes, I'll get you some tea." She left the room nodding to herself.

"Um...", Chink coughed next to him, his discomfort obvious. "I'm goin' to go take care of the 'orses for the night." He excused himself and retreated out the door before Alex could get out his protest. *They had abandoned him.*

Alex approached her and cleared his throat. She stopped rocking but did not turn around. Condolences, he decided. He should offer her condolences. "I am sorry for your loss, my dear. I hope you will soon see it was for the better."

Hollow. Even he could hear how hollow his attempt was. To his surprise, though, she started to laugh. She whispered something he could not hear and he stepped closer to try to make out her words. "Pardon?"

She rocked back on her heels and turned her head just enough for him to see the profile of her lips as she repeated herself. "I said, you have brought my destruction." Her words were bitter but at least she was talking instead of crying.

Alex took a step closer. "My intent was to bring your freedom."

"I was not a prisoner!" she snapped. Icy fire flaring in her features for a moment, but the next her voice cracked. "I was his promise... a promise to protect... I have failed him! Oh, Civyl..." Doubling forward, her sobs started to shake her body again.

"Hey, hey," he closed the gap between them, instinctively resting a hand on her shoulder. *No, no, no... not more crying.* His psyche couldn't take it. "You haven't failed anyone," he tried to reassure her, "It's going to be all-"

His comfort was cut short as she spun on him. A pain ripped into his side from the dagger she had stabbed him with. "Murderer!" she seethed as she withdrew the knife with a wicked twist. Alex cried out as he fell back, too shocked by her venom to do much else but try to stem the flow of blood. "You will share his fate!"

She lunged to strike again but Alex managed to roll away. "Nivia! Chink!" he called for assistance as he coughed up blood. "She's armed!"

The old woman came into the doorway, mouth gaping open and holding a full cup of tea. "What? What's this? Stop it child! Put the knife down!"

Alex didn't think it possible but the statement seemed to make her angrier. The air in the home began to spin around the room wildly. "I am NOT a *child!*" She screamed as a blast of air lifted a

chair to fling at the woman. Nivia cried out as she was knocked backwards, her cup shattering on the floor.

She moaned, dazed from the blow, and Alex pushed himself backwards towards her. What had he done bringing this wind witch here? *A grievous mistake.* The girl let the quickening wind lift the shards of broken glass to spin around the room. They slashed at him from the right and the left. He tried to bat them away with his arm but there were too many. "Stop this!" he coughed and cringed as the movement jerked his ripped muscle. "Chink!" he called again, hoping to be heard.

Nivia stirred and tried to sit up catching the girl's attention. The shards of glass lifted in the air, a threatening display. "No!" he shouted struggling to his knees, "I won't let you hurt her!" She returned her focus to him deepening her scowl. "Please, just *leave us be!*"

He didn't know why he said it. He didn't realize he was saying it until the words were already out of his mouth. A smoldering twig finally waking to flame, he finally understood. Though maybe too late... yes, far too late. "Please! I'm sorry. I should have left when you asked. I didn't know what he meant to you." He coughed again, dizzy with the tearing pain. He fell back, sitting down hard. It was difficult to stay focused on her. She was too young. Though she claimed not to be a child she was still too young to be burdened with a promised. Too young to suffer such loss. Too young to be filled with such rage. "Sorry..." his bloodstained lips mouthed the word again though no sound came out.

She hesitated. At least she hesitated. But her uncertainty soon turned to hard determination. "Your apology will not bring him back." He could barely hear her over the noise of the wind as she tipped the table over pinning him beneath. The shrapnel in the air seemed to come together in a tight spiral that she sent sweeping towards him.

In the surreal moment, he found himself chuckling. Of all the ways he could have died, this – shred to death by a broken teacup – was not one he would have imagined.

The door burst open and a silhouette stood in its frame. *Chink?* Hope rose in him for a second, but no, Chink wasn't the man in the doorway. Shoulders too narrow... Too tall... Hair.

A rumble of thunder bellowed in the house, "Leave her alone!" The fire in the hearth leapt in a roar to answer, brightening the room. *A ghost!* The specter of the stranger had come from beyond the grave to make sure he also left the land of the living. Odd, though, that he seemed to be wearing only a saddle blanket tied at the hip. His eyes were wild in their warrior's sweep of the room and they landed on her.

"Fiora!" He yelled her name into the room and everything stopped. The glass dropped out of the sky and the dagger fell from her hand to all clink on the floor.

She blinked at him in disbelief. "Civyl?" He was breathing hard and stared at her with his one good eye. She ran to him almost knocking him over with the force of her embrace. "Oh Civyl, *my Civyl*, you're alive!!" She buried her face in his chest and moisture made his eye shine.

Alex gritted through the pain of another cough as he watched this man - full of relief and uncertainty - cup the back of her head with one hand while his lips brushed the hair on top. "Aye, I'm alive. What about you? Did they hurt you?"

He lifted her face up so he could inspect it but she shook free so she could rest her cheek on his chest. "No, I'm not hurt. Not anymore."

He didn't seem to believe her as his suspicious eye met Alex's. "Why were you fighting him then?"

Shame colored her cheeks as she ducked her head, but to her credit she did not lie. "To avenge you. I couldn't suffer to let him live."

Alex observed the man's gentle touch and the emotions behind his furrowed brow. He recognized that look and it twisted his gut worse than her knife had... Alex had been wrong. This man had the same look for her that Alex once had for someone else. This man would protect her with his life and she obviously loved him above any other. This was right. This was meant to be... and Alex had almost separated them.

With another painful cough, he gave in to the pull of the dark. Maybe it was time to stop pretending to be a hero and time to admit the truth. For the one girl he should have protected, the one girl that had mattered most, Alex had failed. He was no hero. He was nothing but a slave to his guilt.

Emergency Situation

By Luca - May 02 2014

Luca flew out of her bed. *Was this real? Was the school really under attack, or was that part of the dream?*, she thought. A second went by before another powerful explosion rocked the ground and nearly made her lose her balance. Her eyes grew wider. *What do I do? What do you do when someone attacks your school?*

Die, probably. The response she imagined her brother would make came into her mind. She looked around the room and managed to throw some items into a pack. She wasn't even aware of what it was that she was putting in. She ran out into the hallway. The rooms of the other students were already opened off to her right. All of them were open to her left as well except for one. She knew whose room that was, but she was determined to get him up anyway.

Hurriedly, she dashed over and bust open the door. Kyle lay in his bed with a section of the Foundation's ceiling broken off and lying where the rest of his head should be. Luca remained in the doorway, a hand rising to cover her mouth, agape. What was happening? Another explosion rang out. She turned back to see the hallway collapsed far behind her, sending a plume of dust and debris through the air. She needed to get out.

A beam of electricity flew out of the cloud of dust far down the hallway and shot by Luca's head. She gasped. White lightning, she knew that spell, she had seen a many times before. Across the hall was a staircase back up to the main level. *Help, I need to get help.* She darted upstairs. *There has to be people still alive who can stop this.* The stone stairway upwards gave way to the long stone chamber next to the common room. The walls had already been scorches, with blast holes torn through the decorative elements. The high vaulted ceilings, made out of etched marble in this area would normally make her feel very safe, but after seeing Kyle in his room, Luca didn't want to have anything above her head for a while.

"It's you," Amarac Doran said, surprised and clearly feeling the same alarm as everyone else. "You need to get upstairs and follow the other teachers out to the evacuation zone." She hadn't even heard of an 'evacuation zone' at this school before. *If it was outside, what would it even look like? Something in an invisible barrier?*

"Master Doran, do you know where my br-," she started, but the largest explosion yet rang out. The walls exploded and blew into the room thirty feet behind them. Doran pushed Luca back behind him, knocking her to the ground, as he stepped forward to address a potential threat. Dust

and pieces of stone were still raining down, but the presence of the man ahead of them could be felt without the power of sight.

Doran turned back to find that the other students had stopped to watch the explosion and see what had caused it. "Imbeciles!" Doran shouted out "Keep running or this hall shall be your tomb!" The shock of the explosions gave way to hysteria as the students turned away and scrambled up the staircase to the new construction zone. Luca realized that she, too, needed to follow them and get to a safe place to let this attack blow over. She picked herself off the ground and started to follow the mass of people. She started running.

"*Molten Spark*," The voice from through the dust cloud said, his voice was calm, but somehow the power of the spell allowed for his voice to be heard clearly, despite his distance. Doran looked back to see a ball of searing fire tear past him to the arch of the staircase that led to the new construction. The passageway collapsed in a shower of rock debris. Luca whipped her head back to the man as his face came into view.

"Ren Therin," Doran said in a tired, disappointed voice. "I should have known that you would have been the first person to defect if the opportunity arose. What's your reason, bitter that you haven't been made magus of this school yet?"

Therin walked forward slightly and glanced past Doran. "Oh," he said with disappointment, "just an expendable student. I thought it was *you* who was trying to escape, Amarac. But really, I'm glad you weren't. The only business I really have chasing mice is just to make sure that you're dead." Luca stood down the hallway with no obvious way to get out. The staircase was blocked and the only other alternative was past the two master mages. She probably wouldn't be able to get by without being attacked. And without the ability to do magic at *all*, she wouldn't even be able to defend herself. Doran probably had that at the forefront of his mind as well. She *did* just see him a week ago to talk about that very problem.

"You want to kill me, specifically? For what purpose?" Doran responded.

"You are the embodiment of the Somand College. You are manifestation of what is keeping us in the past, and just another obstacle from keeping us from uniting as Masters of Our Domain" Doran's eyes widened. *Masters of Our Domain*? That exact phrase wouldn't have been generated by accident. There was no mistaking it, this was the push. They had come back.

"It's over. The time of living under violence and anarchy has ended. I bid you farewell, Amarac Doran. As a sign of respect, I have decided to give you a display of your own power." Therin raised his right hand, extended his fingers and pointed his palm at them both. "*Sovereign Star – Oblivion Concerto*." He cast calmly.

Fierce yellow and green light exploded from his hand. It sounded like a torrent of swords being sharpened by grindstones. Doran's eyes flew open all the way at the unexpected use of such a high level attack spell. The energy from the wave of hostile magic coming towards them created massive winds, as the spell energy affected the air around them. The ground split and cracked as pieces of the Foundation broke and flew into the air as the mass of energy traveled along.

Doran sliced through the air in front of him with his hand and threw the hand up as if pulling up a sheet. The wind intensified to almost hurricane force, by the intensity of Doran's overwhelming spell energy, it pushed the sleeves of his and robe back to his shoulders as his cloak flapping violently. "*Splitting Void!*" He roared. A white translucent wall instantly grew up from the ground with a sound like stones falling into a heap. It was so thin, it looked so fragile, but the sovereign star spell was completely blocked. Yellow light was ripped past them, shattering the ground as it passed on either side of the barrier, deflected on the walls between Doran and Therin, and collapsing a section of wall. On the other side, a pillar was struck, severing it from the ceiling and blowing it over. This power reigning through the halls, these forces by the two highest ranking scholars at this college, it was overwhelming, crushing. Luca felt as though the spell energy in this room was going to strangle her.

The barrier faded away. Doran looked on with squinted eyes. Therin smirked, admiring the strength of the spell he just threw down. If he was more tired now than before, it wasn't evident. He dropped his hands and continued to speak calmly. "They say that you are the only one who has ever been able to cast that spell in its true form." He grinned. "But *I* am familiar with the chant. And you don't reach the rank of head of the Defensive Magic Division without being able. To use. Magic!" he cried out and pointed his palms at Doran once again.

Doran raised two fingers. "*Radiant Prison Sink*". Light flashed outward from his two fingers and the ground beneath Therin began to glow with yellow light. A circle emerged on the ground and symbols in a language Luca had never seen before glowed as they circled the perimeter, extending out in a three feet radius. Therin grunted as he struggled against the binding but appeared unable to move at all.

"Your overconfidence in your powers, limits your ability to understand the forces you wield." Doran explained, "The spell you used just now was a failure. Although its power was great, that is not the form of sovereign star. You are familiar with its incantation, but you do not know that incantation's meaning, or its message...You don't know who it is."

"I don't know *who* a *spell* is? How senile have you gotten, Amarac!? Spells are tools meant to be used!" He roared and spell energy, again, filled the air.

"It pains me to have to beat on such a pitiful being. May you yet, in your final moments, find the truth you need."

As the strong winds returned to the stone chamber, Therin cracked open the bonds of the seal and raised his hands the rest of the way. Doran made an audible surprised noise. "*Adamantine Blast!*" Therin cried. The wind continued to blow, and Therin he continued to stand with his hands raised. Nothing else happened. His spell energy filled the air, but no magic flowed from his form. He gasped. "What is this? What have you gone and done Doran?"

"Sorry, but I don't think your "tool" wanted to answer you today," he said with his eyes closed looking down. He examined the wind blowing back his robe. "Although, I have to admit, you have amassed considerable spell energy. I'm not a fan of this spell, but you don't leave me with much of a choice. This world shall not be destroyed. Not even...by you. "*Rampant Subjugating Iron Lance*"

The areas of Therin's ball-socket joints bulged under his robes and white metal lances burst out of all of them, placing him at the center of dozens of hexagonal beams of iron. Therin screamed out in agony as he dropped to the ground, again unable to move. Doran walked forward, leaving Luca standing awkwardly to watch.

"The time has come to give up, Ren," Doran said. He sighed as he looked down at the collapsed man. "Do you even know who he is?" He asked sadly. Therin strained himself to meet Doran's stare. "Where is the man who started this mess. Where is Amr-" Doran was cut off by another beam of white lightning hurdling through the air from down the staircase to students quarters. Doran gasped but easily deflected the attack by swatting it with his bare hand. The lightning landed on the far wall beyond Therin and cracked the stone slightly. *That was a fairly weak attempt at that spell*, Doran thought as he glanced at the impact site, *who could have...* A student revealed himself at the bottom of the staircase. Dozens of footprints could be heard approaching from the south halls as well. *Was it the next evacuation group?*

"Yes, there he is, my lads, a traitor who attacked us. Take him down, remember what I taught you!" Therin cried out even though he was unable to move or counter the iron beams.

"No!" *Damn that Therin.* Doran thought. There wasn't much time. He glanced back at Luca. he wasn't about to kill his own students, but he was going to have a hard time protecting Luca with attacks from so many different directions if he didn't strike back. He directed a hand at a section of wall by the staircase. "*Molten Spark*," he said. A firebolt was unleashed from his hand that collapsed the wall and revealed the hallway.

He must be extremely familiar with the construction to be able to so accurately tell where rooms are through walls. Luca thought.

"Luca," Doran called out. "Get out of this place. Head to the west Wandering Forest and wait for me there. You will make it, but only if you go now and do not stop." Molten sparks and white

lightning spells were being hurdled in from the students running up the halls. But Doran had a calm look in his eye that he didn't take away from hers until he felt that she believed.

There was a pause. "Right." She said, and ran to the hallway through the broken wall.

Doran turned back to the dozens of students standing in front of him and walked forward. "It is finally time for me to give you all the punishment you deserve." As Luca looked back, she saw Doran deflecting the lightning bolts and fireballs with his hands and returning fire with spells of the same level.

A staircase was coming up. What joy, the surface was coming closer. Luca sprinted up as fast as she could when a huge crash came from behind her with a gust of wind. Some explosion came from the Foundation chamber. *Was that Therin? Was he back? Was it another instructor that defected to this rebellion?* Luca remained frozen on that step. Even after Therin....especially after Therin, she had no idea what the enemy looked like. What if she ran into another student here? Even some of them had turned against the school. *'You will make it, but only if you go now and do not stop.'* Doran's words rang out in her mind. She had to trust that he was right and that he was on her their side. She ran on.

The Mending

By Jewels - May 06 2014

She was here! She was unharmed! Civyl's muscles trembled from exhaustion and his lungs screamed out in protest at every single breath. He had been running. ...for over a half-day! Partly because the tether that held him to her demanded it, and partly because of his worry for her safety. Thank the Wisdom they had been travelling north. The pull of Enundale only made him run faster and the hook in his side was mild from the ground he'd made.

She was here. She was unharmed. Civyl's heart pounded out a ferocious tempo and tears stung his eye threatening to fall. When she ran to him – threw her arms around him... there could not be a better feeling in this life. Everything in him rejoiced, especially that part of him he could not remember. This was right. This was meant to be. Wisdom help him, he'd never let her go.

...she was here. ...she was unharmed. And she was saying something to him but he couldn't focus on it. He could feel her lips moving against his chest, her breath brushing across his skin, but her words were lost to the wind. He looked down as she turned up her face, brow knitting in concern. She mouthed his name but the sound of it was muffled behind a roaring fire that rang in his ears. The world turned on its side as a pain slammed into his shoulder. He lost sight of her

face as darkness clouded his vision but he was not worried. ...*she was here...she...was...unharmmed....*

“Civyl?! *Civyl!!*!” She shook his shoulder as hard as she dared but she could not rouse him again. Shallow breathing... pale skin... his heartbeat slowed beneath her fingertips. *Not again! He couldn’t die again!* Fiora jumped up, frantic with the thought, and ran to the old woman who was still sitting in the doorway rubbing her hip. “Help him! Please, you must help him!”

The woman focused on her face and scowled deeply. “I offered you help once,” she growled. “You brought vengeance into my living room to thank me... *and* you broke my favorite tea cup. Why should I help him for you?”

Fiora knew she had no right to demand anything from this woman who had put up with more than she deserved from her today. She dropped to her knees at her side. “*Please!!* I’ll do anything!” she clutched the woman’s sleeve and squeezed her eyes shut to hold in the tears. “I promise! Anything you want. I just... I can’t...,” unbidden a sob escaped but she bit the rest back. This woman had heard her cry more than enough for one day. “I can’t lose him again!” she finally choked out.

Lifting one eyebrow the woman nodded. “All right. I will help your promised one. But *first*,” she paused to emphasize that her request took priority, “*you* must help me with Alex.”

Fiora’s heart fell as she looked at the other man dying on this woman’s floor. A new rush of anger washed over her. He had dumped Civyl into the fire. He had left her promise *for dead!* Even though Civyl had somehow survived, that villain did not deserve to live.

The old woman must have read the expression on her face because her tone was full of warning, “Do not misjudge me as kind, child. I was helping you in the first place only because Alex asked me to. He is as dear as a son to me, and if he dies, *MY* vengeance will not be as kind as yours was.”

There was an icy truth in the woman’s eyes that caused Fiora to shiver. Gulping back her new fear, she nodded her head vigorously. “Anything,” she whispered out as she helped her to her feet. “Just tell me what to do.”

The old woman was calm but urgent as she assessed Alex’s condition. His ragged breath was growing weaker by the tick and he was losing a lot of blood. “Grab the whiskey, child, quickly now!” She pointed her towards the kitchen. Too anxious for Civyl’s safety to cringe at being

called a child yet again, Fiora literally flew in search of it and came back holding it out to her, but the woman shook her head. “Rub some on your hands and pour it over his wound.” The woman nodded in approval while she did and then motioned for her to sit.

“I need you to do something for me. It is very important. You have cut a hole in his lung and he cannot breathe on his own. I need you to breathe for him while I work. Can you do that?” Fiora nodded already making the request of the wind. Almost immediately his breaths sounded deeper, but his wound started to bubble. “Plug the wound, now, quickly, quickly; put your finger in the hole.” Fiora’s head snapped up; surely the old woman was joking, but her face was dead serious. “You must keep the air in his lungs, child! Finger in his side!”

Screwing up her face in revulsion, she forced herself to do as the woman asked. It was sticky and warm and squished as she pushed her finger in far enough to put it over the tear her dagger had made. Thankfully, Alex’s breathing became steadier and Nivia nodded her head, “Good, good, if you stay like this it will keep him from death’s door long enough for me to prepare the needed medicines and supplies. Keep him breathing while I work, child, do you understand?” Again, Fiora nodded. There was little else she *could* do as she concentrated on the movement of the wind in and out of his mouth and keeping the slim contents of her queasy stomach down.

It was the hardest thing in her life, to focus on the man dying in front of her when Cyvil lay much too still on the floor behind her. The wind whispered the steady rise and fall of his chest to her, though, so she knew he was at least still alive.

Nivia worked quickly; killing a hare she apparently kept for just such a need, and harvested it for parts of its skin and organs. When she was ready, she had Fiora place a patch of skin over the hole in the lung. She had smeared it with a salve that was supposed to help the two pieces bond together. A second patch went over the hole in the sack around the lung in a similar fashion and the woman finally relaxed a little. “That was the most critical part. He should be able to breathe on his own now.” Fiora took that as an instruction to stop forcing air inside him and, as the woman had predicted, Alex kept on breathing. He was still bleeding, though, and her tasks were not yet complete.

The ticks passed slowly and Fiora’s dress was soaked in Alex’s blood when the door burst open again. “Oh, my achin’ ‘ead...” It was one of the attackers; the big man with the chainmail on. He staggered into the room with a split lip and one eye swollen shut. After sweeping the wreckage in the room with his other eye he bristled. “Wrath of the Void, what ‘appened in ‘ere?!” He took in the sight of Fiora’s crimson gown with everything else. “No... Not Alex, too!” In a half-tick, his eye narrowed at his feet and he drew his sword. “Nivia, did this ‘ere cur do that to Alex? I swears I’ll tear ‘im limb from limb *for real* this time!!”

“NO!!” Abandoning her charge, Fiora leapt to Civyl and threw herself over him. “Don’t you *touch him!*!”

He hesitated for a second as indecision crossed his face but thankfully, Nivia made up his mind for him. “Haven’t you done enough harm for one day, Chink? Under no circumstances are you to hurt him, again. Do you understand me?”

“But Alex-“ he started to protest but Nivia cut him off.

“NO circumstances!”

Chink pursed his lips and sheathed his sword with a huff. Fiora didn’t trust him not to try again when no one was looking.

“Good, good.” Nivia went on as if nothing was actually amiss. “Now that we’re all being civilized to each other, we can maybe focus on the more pressing matters, hmm? Come, child, Alex is bleeding again and I need your steady hands to finish his stitches.”

“Yes, ma’am,” she whispered as she lifted herself off Civyl’s chest. She didn’t take her eyes off of Chink, though, until he had crossed the room and set up a turned over chair to sit on. Satisfied that he was far enough away that she could reach Civyl before him, Fiora finally returned her attention to the open wound she was sewing closed. Nivia’s hands did not shake at all as she directed her where to place the needle. If she had to venture a guess, the woman didn’t really need her ‘steady hands’ for this task, but she supposed that making her do the mending was another way to really make it sink in; the gravity of what she had done – and the consequences of it.

Before Fiora had started, the woman poked a hollow grass reed into the wound with more rabbit skin tied to the end. “In case there is air trapped in his belly,” the woman explained. “It will let the air inside out, but not let more air back in.” Fiora was sewing around it now. It looked odd, sticking out of his side like that, but Nivia assured her it was necessary for proper healing of this type of wound. Guilt and remorse battled with anger and justification the whole time she worked. *He deserved to die... didn’t he?* But if so, why was she so relieved that he wasn’t going to?

When Nivia finally announced he was stable, she ordered Chink to carry him upstairs. The woman did not complain when Fiora stayed downstairs next to Civyl. His breath had leveled out to somewhat normal – nothing like the death rattle Alex’d had – and she wasn’t afraid for his life anymore. She wondered if the old woman had known he was all right the whole time and let her worry for nothing.

In mere ticks they were back and Nivia told Chink to carry Civyl up the stairs too. “What?! No way! I ain’t ‘elping ‘im. Just ain’t right, Nivia! Just ain’t right!”

The woman narrowed her eyes at him with a dangerous stare. Even Fiora was scared, though the scowl was not meant for her. “Take him upstairs, Chink!”

But the bald man only shook his head. “No, I won’t do it! I refuse!” and with that he stormed back up the stairs leaving Nivia huffing behind him.

“Stubborn man...” she grumbled under her breath and she turned her attention back to Civyl. “Well, perhaps we won’t need him upstairs.” Nivia took a half tick to look him over before going to her medicines. “He doesn’t seem to be hurt too badly. Perhaps he will let us wake him up, hmm?”

She rummaged around for some type of plant, which she snapped under Civyl’s nose. He coughed and started from the smell, sitting up on one elbow in confusion. “What is that foul stench?”

Fiora was ecstatic and threw her arms around his neck again. “Oh Civyl, you’re okay! I was so scared!” He wrapped an arm around her in reply but pulled back suddenly, staring at the bright red wetness his hand came away with. His face drained of color when he glanced at her dress but she was quick to reassure him before he had the chance to ask. “It’s okay, I’m not hurt. It’s from Alex.” She glanced at the old woman who looked quite satisfied in herself before finishing a bit tongue-in-cheek. “Nivia convinced me to help save him from premature death.”

After a little bit of explaining who Nivia was and where they were, the old woman got him sitting on a chair next to the fire. A cursory inspection revealed his only real wounds were the scrapes and gashes on his feet and legs. “From running barefoot,” was his explanation. “The fire burned all of my clothing and those ruffians stole my pack.” Nivia handed Fiora some salve and bandages to wrap them in and oversaw the work interrupting only minimally.

When Fiora was done she settled herself on the floor leaning against his leg. She drew strength from the physical contact and did not want to be apart from him again. Soon the woman turned her head to them with confusion on her face. “Chink said they had killed you. Tell me what happened.” Fiora went through a quick and likely biased version of the events that ended with Alex tripping Civyl into the fire. “But you weren’t hurt?” Nivia asked Civyl.

Fiora’s brow furrowed also, “You screamed,” she shuddered at the memory. “Why did you scream if the fire did not burn you?”

“Oh, it hurt all right,” he admitted with a cringe, “but it only hurt the burn I already had.” He lifted his arm to show them. It looked... not exactly healed, but not infected anymore. The angry red around the wound had cooled to a normal pink and healthy scabbing covered the rest. “Hurt

bad enough that I passed out, but I guess it was killing all of the bad stuff, because when I woke it looked like this.”

Nivia was nodding her head. “So you are a fire walker, then. But why did you fear the fire in the first place? How did you get the burn on your arm... and on your face?”

Civyl turned his gaze to Fiora who explained. “He was forbidden by the fire, four years ago.” She ducked her head so she wouldn’t have to see the woman’s expression... or let her read the truth in her own. “He killed a man with the flame.”

The woman’s brow was still creased but she was nodding. “And you wished to also be forbidden by your element, child?”

Fiora cringed, not at the use of ‘child’ but at how appropriate it fit this situation. How could she have been so reckless? She was suddenly appalled at how she had planned to use the wind to kill. “I hadn’t even thought of that. Tears of Wisdom! What would I have done without the wind by my side??” Emotion threatened to make her a sobbing mess once again so she shoved the possibility to the back of her mind and focused on Civyl. The fire had not consumed him. It had helped him instead. That was good... but it left her with so many questions. “Why didn’t it burn you this time? It tried when you picked up the burning stick. I saw that.”

Civyl shrugged. “Maybe because I didn’t try to wield it when I fell. I was too distracted with the pain in my arm to try to fight back anymore and then I was unconscious.”

Fiora shut her eyes with the possibilities. Something still wasn’t adding up. The wind carried a puff of smoke from the hearth to her nose as if to help her remember. “The smell, though,” she whispered out, “It was the same smell as the... the... as burnt flesh. I smelled burnt flesh.”

Civyl smiled with a sheepish half-grin. “Yeah... In addition to burning all of the clothing I was wearing, it also burnt our supper. Sorry to say that we will not be having rabbit and grouse soup tonight. They were turned completely to ash.”

The wild game... she had smelled the wild game burning... Fiora allowed herself a smile. Civyl was alive! The fire had not taken him from her. She had not failed and Civyl’s quest, whatever it might be, could also be fulfilled. It was a good feeling. Especially with him sitting right next to her. She had one last question on her mind, and she asked it while she smoothed down the hairs on his leg. “How did you find me?”

“It wasn’t too difficult to follow four sets of horse prints,” he shrugged as his hand rested on the top of her head in affection. “I had to find you. I had to make sure they weren’t hurting you.”

She turned her forehead to lean on his leg. "I'm so glad you did," she whispered with closed eyes.

"Hmmm..." The old woman was staring at them thoughtfully when Fiora glanced. Her hand rubbed her wrinkled chin while her eyes squinted in concentration. She stared at them long enough for Fiora to wonder if she would ever say her mind. Abruptly, Nivia stood. "That reminds me. If we don't want the rest of that hare I butchered to go to waste I should probably cook it up, hmm? I'm afraid I don't have a spare grouse, but some rabbit stew does sound quite nice for tonight."

By the grumbling in Fiora's tummy, she knew she would be most grateful for food. "Can I help with anything?" she offered.

Nivia scoffed, "Not dressed like that, you can't. You'll need to wash up first. Upstairs, third door on your left. There must be something in my closet that you can change into. And you'll find a washtub full and waiting right across the hall. Quick as you can, now. I'll be needing your steady hands to cut the frithnip root for the broth."

Frithnip root? Just the thought of the tender plant made her mouth water. Fiora hadn't had frithnip root in ages and her hunger made her eager to have it again. "Yes, ma'am!" she jumped up and headed for the stairs heedless of what else she might find at the top of the stairs.

Rosemarsh, Part I

By Zoe - May 08 2014

"Hey, Kiro?"

The knocking and subsequent speaking interrupted the younger Kiro's concentration. The items that were precariously balanced thanks to his shadow tumbled to the floor. While they did not break, it nonetheless irked him.

"Dad, if I don't get this right by tomorrow, Master won't be happy," Kiro grumbled. His father winced.

"Sorry, son. I just wanted to let you know dinner was ready."

Kiro hummed in acknowledgement and manipulated the items into place again. His father sighed and closed the door.

A rock caused Kiro to stumble for a moment, forcing his mind to the present. The southern gates of Rosemarsh loomed nearby, the week-long journey stretched out before them. It had taken them four days to reach the edge of the forest going west, having no real idea how large the forest actually was. It took another day to find a road, and two more to reach their destination.

Kaiya had remained silent for the entire journey beyond muttering "morning" and "night". As he discovered, she barely responds to small talk, somehow finding ways to end the conversation quickly to make way for silence. The last time he tried to start a conversation, she broke it off only to sit and stare at a tree for an hour. Kiro then finally gave up on talking for the sake of talking. He didn't mind, actually. It was rather relieving, if a bit unexpected. Most anyone else would talk for the sake of talking. It wasn't until they neared the town that Kiro finally voiced his thoughts.

"What do you actually plan to do now?" Kiro asked.

Kaiya, still keeping her eyes on the town, replied, "Find work. Figure out living. If this town doesn't work, I'll find another." She paused, then continued, "Why, were you thinking something different?"

"I don't know. What do you even do when you lose a home like this?"

"Meander through a forest, walk towards the nearest city?"

If there was any hint of a joke, her deadpan expression failed to indicate it.

"Were you thinking revenge?"

Was he? Several times, he thought about getting back at them. The desperate look of the man dying by his very shadows pierced through any notion of it. He wasn't sure he wanted more of those.

Kaiya sighed, apparently taking his silence for confirmation. "Don't even think about it. You might have killed one—" Kiro flinched. He never told her he did that. "—but you would be an idiot to try to enact vengeance. Life is painful enough with keeping alive to worry us each day."

No, definitely not revenge. What does someone do after losing their home, then? According to Kaiya, it was as simple as finding another. It was an absurdly simple solution. Of course, there's also Shadowmancy to pass on to future generations. Making a family would be... difficult, so he'd have to find some other way. He shook his head in response to the question.

"No, sorry. I was thinking. There's nothing back there. I don't want revenge."

"What did you actually plan to go and do, then?" Kaiya asked, wrenching Kiro back from his thoughts.

"I don't know. I guess I'm just going to do what you plan on doing. I can figure it out from there."

She nodded. The gates drew nearer and nearer, its features becoming more prominent in the mid-morning. They were tall, or at least Kiro thought they were. Not having had walls in the village, he had nothing to compare them to. Would they have been saved if they had walls?

A pair of stoic guards stood on opposite ends of the gate, giving a bored glance to the two before staring ahead once more. They took that as a sign to go ahead and walked through.

Their senses were assaulted by a flurry of sounds reminiscent of the days when bands of merchants would pass through their village which only increased in volume as they made their way north through the city. They soon reached a market with more transactions ongoing than very second than Kiro had ever seen in his life. Trying to distinguish any particular sound from anyone not next to you was borderline impossible, even for him. People haggled, people bickered, children laughed. It was chaos, but obviously orderly in some form.

And yet, similar though it was to when merchants had passed, it was different, and not just due to the number of people. There was a tension in the air. Kiro then noticed how subtly different everyone looked, as well as how these different looking people tended to mingle more with those that looked like themselves. Instantly he mentally wished he had a mirror or better memory of his own face, mostly due to worry of this strange development. Unbeknown to him, Kaiya was thinking the same thing, though more out of curiosity than worry.

The tension was strongest when the different looking people communicated. A couple times it looked like a fight was going to break out, only for a cough from one of the guards to break up the fight. Kiro wasn't sure he wanted to know how a mere cough from a guard was sufficient.

After several attempts to ask someone—largely being ignored or sneered at—they were finally directed to a large board covered with paper of varying age. Ignoring the ones with such horrid

handwriting it was no wonder the paper it was written on was yellow, the pair searched for something either of them could do.

Kiro could hunt and gather. He could read. He could write. He was as much of a scholar as his village would allow, and he could perform Shadowmancy. Kaiya had a similar skill-set, except instead of hunting, she was trained in fighting. And yet, these skills did not really apply to most of the jobs. One even made Kiro, and especially Kaiya, visually recoil. Kaiya had no desire to "fulfill the every desire of deep-pocketed drunkards".

"Ah," Kaiya said. "What day is it?"

Kiro began sorting through the days since he'd last checked a calendar. Kaiya beat him to it, though.

"Yeah. Hmm. This thing is today, then. That's... suspiciously lucky."

Kiro grumbled. Why ask if you were prepared to figure it out?

"What'd you find?" he asked.

"Asking for able-bodied men to assist in moving stuff. Hopefully the men part is just a figure of speech."

"Right. Hopefully there will be spots for both of us."

Following the directions through a short series of streets, they came across a store. Four men were standing in front of it, two of them elderly men standing with their backs to the store. They were likely the ones in charge, with the two younger men facing them probably there for the same reason they were. The old men were scrawny, with bulging bellies, in complete contrast to the rare few older men they had grown up seeing. The other two hardly stood out. Young, averagely build, with scruffy short dark-brown hair.

"We're here for the job," Kiro said as they walked over.

"We?" one of the older men asked, glancing at Kaiya.

"Yes. We," Kaiya replied curtly.

"Where are you from, Orthaeum? Don't normally see women working, 'cept in the bars."

Orthaeum?

"No. Somewhere else," Kiro replied.

"Well, I reckon three workers is enough. Run along, miss. I here there's a few bars hiring women if you *really* want to work."

Kaiya appeared completely calm to Kiro at first, at least until he saw a patch of ground seemingly ripple. Strange, that one of the things they have in common is their tendency to vent through their art. The men didn't even notice. Shadowmancy may mostly be an art, but there's a reason his father would always bring him hunting. Idiots.

Turning to Kiro, Kaiya whispered, "You might as well stay and work, since we're already here. I'll find something else. Meet by the south gate at sundown if you can."

"Right."

The work was tiring, but brief. The three men hauled boxes from one location back to the store. Kiro worked with the single-minded focus of a Shadowmancer that few could match, unaware of the strain on his arms until after. While he was not frail by any means, he did not stress his arms as much as many others would. Still, he managed to actually work faster than the other two, and he suspected they were at least a little stronger.

One of the older men handed each of the three a small bag of coins as payment, after which Kiro immediately set off after a quick, polite nod that they hardly deserved. There was time before he was supposed to meet up with Kaiya, but he didn't want to stay there.

"Hey!" shouted one of the two men he worked with. Kiro paused long enough for him to catch up. "Where are you from?"

Kiro never got a good look at either of them before. This one looked about his age. He was slightly taller, with short, slightly messy brown hair. Green eyes. Looking at his face, Kiro noted he was actually attractive. Kiro quickly turned around and started walking again, asking, "Why do you want to know?"

Kiro sounded almost accusing. Dammit. Then he mentally shook his head. He was being irrational. The man wasn't *that* attractive.

The man followed, replying, "Just wondering. I've always been curious of other places. There's many different sorts of people, but very few ever want to talk. You don't look like any of the others, so I hoped you might be new here."

"Yeah. Just stopped by today. From a village a ways east."

Kiro neglected to mention that the village is now a pile of ashes.

"What was it like?"

"It—"

Kiro stopped. The other glanced at him, confused, but he didn't notice. An oppressive force came upon his skull—no, *through* his skull, but it couldn't have been physical. It buzzed in intensity, and he began feeling the surface of his being be laid out. Not knowing what exactly was happening, but realizing the attack was somehow mental, through a memory he could only recall the basics of, Kiro focused his thoughts, not letting the attacker win without a fight. A few tense seconds stretched on, but finally the buzzing and the force withdrew. He looked around, finally spotting a man in white robes surrounded by five guards.

The robed man clutched his forehead, glaring at Kiro.

"Guards! After that yellow-eyed boy!"

The Reflection

By Jewels - May 13 2014

His heart beat out a quick rhythm as he watched her disappear up the staircase. Civyl cringed at the last sight of her ruined gown and felt a wrenching at its loss. It was all she owned. He was sorry for what she had endured today. Kidnapping, heartbreak... vengeance and fright. The way she had been ready to avenge him? He shook his head at the thought. He had not realized how much he meant to her... how deeply she cared about him. And it was stirring up feelings of his own that he had not realized were there. Well... maybe he'd had an inkling before, but he had not wanted to admit it. Having her stolen from his side this morning and finding her safe once again... he had no doubt. He loved her. With an ache that smoldered at his core, he loved her.

He caught the old woman staring at him with an upturned eyebrow and a frown. Wise eyes bored holes right through his soul. His face flushed with heat at her seeming disapproval. She opened her mouth to give voice to her opinion but hesitated before clucking her tongue and shaking her head again instead. He tensed at even her unspoken judgment but decided she had right to her opinions as long as she kept them to herself.

“As soon as I can walk on my feet, we will be on our way,” he said firmly, both to assure her they would not overstay their welcome and to curb any thought the woman might have for suggesting otherwise.

She stared at him thoughtfully before giving a reply. “They will be better by morning. My salve will knit your wounds together in the night.” He gave her a short nod and a thank you then intended to let silence fill the rest of their time, but she asked him something. “Why are you here?”

He scoffed at the absurd question. “For Fiora, of course. Your little band of thieves stole her from me!”

Nivia shook her head, exasperation in her tone. “Not ‘here’ at my house; ‘here’ so far from Kavaccet. Why are you travelling in the woods? Very few born in Kavaccet venture out of it unless they must. My *little band* tells me they heard you arguing with the girl, forcing her to come.” Civyl lifted an indignant finger, ready to defend against the observation, but she waved him off. “I know she is not with you against her will. That is obvious. But she does not wish to be *here*.” She used her hands to indicate the area in general as she kept talking and Civyl started to feel self-conscious under the interrogation. “She travels in her dress of age with no other clothing, not even shoes, and your pack is just as sparse.” He jerked up his head at her admission to snooping through his things but she ignored him and continued to press him, her voice adamant. “I ask you again, *why are you here?*”

Civyl tightened his jaw as he met her gaze. He owed this woman no answers to her probing questions and didn’t intend to give her any. It was none of her business... and even *he* didn’t know why beyond the pull of the mountain. He wasn’t going to try to explain that to her.

Faced with his silence, she slumped back in her chair with frustration and rubbed her wrinkled chin. “Stubborn man,” she mumbled under her breath and let out a long sigh. He thought that would be the end of it but she surprised him with her next blurted statement. “The fire did not forbid you.”

“What?”

“The fire,” she repeated leaning forward in her chair. “If it had truly forbidden you, it would not have spared your life, and it would not have responded like it did when you arrived.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It responded to your emotion, jumping out of the hearth like that. It nearly set my house ablaze for your anger... *for you*.” She paused letting him take it in before continuing. “No element would even twitch for the forbidden unless it was to condemn them in death.”

Civyl shook his head as he struggled to understand. “But it attacks me when I try to wield it. What else could it be?”

At that Nivia lifted one finger to the air before tapping her chin with it and resting back into her chair again. It appeared she either did not know or was unwilling to tell.

The water in the washtub was blissfully warm. Somewhere in the back of her mind, mixed in with her wails of mourning, Fiora half-recalled the men lugging the buckets of heated water up the stairs at Nivia’s request. Chink had complained and she had said chided him... something about the best way to soothe a broken spirit... or was it warm a frozen soul?

Whatever it was, she was grateful for the woman’s thoughtfulness. Tense muscles relaxed and she was tempted to soak for a whole full-tick, but her grumbling stomach reminded her what waited for her when she finished. Forgoing the use of a towel, Fiora spun the air in the room around her after she stepped out – a cool contrast to the warm water on her skin.

There hadn’t been much to choose from in Nivia’s wardrobe; most of her clothing seemed to be as old as her. Earthy tones in scratchy textures and much too short for her taste... Fiora was a good foot taller than Nivia and wider at the shoulders and bust, too. She dared to try a few on for size but they just wouldn’t fit. Luckily, tucked under a quilt in a chest, she had found one dress that was almost the perfect size, if a bit billowy. Surely not something Nivia had ever worn though she owned it. Perhaps she’d had a daughter...

Blue as the sky just before dusk, it reached a bit past her toes and the long white sleeves were made of a sheer material as light as spiders’ webs that danced with the slightest stirring of the wind. Once she had donned it, she dared a glance in the looking glass set against the wall. She gasped at the woman who stared back at her; she was almost unrecognizable. Haunted... that’s how she would describe herself. Haunted by things she could not control. She fingered the lace at

the neckline and the embroidery just under the bodice. It was almost too fancy to wear, but there *was* nothing else. She would just have to be careful...

She left the room in shadow as the sun began to creep behind the trees. They would need to light some lamps soon. A moment later, Chink came out of the room in front of her holding one aloft. He paused in the hallway facing the wall with a sigh. With his chainmail off he now wore just a simple white shirt and brown trousers. His face was drawn in tired worry as he rubbed his bald head and gingerly poked at his swollen eye. He looked a lot smaller... and a little less intimidating.

He took one look in her direction and started, dropping the lamp on his toe. It rolled towards her on the floor casting eerie shadows on his gaping mouth. "A-Avery?" The shaky name was a bittersweet whisper that seemed incredibly out of place on the big man's rough tongue. She took a step forward to pick up the lamp for him, shining the light on her face. The glimmer of humanity she had spied in his eyes was extinguished to be replaced with anger. He kept his voice a whisper but his tone was harsh. "What are you doing in that dress?!"

Part of her felt a pang of sudden guilt but it quickly diminished as the dominant part of her reared up in defiance. Sticking out her chin, she answered him, "My dress is ruined. Nivia told me to find something to wear, and I did. You have a problem with that?"

He was shaking with rage, hands balled into fists, and she almost regretted the tone she had decided to use. He was keeping it bottled up, though, only allowing one furious word to pass his lips. "Yes!"

Fiora hesitated. Fear threatened to make her turn around and take it off, but the memory of the man swinging a sword at Civyl with intent to cleave him in two bolstered her rebellion. She took another step closer and stared him down. "Then you shouldn't have kidnapped me."

His arms swung above his head in exasperation, "For the last time, we didn't kidnap you! We was savin' you from that lowlife you been travelling with."

Fiora's nostrils flared with an accusation. "He's not the lowlife here."

Chink became defensive. "First 'e stabbed Borris..."

"No," she cut him off, "*first* Borris shot two arrows at *him*!"

He frowned deeper and finished his sentence as if she hadn't interrupted. "...and then 'e stabbed Alex!" To her surprise, his chin started to quiver and a tear tumbled down his cheek. "They're

the only family I got besides Demil,” he choked out, “and both of ‘em almost died today.” Pointing a thick condemning finger towards the stairs he straightened up to his full height. “There ain’t nuthin’ you can say that will change that wretch’s condemnation in my eyes!”

Fiora was tired of listening to the big man vent. He didn’t know *anything* and was too ignorant to see past the scar on his own nose. She shoved the lantern back into his hand and pushed past him to the stairs leaving him to his irrational emotions. On the top of the landing she turned with one final admission. “Civyl didn’t stab Alex, Chink. I did.” She was surprised at the twinge of guilt she felt at the pain and disbelief that crossed his face. Why should she care if Chink thought well of her? Besides, it was the truth. If he was going to condemn Civyl, he might as well condemn her, too. Civyl was only defending himself; she’d had intent to murder.

He held her in his arms – without any awkwardness or shame – as she slept and for the first time on this journey, both of them slept well. When the pull of the mountain finally woke him in the morning, Civyl made no attempt to get up. Instead, he enjoyed her nearness as he replayed parts of their conversation with Nivia after dinner the night before.

He had complained about the pain of walking before she seated him at the table and Fiora had chided him. “That’s what happens when you run without boots.”

Civyl shook his head at the obvious and glanced at her bare toes. “I need to get you a pair.”

“I don’t need shoes.”

And up to this point she hadn’t. Her element had let her float across the terrain without fear, but there was more than rocks on the path where they were headed. There was also snow. “You will when the ground gets cold.”

She leaned in to him, then, cupping his face with her hand. “I’m glad the fire left your beard,” she commented off topic.

“And my hair!” he laughed back, “I would not look good bald.” They shared a laugh as Nivia served the soup then fell into quiet contentment as they ate.

When their spoons all clinked against empty bowls, it was their hostess’s turn to ask the questions. Leaning across the dining table the old woman had squinted at his face and pointed at his missing eye. “How did you get this mark? There must be more. Surely you remember something.”

Civyl opened his mouth but didn't know what to say. He wasn't sure if he should trust her, but something about the woman's brash demeanor set him at ease. She wasn't trying to make them like her; she wasn't trying to trick them. So he had shook his head at the woman. "I don't."

"He doesn't remember anything," Fiora added with tight lips and wavering eyes.

For the first time Civyl noticed what a toll that fact was taking on her. He reached out his hand to cover hers on the table. "I am sorry."

Fiora shook her head, bringing his hand up to her cheek. "It's not your fault."

Nivia had frowned at their exchange. "There is more than you are telling me," she poked a bony finger at them.

Civyl didn't look away from Fiora's face. He gave a tiny nod letting her know she could share what she liked. Fiora nodded also before reiterating her previous statement. "He doesn't remember anything, Nivia. Not just about the fire... *anything*." The old woman's eyes had first squinted in confusion, then widened at an internal realization as Fiora continued, fighting a catch in her voice. "I have been his promise since I was only one season old a-and he doesn't remember me!"

To her credit, the old woman reached out an arm of sympathy around her shoulders. Fiora leaned into her as a single sob escaped her lips. Civyl repeated his apology, "I am sorry."

Fiora pulled away from Nivia to wrap her arms around him instead and buried her face in his shoulder. "It's *not* your fault," she mumbled again more adamantly than the last time.

Nivia stared at them in silence for a time before announcing what she had already told him. "You are not forbidden." Fiora had looked up in surprise while Civyl thought his previous question to himself. *What else could it be?* To his surprise, she now had an answer. "It is a curse." Said just as matter-of-factly as her previous statement, Civyl tried to understand what she meant.

"From the fire?"

"No. From different magic."

"How do you know?"

"Come."

Nivia had lifted from her chair and gone to the hearth where a beautiful flame crackled on three

birch bark logs she had stoked it with while cooking. “Come here to the fire,” she instructed and he had hobbled closer, wincing with each step. When he was next to her, she had pointed at the fire. “Only reach in, do not try to hold.”

Fiora had shaken her head, no, but Civyl was not afraid. He had already spent hours in the fire today and it had not harmed him apart from some pain that was for his own good. With a nod, he held out his fingers and put them right into the middle of the fire. The flames licked at his hand, hot but not burning.

“What do you hear?” the woman had asked at his side.

Civyl had closed his eyes and listened. “My name. The fire whispers my name.”

“What do you see?”

He opened his eyes to the beautiful vision of swirling colors. “It is dancing. It is asking me to dance.”

Nivia’s voice grew quieter, more distant as the rest of the world faded away. “What do you feel?”

With a hitch in his breath, a tear fell down his face. “Like I belong.”

Nivia had nodded and clucked her tongue, a satisfied cluck unlike the disapproving ones he had heard from her before. “The fire did not reject you,” she insisted as she tugged him back to sit at the table next to Fiora again. She waited until she had his full attention before going on. “It has *chosen* you. This curse is from an outside source.”

Civyl sat back in his chair in thought. An outside source? Like the pull of the mountain or the tether that kept him at Fiora’s side? He chewed on his lower lip as a growing realization filled his mind.

“Who could have done this?” Fiora’s worried face looked from Nivia to Civyl and back.

She looked to the old woman for answers but Civyl had one ready for this question. His face hardened into a scowl as his fingers brushed the still visible bruises on her delicate neck. “The same kind of person who caused me to put these marks on your throat.”

Fiora had recoiled from him with a start. “What?” she blinked in confusion.

For a moment he had hesitated, fearing her response, but she deserved to know the truth. She deserved to know the danger she was in. “They were my hands, Fiora. *My hands* were wrapped around your throat.” Her own hands had reached to cover the bruises as she shrank away from

him. He didn't want to frighten her but she had to understand. "Anger boiled up in my heart at you and a phrase kept repeating in my head," he tried to explain.

Fiora had looked down at her empty bowl on the table as her eyebrows turned up. "Kill the girl," she had whispered.

He nodded, hoping against hope that when she looked at him again, the fear and mistrust would be gone. "It was real. What you saw when you were 'asleep' was real. Someone is trying to kill you through me and if there are people who can do what he can..."

Civyl trailed off and she finally looked back up at him. The fear of him had been replaced in her eyes, to an anger on his behalf. "Then there are people who can curse you to not wield the fire!" With fervor, she had turned back to Nivia with her plea. "Can you remove the curse? Can you help us?"

Civyl's hope rose quickly at the prospect. How differently things would have went that morning if he had been able to wield the fire to protect her but hope came crashing down just as quickly. The old woman shook her head sadly. "My abilities lie only in healing the physical..." Fiora's face had fallen, too, but Nivia tapped her wrinkled chin in thought. "...but I know of a man who might be able to help."

Dizzily, his hope soared once again. Fiora had been so excited she leapt from her chair to take the woman's hands in hers, peppering her with questions too fast for the woman to answer. She chose the most pertinent to respond to. "It is half a day's journey on horseback, but..." she met Fiora's eyes in her hesitation and glanced up the stairs. "...I cannot leave my charges unattended."

"Chink is here," Fiora raised a hand. "He can take care of the others."

Nivia had shaken her head adamantly. "No. He is no good." Civyl stifled a laugh at the woman's scowling opinion. "He is a warrior," she continued. "Alex and Borris need a *healer's* touch."

"Is there another one in town?" he asked only to have Nivia shake her head no again.

Civyl felt his sliver of hope start to wither once again but he held off his conclusion as the woman's shrewd eyes looked Fiora up and down. "There is no other healer living in Brittner... but there is another one sitting right here."

Nivia started right at Fiora who pulled back in confusion. "I am not a healer," she insisted, putting up her palms to ward the woman back.

Civyl wanted to encourage her. If it would mean he could wield the fire again to protect her, and Nivia was willing to let her... “You did a pretty good job with my arm.”

She swung on him, defensive, “That was just wrapping it up!”

“But you knew what to do,” he pointed out. “And you *made* me take care of it, even when I argued about it.”

Nivia pursed her lips. “Do not sell yourself short, child.” Civyl cringed at the woman’s term but oddly, instead of making Fiora angry, she seemed to perk up at it. “What you did today to help Alex was far beyond what most healers deal with on a daily basis. You were calm and determined in the crisis, keeping your focus where it was needed even though I knew you’d rather have attended your promised. You saved Alex’s life just as surely as you almost ended it. I could not have saved him without your help.” The woman paused to let that statement sink in. How many years had Nivia been a healer? Admitting that she could not have done it on her own was huge.

Civyl looked at Fiora, “I will not say you must do this, but... if there is a way for me to wield the fire again – if there is a chance to lift this curse, I’d like to take it. Wouldn’t you?”

“Of course,” she replied quickly staring at him with a meaningful gaze, “but a full day to ride there and back... Can we afford to lose the time?”

Civyl had been wondering the same question but had come up with a solution. “With Alex and Borris both out of fighting commission for a while, I thought, perhaps we could borrow their horses to reach our destination on time.”

Fiora had nodded at the idea. “That could work... if they are willing.”

The old woman had stood then, as if making up the men’s minds for them. “That settles it then. I will take Civyl to try to remove his curse in the morning and you will stay here and tend to Alex. I put him in your charge.”

Fiora had made as if to argue but Nivia had fixed her with a stern gaze. “You caused his injury. Now you must mend it.”

Fiora’s argument had died on her lips as she ducked her head in submission. “Yes ma’am.”

Soon after the old woman had turned in for the night. “I trust that you can make your own beds,” she had said on her way up the stairs, more statement than question.

Rolling out their bedrolls in front of the hearth, he addressed her furrowed brow. “Are you sure you are okay with this. I won’t go if you don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“That’s not it,” Fiora shook her head, golden brown tresses falling across her shoulders with the movement. “I just wish I could go with. I hate to be separated from you.” She stared down at her bedroll and he felt there was more to the meaning behind her words when she said it again. “I hate it.”

He wasn’t sure which emotion had been the catalyst for his next action; boldness, compassion, selfishness... but he caught the corner of her bedroll and pulled it towards him, tucking it inside his own. “We do not have to be separated until morning.” He held his breath until she smiled at him, and curled up against his chest, she had fallen asleep in minutes.

Now it was morning and she still slept in almost the same position. He did not want to leave her here either, but the prospect of being able to dance with the fire again... it pulled on him more than the mountain did. Perhaps it was because he couldn’t ever remember doing it before, but more likely it was because waltzing with the flame was a part of him. It was ingrained in every cell, seared into his soul. He stared at the embers that still glowed red from the hearth and the mottled red called his name. *He was meant to wield the fire.*

The Dress

By Jewels - May 18 2014

The world was bright and fuzzy when he first cracked his eyes. ...and he was not alone. She stood silhouetted in the frame of the open window looking out over the expanse. The breeze tossed her tresses and whispery sleeves away from the deep blue dress she wore. Alex’s breaths came in short shallow gulps and his heart pounded in his temple as he recognized her. She was here... she couldn’t be here... Had she come for him? Why else would she be here? He tried to sit up, groaning as pain stabbed his side, and she turned to face him. The sunshine that hit his face blinded him and forced his eyes shut. He tried to open them again – focus on her face... but his body betrayed him with weariness and he couldn’t keep his eyes open for more than a few seconds at a time. She moved to his side... a floating angel... Avery...

Nivia had left him in her care. The old woman had abandoned him and he could just imagine her laughter at the irony of it. He almost felt betrayed.

His lung burned with every full breath, but he knew he was healing. If he had received this injury anywhere else, he was confident he wouldn't have survived. Nivia's medicinal knowledge – and no little amount of magic – had him healing quickly. But to leave him in *her* care... the woman's sense of humor was torturous.

Fiora held his elbow as he stood. A surprisingly strong hold for one so slight. Her grip steadied him as throbbing pain stretched through his side. "Come on," she ordered when Alex hesitated to move any further. "Nivia said you had to do some walking today if you want to go to town tomorrow."

Nivia said... Nivia said he should listen to the girl's direction. Why did the old woman trust her so readily? "I'd be ready to go *today* if someone hadn't stabbed me," he spit out bitterly, but she did not flinch.

"You'd also be able to go today if someone had just listened to me in the first place, so quit your whining and move your feet." She was right, of course. How many times had she asked him to leave them alone? He knew that she was right but the pain made it difficult to be civil. That she flounced around in Avery's dress did not help. Every sight of her gave him a heavy heart. He tried to stare forward. With a scowl and a grimace, Alex put one foot in front of the other and allowed her to lead him out of the house.

The sun shined down too brightly from its high perch over the trees but a constant breeze cooled his skin in the afternoon heat. Alex squinted across the yard to where his recovering brother sat. Chink held a bowl in one hand and a napkin in another while Borris spooned the contents into his mouth. It wasn't a perfect process – more often than not the broth on the spoon ended up running down his chin – but Chink was ready to wipe it off before it fell to his lap. They talked and laughed in between bites reminding Alex of everything that had gone into building their friendship.

When they first caught sight of the two of them, their expressions darkened. Chink hid a flash of anger while Borris looked white as a sheet, eyes shining. Alex's heart went out to both of them. He understood and offered an apologetic nod in their direction. Fiora seemed oblivious to the pain her choice in wardrobe caused, but there was nothing for it.

Before Nivia had left, she had sat down with all of them, giving them an earful for their fault in all that had happened the previous day. She explained in unnecessary detail how the girl's efforts to right her wrong was the only reason he was alive, and insisted that all of them let bygones be bygones. Alex wasn't sure he could. He had seen the blood soaked fabric the girl had worn

yesterday - *his blood* - right before Nivia had thrown it into the fire. They had checked her pack the day before; they all knew she owned nothing else. The girl had to wear something, but Alex wasn't happy about it. He cast an involuntary sideways glance at her profile. As uncomfortable as it was to see her in it, the dress suited her. He turned to face forward again, blowing out a slow breath the burning in his lungs told he was holding.

Chink and Borris did their best to ignore them both, going back to the task of getting the soup into Borris's belly. Fiora had Alex circle the house a few times and every time they passed the two men he couldn't help but smile. On the third round her curiosity at his glances and smiles must have been more than she could stand. "Copper for your thoughts," she offered.

Her voice startled him as his head spun around to face her. The movement jerked his side and he groaned. "Hmm... What?" he pretended he hadn't heard her.

She smiled at him then. Really smiled. It was like she was looking at him for the first time. Intentionally *looking* at him. He was no longer 'thug number three' and a sliver of humanity he hadn't known he had lost was returned to him. He couldn't help it; he smiled back.

She glanced across the clearing. "I am sorry your brother got hurt," she offered.

"Yeah, me too."

Dropping her head to study the grass, she kicked a rock out of their path. "I'm sorry *you* got hurt."

Fiora peeked up at him, regret slightly creasing her brow. Could he really let bygones be bygones? He supposed he wouldn't know unless he tried. "Apology accepted," he responded, though his heart remained wary.

She smiled again – the lifted guilt making it brighter – and gave his arm a squeeze. He would let her remain unaware of his reservations, though it pained his own conscious. She returned her gaze to the other men and lifted her chin in their direction. "I would not have imagined such tenderness between warriors."

Surprised at her word choice, Alex gave a snorted laugh, but she was right; it was indeed tender. He was so used to observing it, though, that it did not seem odd to him. It would have been odd for them *NOT* to be tender. He shrugged his shoulders at her, regretting the movement as it stretched his wound again. "That is how people behave when they love each other."

Her brow pinched in thought. "They love each other?" she repeated, sounding shocked that the

two could be capable of such an emotion. He watched her worry her lower lip until she *really* saw them for the first time. No more 'thug number one and two'. It was affirming to watch her make the mental transition. "Is Chink also your brother?"

Again he laughed, careful not to move his insides around too much. "No, not brothers. You don't see me doting over Borris do you?" She shook her head waiting expectantly for him to continue. Something about her intense interest made him *want* her to understand. "No, they are *closer* than brothers. Best friends since the day they were born. Almost literally. That's how our families met. Our mother was giving birth to Borris the same day as Chink's mother was giving birth to him. Both our mothers and those two became fast friends. The three of us grew up together and Chink *is* like another brother to me, but those two?" Alex pointed a slightly raised finger in their direction. "Their love runs so much deeper than family, especially now."

It hit him, then, how he had just given her a rather personal bit of information. *Why had he done that?* The question bounced around the inside of his mind, unanswered, when she asked a different one.

"What do you mean, why now?" He looked at her wondering how much he should tell this girl who had tried to kill him just a day ago. The way she looked at him, though, all innocence and curiosity as if the previous day had not happened at all... it made him long for the ability to be so free.

She stared at him with such eager expectation, such a thirst to know, that he found it hard to refuse her. "They've been through a lot together," he finally answered. "We all have." He saw the interest intensify in her features and gave in to the urge. He wanted her to understand; *needed her to know*. "We grew up in Kavaccet, the three of us." He looked at her knowing he would read surprise on her face and was not disappointed. He chuckled a little at her open mouth. "You didn't think my disdain for the place came from nothing, did you?"

Fiora looked to the ground in thought without answering. They had rounded the corner of the house so the two men were not visible as he went on. "When we were kids there was a battle, a fight over power and land... The Wisdom called upon the people of Kavaccet to take up arms. She chose who would go into battle and who would stay behind." He did not try to hide the mocking contempt that hardened his next statement. "Lady Darya, in all her *wisdom*, chose *all* of our parents to go fight. Both mothers, both fathers, sent to defend The Wisdom in some petty land dispute. *All* of them sent to their *deaths*."

"Oh," she gasped next to him and her fingers found his arm. "I... I'm so sorry." He could tell by her eyes that she was. Moisture made them shine as she opened her mouth to add something but thought better of it and returned to staring at the ground.

"So it was just us kids. Me, Borris, Chink... and Chink's sister Avery."

He heard her suck in a big breath before blowing it out with a groan. “Chink’s sister? That explains some things.”

Alex just nodded his head. “The light of Chink’s life, all spunk and fire and innocence. He loved her so much. We all did, really. Growing up together... we...” he didn’t know how to explain it so he stopped trying. “Chink was so protective, especially after our parents died and we moved in together. It was quite endearing, really, watching him chase away anyone he considered a bad influence and we teased him to no end.” He allowed himself a smile as he paused. A good memory... he didn’t have many of those. It was one moment he hoped never to forget.

“We weren’t really surprised when Chink went for his promise and was given military training. He just had that warrior demeanor. I’d already been in military training for a year so we worked together a lot. At that point we were both focused on being able to protect Avery if there was another battle. Borris waited a year before going to The Wisdom for his promise and was gifted with a Bloom... she gifted him with Avery.”

“Well that was good, wasn’t it?” He watched her eyes light up even as his mood spiraled down. “She knew you all loved each other already, right?”

“So it seemed,” He nodded though he knew the rest of the story would prove her assertion false. “She and Borris got married almost immediately. Happiest day of his life, if you ask him. Happiest day of Chink’s life, too, probably. And they were with child very quickly.” Fiora actually clapped her hands with the news. Her enthusiasm echoed that of Avery’s when she’d found out. With a pang of sorrow, it struck him how similar they looked in that moment. In that dress... with that hair... and those eyes? He shook his head to rid it of the thought before he embarrassed himself. Alex hated to ruin her current joy but he could not finish the telling with it intact. “Our story does not have a happy ending.”

They were returning to the front of the house as he said it and the two warriors had finished their meal and talked quietly, still ignoring them. Fiora slowed down her walk. She looked at Alex then at Borris and Chink seeming to put the pieces together herself. Innocent eyes widened in worry. “Where is Avery? Where is the baby?”

“Neither survived childbirth,” he confessed as he watched her face fall in something close to horror. It almost broke his heart anew.

“And I’m... I’m wearing her dress,” she looked down at the billowy fabric around her waist as if really seeing it for the first time. “Oh, Tears of Wisdom...”

Alex shook his head at her expression. Tears of Wisdom, indeed. “Chink and Borris...” he lifted

a hand towards the two but kept his voice down to not disturb them, “their love is one solidified in tragedy. When everything you hold dear in life is ripped from your grasp, you cling to whatever is left. So they held each other and cried for days and days. They would have starved in their grief if I had not forced them to eat.” He paused in the telling to catch his breath. His wound throbbed with pain and his muscles were tired from holding himself upright. He turned their walk towards the woods where he could lean on some trees for a bit.

At the edge of the clearing he stopped and she let him. “The house where we had lived together held too much sorrow so we left. Left our home and our heritage; the burden of Kavaccet and the curse of The Wisdom behind us. That’s when we found Demil. He grew up in Brittner, the city that the Wisdom sent my parents to fight. His parents died then, too. He was only nine at the time living on the streets as an urchin. With so many deaths, there was no one left willing to take him in.”

“That... that’s so terrible!” Fiora was trembling now. He had shaken her belief in the woman she had been taught was an infallible god, but better she learn it now. Better she see that this woman should have no power over what she decides to do with her life. If only *he* had known sooner... his life would have been so different. “I can’t imagine having to live on the streets,” she continued finding a log to sit on, perhaps because she was losing her will to stand.

“The four of us kind of just stuck together from there. Demil became a part of our family. He had street smarts and back alley connections, and we had the muscle for doing odd jobs enough to get by. It was not an ideal upbringing, by any means. All courtesy of her grace, Lady Darya, and the wisdom she claims to have.” Her mouth opened and shut again as he watched her process everything, wanting to protest but being unable to refute his case. Somehow she seemed a little less innocent... a little more burdened by life and he knew it was his fault. Ignorance is bliss, after all, and the truth... well, sometimes the truth held nothing but pain.

Fiora’s eyes eventually drifted back to Chink who held Borris’s hand, still clinging to what he had left. Borris smiled at him with a kind of connection that Alex had never known with anyone. It almost made him jealous... almost. “At least my brother was able to find happiness again,” he commented, “which is more than I can say for myself.”

“You are not happy...” It was just as much statement as it was question.

Hearing her say it aloud only solidified the fact and the weight of it made him even more weary. He had not told her everything The Wisdom had taken from him. Instead of burdening her with more, though, he lowered himself to the log next to her and simply shook his head in silent response as they both observed Chink kiss Borris on the forehead. Alex smiled. Fiora blushed and dropped her gaze.

He was used to their familiarity and gave a shrug. “I am just happy that my brother is happy. I

am glad that Chink was there for him to cling to. After all they have lost, it is a miracle their hearts are still able to love.” He took in a deep breath and let out a long sigh as it stretched his wound against its stitches, “Tragedy has broken us all.”

Again Alex wondered why he was telling her all this. Nivia was the only other besides their band of four that knew their story. The only other he had trusted with it. This girl had tried to kill him... but still he trusted her. Inexplicably and without reason, he realized; he trusted her. Maybe it was the way she had fought for her love or the way she mourned when she had thought him lost. Maybe even the way she came after him in vengeance. They were all things Alex had failed to do in his life. All things he regretted not doing. She was braver than he was and, though it put him to shame, he respected her for it.

Fiora’s gaze returned to her lap where the fingers of one hand stroked another. She did not look at him when she asked one more question. “And what of you, Alex, what do you cling to?”

He did not answer right away, partly because he had never thought about it before, and partly because he didn’t want to admit it. He waited long enough that she had looked at him, worry creasing her brow. “I cling to the only thing that I have left,” he finally answered in bitterness. “My hatred for The Wisdom.”

Alex worked his body hard, walking so much she feared he might collapse. Fiora insisted he return to his bed until supper. That he did not argue proved to her that he had pushed himself too far. She was impressed, though, with how quickly he was healing. Nivia had said her salve was magical, but watching Civyl walk without cringing and Alex simply being able to stand both proved to her that it was truth.

The door slamming open had her hurrying downstairs. A part of her hoped Civyl had come back already but it was too soon. Had something gone wrong? She stopped on the bottom step catching sight of the wiry man, Demil, and her hopes deflated. He was struggling under a multitude of packages that teetered precariously on top of each other and hung from his harms in bags. He spied her out of the corner of his eye. “You there, girl. Yeah, you. Come ‘ere, come ‘ere. Take these from me before they fall, eh?”

She hesitated, but only for a moment. Without his sword pointed at Civyl, the man seemed harmless. Fiora hurried to take the top most packages and set them on the table until his hands were free for him to set down the bags. “Thank ye kindly, miss.” He flashed her a wide grin. Somehow, his two missing teeth gave him a quirky endearment today where they had made him look more vile yesterday.

“You’re welcome,” she replied in kind, bowing out of habit. At least she had not lost her manners on this trip.

His smile turned shy and his tone was gentle when he addressed her next. “I’m really glad to see yer okay. I was awfully scared fer you when I saw that man carryin’ you over his shoulder.” Fiora sucked in a breath. She hadn’t realized how it must have looked to them. “Followed him fer a whole day,” he continued almost apologetically, “but I couldn’t get close enough to see if you were all right. Alex always told me not to risk confronting someone alone, but I would have if I’d seen him hurting you.”

Fiora opened up her mouth to defend Civyl, to say that he hadn’t hurt her, but then she remembered the bruises on her neck. Without thinking of it, her hand lifted to test the tenderness but she forced it down when she caught him staring. Sympathy crinkled the corners of his eyes. “I kept watch all night,” he scratched the back of his neck while pink flooded his cheeks, “to make sure he was descent to ya.” She really didn’t know what to say. She should thank him but she didn’t know how. She found herself only nodding at him. “He left you alone to forage in the morning and I was hoping I could sneak you out of there, but he musta drugged you ‘cause yer eyes were all silvery white. That’s when I went to get the rest of ‘em to help.”

“Thank you,” she finally spit out, surprised to find herself actually grateful. This stranger didn’t know her, had *no reason* to care two coppers about her, but he had thought she needed help and tried to provide it. No wonder they hadn’t listened to her when she’d tried to say she was fine. “I appreciate your concern.”

He nodded, looking satisfied before he gazed around the room a little nervously and posed a question. “Is, ah... is Nivia around somewhere?”

“No, she’s out for the day. We don’t expect her back until tomorrow.”

He blew out a huge sigh of relief and grinned all the wider, his blue eyes twinkling with mirth. “Good!” he laughed loudly, grabbing a hold of her wrists and spinning her around. Fiora let out a yelp of surprise but he didn’t seem to notice. When he stopped turning, he let her go and leaned in close with a hushed tone. “Just between you and me, that old crone gives me the hee-bee-gee-bees.” Despite herself, Fiora laughed at his antics. “So how’s our Borris? He gonna make it?” He asked in a way that showed he assumed the answer was yes, but wanted to make sure. A sudden realization struck her with his question, though. *He didn’t know*. He didn’t know anything that happened yesterday after Borris getting hurt. And for some reason, it was incredibly freeing.

When he lifted an eyebrow, she realized she hadn’t answered him yet. “Um, yeah, he’s going to be fine. Nivia fixed him right up and Chink has been keeping him company.”

Demil snorted. "Course he is. Can't never barely separate those two. What about Alex? Where's he at?"

Fiora pursed her lips and fidgeted with the fabric of her sleeve. She didn't want him to know Alex was hurt, too... he'd want to know details. "He's taking a nap," she decided on. It wasn't a lie. "We really shouldn't disturb him until supper time."

"Oh, all right, well..." he looked around like he was uncomfortable with just standing still. "I'd put this stuff away, 'cept I don't know where half of it goes."

Fiora peeked into one of the bags. It was filled with lots of different plants. "What is all this, anyway?"

He shrugged. "Ingredients. Nivia uses lots of stuff in her medicines. But really, I think she just wanted to get me out of the house yesterday."

"Why's that?"

"First, she knows I don't like to be around her. 'Specially without the others. And fer two, she don't like it that I can't sit still for long." Even as he said it, Fiora watched him bob up and down, shifting from foot to foot. "I coulda come back last night, but..." he shivered and she got the distinct impression that even without Nivia here, her house was still giving him 'hee-bee-gee-bees'.

An idea took form in her mind and she gave him a sideways glance. "How far away is the town?"

"About a full tick by foot and less on horseback. Why?"

"Do they sell clothes there?"

"Sure they do. Brittner's not as big as Kavaccet, but we gots just about anything you could ever want." He looked her up and down with a quizzical expression. "You wantin' to go shopping? You look awfully purdy in that there dress you already have on."

Fiora felt her cheeks grow hot at the compliment. The way he looked at her with acceptance and approval... It was a stark contrast – and a pleasant one – to the looks the other three men gave her. He must not have met Avery. "Thank you," she managed, "but it doesn't belong to me. I need something else to wear."

“What about the white dress? The one you were in yesterday?”

She turned her face away, scared he would see her guilt and sadness at its loss. “It was ruined, I’m afraid. I need something different. Like sturdy traveling clothes. Long journey ahead of me.”

She held her breath as the light in his eyes darkened and a frown crossed his face. “Yer not stayin’ in Brittner?” He stared in disappointment for a moment before shrugging. “Well, come on, then. No time like right now, as they say.”

She blew out a relieved breath with a smile. “Just give me a minute. I’ll be right back.” Fiora hurried up the stairs, careful to be quiet when she passed Alex’s door. She heard a soft snore coming from his room and peeked in. The lines of his face were smoothed into a peaceful contentment, so unlike the pain he hid behind his eyes when he could no longer avoid looking at her. It had not been from the pain of his wound, she could tell when that bothered him. No, his hurt was much deeper, all of them had a deep hurt, and seeing her in the blue dress reminded them of it. They were people just like her... just like Civyl... She realized now how they were trying to help her and nodded to herself. The faster she was out of this dress, the better, for all their sakes.

The Market

By Jewels - June 01 2014

They rode leisurely through the woods toward town; by necessity since the dress required her to sit side saddle. She would have much enjoyed the peaceful backdrop of nature around her... except Demil never ceased talking. It seemed to Fiora that he couldn’t stop. Though, he must be able to stay silent when he wished; he’d not roused Civyl when he had followed him for a whole day, after all. Perhaps it was the length of his necessary silence that caused him to prattle on and on as he rode next to her.

He would jump from topic to topic so often it made her dizzy just trying to keep up. From the weather to the offerings of the shops in Brittner to his long held fear of Nivia to his affinity for ale and whiskey and back to the shops again. When it all became too overwhelming for her, she kept her gaze forward and let his voice become background noise while she focused her thoughts on an easy topic; namely the visage of the beast she rode on.

The stallion was a fine specimen that rivaled any of Lady Darya’s stock for quality. His coat was a very dark brown that could almost be considered black under enough shadow. But the sunlight

caught the burnt sienna highlights in the sheen of his hide. Apart from a triangle of white right between his forelegs, it was the only color he wore.

Fiora had been a little nervous, riding a stallion, for the male of the species was well known to be harder to handle but Demil had insisted he would be kind. "He has an affinity for the ladies, that one," he had joked, "like rider, like horse, eh?" He gave her a wink and Fiora felt heat rise to her cheeks.

Demil had called him Clover, "...cuz it's his favorite snack," he explained. "Can't barely get him to keep going if he finds a bloomin' patch. No you can't. At least not till he's eaten all the flowers off." He had laughed at his own statement while he worked on cinching the saddle.

"Clover," she murmured watching the horse's ears perk and swivel toward her. She patted his neck. "That's a nice name."

"What'd you say?" Demil asked.

Fiora started, more from the following pause in his constant voice than from being addressed. She turned towards him while her brain frantically processed his last sentence. "Nothing," she blurted. "I was just admiring your horse."

"What, ole Gentre here?" he patted the neck of the horse he was riding on, misunderstanding her statement; she didn't correct him. "Why he's practically family. We got him not too long after the Birchwood brothers found me. Yes we did."

"Birchwood brothers?" She thought she had heard the name before back in Kavaccet, from one of the sisters in waiting, perhaps. Or was it at an event?

Demil smiled wide at her question, glad that he now had her full attention. "Yeah! Alex, Borris, and Chink all go by that name. Chink's not a real Birchwood but they're practically family so he uses it. I started using it, too, seein' how I had no one else when they found me." His normally jovial expression darkened and he lapsed into an unusual bit of silence.

Fiora took the opportunity to offer him her condolences. "I'm sorry," she started, "about your parents." His eyes met hers half filled with the sorrow of remembering, the other with surprise that she knew. "Alex told me that they died in a battle." She was going to leave it at that but something in her needed to see his reaction, "...with The Wisdom."

His shoulders slumped and he sighed. "Honestly, I didn't know much about the 'who' or 'why' until Alex told me. People just said it was a reaction to a revolt and I believed it. I know Alex fully blames the Lady, fer all our parents' deaths, but the five years between losin' my parents

and meetin' him, I made my peace with it. A sad peace. There wouldn't have needed to been a battle if there wasn't a revolt, eh?" He gave her a weak smile but she could tell it still pained him. She didn't know how to respond so she just rode on next to him in the silence, the muted clip-clop of their horse's hooves on the widening dirt path steady in contrast.

Finally, he lifted his head, his normal grin back on his face. "I wouldn't change it if I could, though," he announced. "No I wouldn't. It's what brought the Birchwood brothers to me, and that's been the best thing I could ever imagine happenin' in my life. The very best! Who wouldn't want to live a life of rescuin' little ladies from dire straits, eh?" He laughed his normal jovial laugh even harder than she'd heard it from him before and she couldn't help but smile. How he managed to bubble over with such enthusiasm for life was beyond her, but she found she rather liked it.

Soon enough, the path became rode as trees were replaced by wooden and brick homes on either side of them. "We're here, where do you want to go first?" he asked.

Fiora didn't need to think for a bit, there was only one reason she needed to be in town. "Take me to your finest tailor's shop."

He gave her a doubtful look, "The finest?"

"The finest!" she nodded for emphasis.

He shrugged but led her on through the winding streets. The village was laid out erratically in her opinion. All streets curved and twisted and turned. Some streets dead-ended at a group of homes, but Demil led her in between the houses, spaces so tight, her legs rubbed on the sides if she wasn't careful. It didn't take long for her to lose her sense of direction. The only thing she could tell for sure, was that they were headed for the center.

Demil did not disappoint, the shop he led her to had a sign out front that read *Gilver's Fashions & Finery* which showcased a number of fancy dresses and tailored suits in the windows. "Our finest clothin' establishment, by far," he boasted. When she entered, though, she thought that maybe 'the finest' was not quite what she was looking for. The closest they had to travelling clothes were some men's trousers and button down shirts. Just a peek at the price and Fiora about swooned. They were exorbitant even by Kavaccet's standards. Not that she had actually gone shopping before, but her studies had included basic economics. Something every Bloom should know when they become a Flower in charge of a household.

Demil caught her frown and guessed, "A bit too rich fer yer tastes, eh?" She only nodded. She hadn't even counted how much her mother had given her for this trip, but she was not about to

squander it here. He gave her a knowing smile, as if he'd expected it all along. "Come on, then. Come along. I'm goin' to show you the best place for clothin'."

"The best?" she stammered, "...but I thought --"

He cut her off by holding up a hand. "This here is the *finest* in all Brittner, but it's not the *best*. Not by a long shot."

She tried to question him further as he led her away, but he seemed to enjoy keeping the secret. More twists and turns and dead-end shortcuts now had her doubting she'd ever be able to find her way back to Nivia's. She suddenly wished Civyl were with her and hoped he was alright with the old woman, wherever they had gone. Houses started to get closer together and the shortcuts became more frequent, but Demil's grin never left his face as he urged her forward. The smell of refuse and worse also rose. Even Clover seemed uneasy as he snorted and stomped his hoof beneath her.

The sight of a number of scruffy and dirty urchins reminded her of Demil's lost childhood. "I couldn't imagine growing up on the streets," she whispered with a pang of guilt at her privileged upbringing.

"Oh, wasn't so bad," he shrugged, "Not after the first winter, at least. Once you survive yer first winter on yer own, you know you can survive anythin'! I know where every hidey-hole, every secret door, n' every wild patch of berries is. You meet a whole lot more people, too, when yer on the streets. Get to know the real people behind the faces. It's those folks who will help you when you've nothin' to give back that are the ones to be thankful for."

Fiora let that insight sink in for a while. It was true, she had been sheltered. And did she ever really know the Lady? Not if what Alex had told her was true. She followed him quietly with much to consider.

Demil finally stopped in front of a rundown building with its sign hanging askew. *The Buttermilk Inn & Tavern*. It also seemed to be a brothel. She had never seen one before but with the line of ladies in short skirts and low blouses waving from the front steps, this is what she'd imagined one would look like. Fiora tried not to let her apprehension show on her face.

"Demil," one of them called and the rest picked up the chorus of repeating his name. "Come back to us so soon?" the first one joked.

Demil swung down from his horse with a bright welcoming smile, "Sherry." He held his arms open to her and she ran to him, kissing him full on the lips. As soon as 'Sherry' had stepped

aside, another woman took her place kissing him longer and deeper as if to outdo the first. “Melinda,” he murmured under her onslaught. Or at least that was what she thought he’d said.

A third girl, who looked barely of age, stepped up with her hands on her hips and a pout on her lips. “Meli, quit hoggin’ ‘im. I wanna kiss, too!”

‘Melinda’ turned on her with a frown but stepped aside. The girl walked into his arms and rested her cheek on his chest as Demil folded her into his embrace and rested his cheek on the top of her head. “Hello, Trina,” he whispered into her hair. When she finally pulled back, she tipped her head up and barely brushed his lips with hers before stepping away. Instead of complaining about the stinginess, he gave her a winning smile.

An affinity for the ladies, indeed! As affronted as she was by the whole display, though, Fiora could not deny that Demil seemed to genuinely care for each of these women. He didn’t leer or look down on them; to the contrary, he looked at each almost how Civyl had looked at her before he had forgotten her. Affection, concern, support... how often did Demil frequent this establishment to have such a rapport with them all? She shivered at the thought.

And why had he brought her here? She cleared her throat from her perch on Clover. He looked up as if startled that she was there and the hue around his neck deepened. “Oh, right,” he cleared his own throat, “Ladies I’d like to introduce you to Miss... uh... Miss...” he scratched his head with one finger, “What’d you say yer name was, again?”

“Um, I don’t think I ever did,” she confessed, realizing it herself. “I’m Fiora.”

He smiled as he let her name roll off his tongue. “Fiora.” Somehow, the way he said it – as if it was a precious secret – and the way he looked at her – as if she’d just given him the greatest gift – made her want to jump down and give him her own hug. She shook her head at the silliness of it, but held on a little longer than she needed to when he helped her dismount. She felt a twinge of guilt but his gap toothed smile melted it away. Complete acceptance. That was what he gave her and each of the other women here no matter what they offered him. He even beamed at the woman who had not come down to greet him, though she only frowned in return.

“Ladies,” he started again. “I’d like to introduce you to Miss Fiora. The boys and me saved her just last night, we did.” A murmur of excitement went up from the women. It seemed they were well versed in what saving someone meant. “Fiora, these are the Lynnsen Sisters. They are –“

“Bringing another stray home, are you, Demil?” The fourth woman, who still stood on the Inn’s front step, interrupted him with a scowl. Fiora got the distinct impression that she didn’t welcome her presence. “As if we don’t have enough mouths to feed round here. Why don’t you take her back to that privy-hole Kavaccet and let them take care of her.”

“Vera!” Demil scolded her. “Mind yer mouth, woman. Wasn’t too long ago that you were a stray yerself.”

“How can I forget it when you keep bringing me new ones?!” she threw back. Her harsh statement, obviously meant to indicate the other three women, started a heated argument between them all. For the first time since she’d met him, Demil seemed to be speechless. At a loss for words and a loss for what to do.

“Hey,” she tried to get their attention but her small voice was lost in theirs. Stomping her foot, Fiora tried again while asking the wind for a strong blast in all of their faces. “HEY!” It worked. All four women closed their mouths to look at her wavering somewhere between the need to run away and the desire to attack. Before they could do either, she plunged on. “I don’t intend to stay here, or anywhere in Brittner for that matter, so you don’t have to worry about me.” Why they thought she’d want to join a brothel, anyway, was beyond her. Did she really look that desperate?

Vera regarded her from her perch, brushing a stray hair out of her mouth. Her scowl turned to only a tight lipped frown as she stared. Finally she nodded and said, “Good. Don’t need another wind witch around here stirring up trouble.” With that, she turned on her heel and disappeared inside the Inn.

“I’m sorry,” Demil found his voice again. “She’s a jealous one, that. She’s not always so bitter but she doesn’t like to share. She tries to scare all the new comers away.”

A bar maid? That didn’t like to share? Fiora couldn’t quite wrap her mind around that one. Not that she had long to dwell on it. The other three women surrounded her, admiring her hair and her dress and her ‘wind witch’ abilities. They then each shared how the Birchwoods had saved them from terrible promises. Fiora cringed as they recounted forced labor, drunken tirades, and beatings. She did not say anything to discourage them but she wondered how ‘working’ here was any better. They all seemed happy, at least. Except for Vera, anyway.

When Fiora hesitated at telling her own rescue story, Demil saved her by telling them why she was there. They all hopped up and down from their excitement. The girl Trina took her hand and dragged her in through the front door to the very back of the Inn, down some stairs, and through another door. That led them to a stone walled tunnel with moss growing on the sides. Fiora shivered a little, though she didn’t know if it was from the chill or from the fact that she felt like she were in a tomb. It didn’t help that three bar maids had just decided to come along on her shopping trip. They were nice enough people, but it was all incredibly odd. Demil and Melinda each grabbed a lit torch at the entrance and led the way down the corridor.

It ended at a steel gate that someone operated on the inside with the sound of turning gears and

pulled levers. When it finally opened, Fiora could hardly believe what she saw. The cramped corridor opened up into a crowded cavern that must have been as big as the ballroom of the Sanctuary if not bigger. It was filled with an underground market lit by enclosed candles and lanterns. Vendors of every item imaginable were lined up in fairly neat rows. Some had tables for their wares while others just set their stuff down on the dirt floor or on rugs. Fiora could not hold back her curiosity. "What is this place?"

"This is the best!" Demil answered with no little pride. "The best of everythin' fer the best price, all in one *convenient* location." The way he emphasized 'convenient' made her think that it was more convenient for the vendors and patrons' sakes than for the authorities in Brittner.

It was noisy; almost too noisy to hear Demil as he picked his way through those selling goods. She was surprised by how popular he seemed. Men strode up to shake his hand and clap him on the back. Women walked up to kiss him on the cheek. Children ran up for hugs. She could feel the eyes of everyone they passed. Some wary, some curious, some outright ogling, but thankfully, none approached her. The three bar maids surrounded her and stared down any who looked like they might want to try. Fiora was suddenly very thankful that they had come with. Their immoral clothing seemed to blend in down here where cleavage and knees were bared on more than half the women. She, on the other hand, stood out like a sore thumb in her fine dress. She hoped the trek wouldn't stain it.

They finally stopped at a 'shop' that was filled with both cloth and leather goods. Her eyes watered from the smell of the curing skins. The man who owned the shop stood up with a wide smile and shook Demil's hand vigorously. "Demil, you old devil, so nice to see you out of the sun."

"Likewise, Grant. How is the misses?"

"Still the purdiest thing you ever pulled out of the forest. No offense ladies," the man looked over Demil's shoulder to nod at the women but he did a double take when his eyes rested on Fiora. His eyebrow rose and he licked his lips. "Though I dare say, this new one may have done it." Fiora shrank back with a shudder at the man's leer. He fixed Demil with a calculating stare, "Is she, ah... *taken*?"

Fiora felt heat rise around her neck as her eyes widened at the implication. Only the Wisdom could give a Bloom to a man. That was the law of Kavaccet. *And the very law that the Birchwood brothers defied*, she reminded herself. Besides, down here at the underground market... she didn't expect she'd find a plethora of strict law abiding citizens. They were *all* hiding from the eyes of Kavaccet here.

Demil turned to give her a glance, his expression turning sympathetic. He started to open his mouth to answer but before he got any words out Fiora had a sudden instinct to step forward and

cling to his arm. He met her gaze with a curious one and she prayed he would read her caution. She didn't want this man, or *any* man here, to think they could 'take' her. He nodded in seeming understanding even as Grant swore in his assumption. "Tears of Wisdom, Demil! You already have four wives!"

Wives? ... Plural? With a rush of embarrassment Fiora peeked over her shoulder at the smiling women she had assumed to be bar maids and hoped they had not read her thoughts. The sudden radical shift in perspective left her dizzy and she held on tighter for stability. Turning back to Demil, if he knew her error, his face didn't show it, but it did show something else. Something that made her heart beat faster and her breaths shorter.

Without looking away, he answered Grant's indignation. "And yet, I never took any of 'em until after they'd fully chosen me first." The way his finger stroked the back of her hand... was that an invitation? The rest of the world faded away as he continued to stare and she was drawn into his eyes. There was something so familiar and comfortable in their depths. A warmth that would surround and protect. For the first time, she actually considered it; staying here in Brittner, forever lost in Demil's gaze. With a sharp intake of breath she realized she could be happy here with him and his eyes blazed as if he knew her discovery. Flames of passion and desire danced under his eyelids... just like Civyl's eyes...

Civyl!

With the thought of his name, the spell was broken and the world came rushing back with its offending sounds and smells. Why had she even considered such things? She loved Civyl! A flicker of disappointment crossed Demil's face but he grinned at her all the same. With a quick glance behind her, he gave his wives – three of his *four wives!* – an almost imperceptible shake of his head and they collectively sighed. Though whether it was in relief or they shared in his disappointment, she couldn't tell.

Grant seemed oblivious to the entire exchange and was still complaining beside them. "–don't think it's very fair the way they seem to fall in love with you before they've even met anyone else."

Demil finally turned to him and shrugged. "Who am I to deny a lady's heart, Grant? Love is the most powerful magic there is."

"Well you could just tell them you don't want another– "

"*Demil!*" The high pitched squeal cut Grant off and had them all turning towards the sound. A rather voluptuous woman jogged up with chest bouncing and arms open wide. Fiora had to let go

of Demil's arm as he used it to catch her in his usual welcoming embrace. She gave him a kiss on the cheek before extracting herself to stand next to Grant.

He frowned at her until she mimicked with a pout and kissed him full on the lips. "Don't you get jealous, now. You know I love you."

"You better, woman," he mumbled with a sad but playful tone.

"I'd have to, to keep putting up with you," she returned in kind then turned back to the rest of them. "So, Demil, what brings you here today?"

"Fiora, here needs a few things."

"Fiora?"

"Demil's *fifth*," Grant almost growled and his wife's eyes grew wide.

"*Another* wife? Vera can't be happy about that." Demil only shrugged not confirming or denying their assumption.

Another vendor beside them picked up on the conversation. "You got another wife? Demil you lucky son of a Kracken! Hey, Earl," he hollered across the way. "Did you hear? *Demil's got another wife!*"

Fiora was a little taken aback to hear the lie shouted so loudly in the cave. She was startled when fingers rested on her arm. Trina's shy gaze met hers as Sherry whispered in her ear. "Don't worry, dear, the rumors will spread quickly and keep others from getting their own thoughts about you."

"After you leave," Melinda added, "we'll let them know the truth." Fiora nodded, grateful for the women's understanding.

"She came to us with almost nothin'," Demil was telling Grant's wife, "and she'd really like some good traveling clothes."

The woman's gaze grew with sympathy. "Of course, of course, though she'll need more than that. Come on, child," she urged as she put her arm around Fiora's shoulders. "Let Kami take care of you today. We'll make sure you have everything you need."

Fiora shook her head. "I don't know how much I can get today. I don't have much money."

Kami laughed heartily at her admission and Demil spoke up, “Just put everything on my tab.”

Fiora snapped her head towards him. “No, I couldn’t—”

“I insist,” Demil interrupted.

“We all do,” Sherry assured her. “Get what you need and we will discuss costs later.”

Fiora was insistent, though. She would not take advantage of Demil or let him give her more than the kindness he had already shown her. “No! I won’t take your money!”

Grant’s incredulous voice sounded next to her, uncomfortable close. “What kind of wife won’t spend her own husband’s money?”

Fiora knew she was close to ruining the bluff they had just created but she didn’t care. She stared Grant down as a gust of impossible wind rippled his wares. “Vera was worried about having another mouth to feed. I will not be a burden!”

Again Kami laughed while Grant stepped away, a cautious eye on his swaying product. “An honorable one,” She answered her husband’s question with an elbow’s nudge to his arm. She resumed guiding Fiora towards the ladies trousers. “Come on, then, we will pick out what *you* want first and see how much you have left after that.” Fiora nodded and thought she saw the woman wink at Demil thought she couldn’t be sure in the dim light.

The next hour was consumed with measuring and fittings and haggling. Fiora finally counted her money and inwardly cringed. She hadn’t expected much; she had been right to do so. Still, she would have more than enough to buy what she needed today. She could have made it go further if she’d let Kami give her the deep discounts she tried to. But Fiora refused to take less than a fair price. More than a few people stopped to listen to their odd haggling joust over her chosen riding outfit. “I won’t take more than ten coppers for it,” Kami said with her hands on her hips.

“Ten coppers?! How do you expect me to sleep at night? Why not just tell me to steal it from you? It’s worth at least fifty and you know it!”

“I’ve never sold one for more than twenty.” It was a flat out lie, but Kami spoke it with conviction.

“And I’ve never bought one for less than forty!” That was the truth, but only because she’d never bought a riding outfit before. Still, she knew the prices for one in Kavaccet ranged between forty

and a hundred coppers or more depending on quality. This one was of a fairly good quality and even forty coppers was a great deal, but at least her conscience would not prick her over it.

“Fine,” Kami sighed overdramatically, “I guess I will take thirty coppers.”

Fiora caught her in a steely gaze. As much as she appreciated the woman’s generosity, she was not going to take advantage of it. “No,” she insisted putting the money on the counter. “I will not be a burden. Not to Demil or to Demil’s friends. You will take forty or I will go to a different shop that would be more than happy to take sixty for the same thing.”

Kami sighed again, this time in resignation. She caught Demil’s eye over her shoulder. He was chuckling and shrugged back at her. “You drive a hard bargain, Miss, I’ll give you that. Wisdom forbid I ever be on the wrong side of the bargaining table from you.” Fiora nodded in satisfaction as the woman finally took the money. “Should I wrap that up for you?”

“No, I’d like to wear it out, please. But you can wrap the dress I’m wearing. I don’t want it to get any dirtier than it already is.” Kami nodded and Fiora went behind the privacy screen to change. The blouse and trousers were dull colors and made of a sturdy woven cloth that did not breathe near as well as the dress. Though she knew she would miss the freedom to feel the wind over all her body, this would be much more practical. She came out feeling a little uncomfortable under everyone’s scrutiny.

“I liked the dress better,” Trina blurted out.

Melinda hushed her, but Fiora answered anyway. “It doesn’t belong to me. I need to return it.”

“Oh, okay.” She looked down at the floor. “You really did have nuthin’.”

“A little bit of money and a bedroll,” she corrected. That’s about it. But now I have my own clothes again so that’s good.” Trina nodded at her as they all made their way to the exit.

“Wait a minute,” Melinda piped up, “Where are your shoes?”

Fiora glanced down at her bare toes which were now much more visible without a skirt hiding them. She shrugged, “I’ve never worn shoes.”

Trina’s jaw dropped. “Never?”

“Nope, never needed them before.”

“But you can’t just go around barefoot!” Melinda declared.

“What if you step in a manure pile?”

Fiora gave Trina a wink. “I wash my feet.”

Demil guided them all to the corridor opening. “I have one more thing to get while I’m here. I’ll be right back.” When he returned he had a bouquet of daisies in hand and they headed back to the Inn.

As soon as they opened the door, a red faced Vera greeted them. “*You lied to me!*” she accused aiming a slap at Demil’s face. He dropped his daisies to catch her wrist before it struck and frowned as she kept yelling at him. “Oh, everyone who comes out of that door is all abuzz with how Demil’s got a fifth wife! *A fifth wife!!* I’m a part of this family, too, and I never agreed to this!” It didn’t seem to matter to her that Fiora was the one who’d actually made the claim.

Trina, small as she was, stepped forward with a surprising boldness. “He didn’ lie! She’s not stayin’!”

Vera looked as surprised as Fiora was. “But everyone’s been saying–“

“You know how fast rumors spread down there,” Sherry chided. “We just let them assume so the other men would quit leering at her.”

Vera’s anger deflated at their words and her eyes found Fiora’s when she spoke. “I’m sorry it upset you, ma’am. You do have a lovely family and I would be honored to be a part of it, but honestly I never intended to stay.”

Demil still had a hold of Vera’s hand as she dropped her arm. He held it tenderly and brought it to his lips for a kiss. He whispered her name as he left a trail of kisses up her arm and neck and finally made it to her mouth. Vera seemed to melt into him. “Yer the first woman I ever saved, Vera, and the first I ever loved... but if yer not happy here, with our family, I’m not going to make you stay. I’ve never taken a woman who didn’t fully choose me, and I won’t keep one who chooses to leave.”

There were tears in her eyes and she seemed to see only him. “And where would I find another man with a heart so big that he would still love me when I get jealous or try to slap him or accuse him of dishonesty? If you let me choose, you will never be rid of me.” He grinned wide and nodded to the rest of his wives who all surrounded Vera in a group hug. Fiora felt self-conscious at being witness to such a personal display and was startled when Sherry pulled her in to join them. They all hugged her, even Vera.

“I would've liked 'aving you as part of the family,” Trina whispered.

“Me too,” Melinda agreed and Sherry nodded.

“I would have grown to love you eventually,” Vera admitted. “It’s hard not to love who my husband loves. That’s why I was worried when you first rode up. I could tell he was already fancying you.”

Demil’s neck grew a deeper hue and he rubbed the back of it with one hand. “Aye, but the lady doesn’t fancy me.”

“Yes she does,” Trina chirped frankly. “She just fancies someone else more. I could tell when you asked ‘er to stay.” Now it was Fiora’s turn to blush. Was she really that easy to read?

Melinda jumped on her hesitation. “Ooh, who is he?”

“Yes, yes,” Sherry chimed in. “Tell us his name.”

“Somebody back home?” Vera ventured.

Fiora shook her head before she realized she was doing it and Demil raised an eyebrow at her. “One of the other Birchwoods, then? You haven’t met anyone else on yer travels, have you?” All eyes were on her. They expected an answer, but she didn’t want to have to explain Civyl to Demil yet. In her panic she said the only other name that came to mind.

“Alex.”

Demil actually frowned while the women looked worried. “Uh, oh,” Trina mumbled.

“What?” Fiora asked. “What’s wrong with Alex?” She paused for a moment with worry. “How many wives does *he* have?”

Sherry chuckled and shook her head. “None, dearie, but not for lack of women trying.”

Demil also shook his head, still frowning. “Alex has never shown any interest in settlin’ down since I met him. Never took a fancy to a lady, not even fer pleasure’s own sake.”

Melinda tiskied beside him. “Just ain’t natural.”

“I’d gander a guess that he liked the men,” Vera ventured, “except he’s turned all of those down too.”

“E’s got a broken heart.” Once again Trina blurted out her observation as if it were fact. “I could tell straight away. E does it for ‘er.”

“Does what? For who?” Fiora asked, not following.

“Saves women from promises they didn’ want. Because ‘e failed to save *her* – the woman ‘e loved!”

Vera scoffed, “You couldn’t possibly know that. Don’t be spreading rumors about Alex, now.”

But Fiora wondered if it weren’t true. Trina had already proved very accurate in her observations of herself. It didn’t matter, though, and she said so. “Maybe it’s for the best, then. I won’t be staying in Brittner anyway... no matter who I fancy.”

“Even though you like ‘im more than Demil?!” Trina asked with wide eyes.

Fiora only ducked her head, unwilling to add anything else to her lie. “We should get back to Nivia’s house,” she said to Demil instead. “She gave me some tasks to do while she was gone.”

He raised his brow. “You don’t want to stay fer supper?”

“Oh, no, I really must be back before then. I’m supposed to cook in Nivia’s stead. Can’t let the Birchwood brothers go hungry.”

“Best not,” Melinda agreed, “That Chink can be a bear.”

“Don’t I know it!” Fiora sighed and they all laughed. She said her good-byes and waited by the horses while Demil kissed each of his wives in turn. Her mind thought about the implications of it. They were openly defying the rule of the Wisdom of Kavaccet. Did Lady Darya know? Fiora had once thought the Lady knew everything that happened within her realm, but now... she was sure it was the opposite. But maybe that was a good thing, because these women all looked so happy here with Demil in contrast to the pain they had suffered from their Wisdom granted promises. If the lady knew they defied her, they wouldn’t be able to be together. Watching Trina cling to Demil, Fiora hoped she’d never find out.

Civyl had worried that he wouldn’t be able to leave Fiora behind, but whatever tether had kept

him next to her before did not interfere with his journey with the old woman. He told himself it was likely because he whole heartedly intended to come back to her.

Nivia took the lead and rode in silence which suited Civyl just fine except the old woman took the journey much slower than he would have liked. Half a day's ride at her pace couldn't be all that far. Except they didn't stop when the sun was straight over their heads and when it started falling below the looming mountain horizon Civyl began to worry. His stomach was loudly grumbling for a meal before they finally stopped at a door built into the foothills of Enundale.

They dismounted and knocked only to have no one answer. "He must not be in," Nivia observed. Civyl was ready to give her a sarcastic reply when his stomach rumbled loud enough for her to hear it. "It is past the supper tick, isn't it?" she asked. "Let's have a fire and eat something while we wait. He will see the smoke. He will come."

Civyl felt a new twinge of anger that he had to let Nivia wake the fire, but once it was crackling in his vision, his worries started to fade away. He was here to lift the curse. Here so he could once again dance with the flames. The fire seemed to know and danced excitedly. Even Nivia seemed entranced by the beautiful display.

The sky had darkened to evening colors before a deep voice startled them to attention. "Who do you bring to my hollow, Nivia, to have the waking fire dance in jubilation on my doorstep?"

Civyl turned toward the voice but didn't see anyone in the light of the flame. Not until he moved, that is. His skin was as dark as shadow and his clothing black as soot. Even his eyes were a smoky grey. But there was more to his presence than the sight of him. He carried with him an energy that seemed to absorb the very light around him causing him to fade from vision whenever he stood still.

Nivia stood and bowed to the man. Civyl decided to do the same. She kept herself respectfully lowered when she answered him. "He is a chosen of the flame, Master Akasha."

Though Civyl remained bowed like Nivia, he could tell the man's attention had turned to him. "And why are you here, Chosen of the Flame?"

Civyl didn't know what was proper deference and suddenly wished Nivia had prepared him for this meeting in some way. He felt silly staring at the ground and talking to his borrowed pair of boots, so he decided to just ask. "May I face my inquisitor?"

Out of the corner of his eye Nivia frowned and grew rigid, but the man let out a rumbling laugh. "Of course you may. Nivia is the last of my students to still show such formal respects for me."

"It is a travesty, Master," she grumbled beside him. But she lifted her head to face him when Civyl did.

He waited expectantly without repeating his question so Civyl wasted no more of his time. "I am unable to wield the flame. Nivia believes me cursed and that you may be able to remove it."

The man stepped closer and regarded him appraisingly. Civyl's skin prickled under the scrutiny. "Put your hand in the flame," he said. Civyl felt like it was a test. Instead of bending down to the fire, Civyl simply held out his hand toward the flames. Of their own volition, the flames jumped higher to encompass his hand and swirled brightly.

When Civyl looked back at him, he was frowning. "It seems you can wield the fire just fine to me. Why are you wasting my time?"

Nivia quailed at the admonition but Civyl was not deterred. "I have not tried to wield the flame yet. It is only asking me to dance." Master Akasha squinted at him then at Nivia who shivered under his gaze. Civyl wondered off-hand what kind of man he must be for the frank and fearless old woman he had met yesterday to cower in his presence. *One that requires proof*, he answered himself. With a sigh he steeled himself for the necessary. He turned to face the fire, unwilling to let the man see him cringe. "I will show you." Civyl took a deep breath taking a few more seconds to delight in the comforting warmth that ticked his senses. In his mind's eye, the flame took bodily form in front of him and whispered his name and rested its hand in his palm. An invitation to be whole and complete; to be one. For a moment, a precious sliver of time, Civyl forgot to be afraid. He closed his fingers around the extended hand and whispered one word. "*Dance.*"

But Smoldering Ash

By Luca - June 07 2014

"Come on, don't any of you fall behind *now*. We're almost there." Jared Relen, junior instructor and assistant adjutant for Jacquelyn Wilford, was having his capabilities and resolved put to tests he had never anticipated. Clumsily, through the dim glow of the sliver of moonlight, Jared led a string of a dozen refugee students through the head of the Wandering Forest. Explosions and pops resonated through the trees. Ember colored orbs flew throughout the sky, burning pitch, bombardments from mundane attackers. They came from every angle, arching over the frightened students, unsure of who they were following. Jared, unsure of who he was leading. Everyone was an enemy, and with every strategy for survival, was the promise of death.

Green and yellow light shot out from the north tower of the school in the distance. Broken glass and wood debris showered the ground as the nova of energy dissipated. As some of the students looked back, the fire from the New Construction lit the roof and walls of the school, its light displaying columns of black smoke that rose towards the stars that clear night. The true extent of their new reality.

Jared pressed on. Collapsing sticks under foot and spurred forward by adrenaline and a sense of self-preservation. He didn't intend to go back for anyone who couldn't keep up. He didn't even intend to check if anyone fell behind either. The trees closed in around them and a pair of cairn stones came into view that indicated the entrance of the safehouse. Jared ran to a large monolith, sunken beneath the soil and surrounded by the fallen leaves of the trees, between the two pillars. Jared stopped and the students trickled in behind him. He remained still for several more moments after everyone reached the clearing.

"Why are we stopping?" a student in the back of the group said"

"Quiet!" Jared snapped back, his voice breaking from nerves. He listened for something that might kill them. After waiting long enough to seem satisfied, he turned back to the area between the stones. "*Opulent Clear*," he whispered so as not to display the quiver in his voice again. The monolith that made the base between the two cairn stones became translucent, slowly something appeared through the rock. It was a hole. A ladder was on one side, destination unknown. As it became clearer, suddenly the glowing matter blew off like smoke from a pipe, leaving a perfectly cut square opening through the stone to the safehouse.

"Alright," he said with relief. "Everyone in." The closest students proceeded towards the ladder.

"Stay where you are!" The voice erupted from a figure standing at the treeline, draped in shadows. Jared nearly jumped out of his skin. Who was this person? Where did he come from? The man walked forward, and the dim light of the moon revealed the outline of his face.

"Finius..." Jared recognized.

"The area beyond this threshold is a trap that will lead to every one of you being burned alive," said Finius as he approached from the treeline. The sliver of moonlight revealed the outline of his face. A hand moved forward from his robes. "Come with me, slowly. You don't know what he's capable of." Some of the students exchanged glances between themselves. They moved in Finius' direction.

"W-what? N-No!" Jared stammered. He attempted to right himself by grapping hold of the cairn stones to lift his insubordinate legs, locked up by nerves. "Finius Panan is a defector! You mus-"

"Silence!" he shouted. The overwhelming authority in his voice was enough to mute the small force of will within Jared. "How dare you stand there and call me a traitor as you were but moments away from executing these people? ...well?" he demanded. A soul neither moved nor spoke. "What evidence do you have that you speak the truth and that I am the liar? Tell them what proves that they can trust you!"

Encircled by the scattered brown robes of students and the imposing figure, Jared searched within himself for some witty retort or astounding revelation that would bring to light which side the two men were on...but the truth was he had no such knowledge or charisma. Finally, Jared addressed the students. "I cannot," he exhaled. Now that he examined them, it was clear that they were no greater than second ranks, if that. "There is no evidence. The only thing I can say is to be wise and trust your heart to point you to the right direction." He might not be able to get them all, at this point, but there was still a chance to save some. Three of the students indicated being swayed and moved to stand with Jared once again.

"GET DOWN!" Finius shouted as the tunnel down to the safehouse exploded with a sharp vertical wall of fire. A small shockwave was sent through the area, reducing everyone to the ground. Jared was thrown back a dozen feet, being at the head of the tunnel when it erupted. The column of flame continued to pour out of the stone monolith. The students tried to get to their feet, but for Jared, the situation was incomprehensible.

"The safehouse...what ..." Jared spoke with what burned and deformed remains of his face that he possessed. He looked up, to the distance where Finius stood. There were students and instructors in that safehouse, but now they were ash.

"Do you see what he's done!?! He was going to kill you." Finius stepped forward with a hand raised, robes and linings in silhouette from the fading flames.

"No...this is...impossi" Jared's arms twitched and spasmed, too damaged to obey his commands, too late to resist anything any longer.

"And now, I'll make sure you do no such thing again."

"Kaegan!" Wifall shouted, failing to keep up with the speed of the youth. "Stop now, boy!" They were barreling through the midsection of the east Wandering Forest, an area that Kaegan only recently discovered could be a shortcut to Wifall's lodge. Certainly, he wasn't as familiar with it as the main road and, certainly, he had never traveled it in the middle of the night at a run.

"There isn't time to stop now, if we don't get there now, she'll be dead!" Kaegan shouted without slowing down or looking back.

Wifall was actually glad Kaegan had been beaten up in training and in the fight at the inn, it made keeping up with him far easier. Still, he shouldn't *have* to keep up, this was a horrible idea. Cover of darkness meant nothing at the moment. Kaegan collapsed branches with feet, weighed down by their injuries, and smashed through saplings unfortunate enough to be growing in the paths he had chosen. "Kaegan, you bastard! Stop it!"

He rounded a tree and stopped to look back. Wifall was panting and grasping his knee just a short distance down the hill Kaegan hadn't even realized he had climbed, "Don't you hear those explosions in the distance? Things have gone bad, and Luca's in trouble." He glanced back in the direction he was running as Wifall picked himself off his knee and pushed up the rise.

"And what do you think that you are going to do about it running out into a field when you find 'er? Hell, you don't even know if you're going the right way! But, I'll tell you one thing, you are being reckless! You are just going to find her and get yourself killed because you charged in like you did with me last week and got your ass kicked because you didn't think before you acted!"

Dead leaves shifted underfoot as Kaegan glanced back again. Wifall peered around his head and snapped his fingers louder than Kaegan thought it was possible to snap them. "Stop looking down there! Look with your mind and figure out what you're going to do first." He pushed his shoulder back to make Kaegan face him. "Listen, two things have happened. One is that there are some brigands throwing fireglass at the outside of the walls and your teachers are lighting them up one at a time. The other is that they have completely lost control and a lot of people are dead."

Kaegan gritted his teeth and clenched his fists "Grrrraaaahh" He started to continue in the direction he was going.

Wifall reached forward and yanked his arm back. It was amazing how strong this old soldier actually was, it looked like he hardly expended any effort in the act. Kaegan looked back at him. The moonlight vaguely lit up discs around the bottom of his eyes. Kaegan could tell he was trying desperately to get the message through. "That's what I mean" He said slowly and diligently. "Whatever has happened, we're going to act as if it's the second option." He paused for a second "And you're not ready for whatever we're going to find. So we're going to be careful, and not let anyone know that we're there."

Kaegan's teeth gritted harder.

"We're going to make it through this, lad. And then. You're going to pay me for this week's lesson."

The Weed

By Jewels - June 08 2014

Alex was seventeen Seasons of Birth with the weight of the world on his shoulders. He thought he knew what he wanted – thought he knew exactly what he needed to be happy for the rest of his life but that was not his promise.

Military training?! Why had The Wisdom given him military training when surely she knew how his heart longed to make a Bloom his Flower. Not just any Bloom. The Bloom that had captured his heart the first time she had stolen a kiss from him. After the gifting, he'd told her it wasn't meant to be; that she would never be his Flower, but she refused to accept it.

"I don't care what The Wisdom says," she had huffed, melting his resolve with her passion. "I love you and will be with no other!" She broke the law to give herself to him that night - and many nights after, even though she was not his promise. It was incredibly romantic, sneaking around with her, sharing their forbidden love.

"But what if..." he had stammered in his caution one day, "I don't want you to end up a... a Weed." It was the highest form of shame, to be an unwed mother, and often led to estrangement from friends and disownment from family. Lady Darya supporters often boasted how few weeds could be found within the walls of Kavaccet.

But his lover had scoffed, "And why not?" Her eyes had actually lit with approval at the idea. "If I am with child out of wedlock, it will be all the more reason for the Lady to let us be together. Then she will give me in promise, for sure!"

She had been right. The same month that her Bloom tell had stopped, she was called to the Sanctuary by the Promise Keepers. The Wisdom had, indeed, given her in promise... but to another man. It was a punishment for their fallacies, Alex was sure of it.

The same day of the promise, the other man gave his proposal. Whether out of shock, self-preservation, or because it was expected, she had accepted. On the morrow, she would wed another man, kiss his lips, warm his bed... The woman he loved and the child she carried – his

child – would be taken from him and given to another as if they had never been his. No matter that he'd never had the right to claim them in the first place, the truth of it was still too painful.

Memory of that night played out in his head as he fought desperately to change their destiny. Her passion withdrawn, she spoke with reason though tears filled her eyes. "Maybe it is for the best. Now I will not be shamed. The Lady has given me that."

Alex had agreed that night so long ago. He had given her up and let her go... but that was before he knew the outcome. Not again. Not today! "No!" he shouted, though his mouth moved as if it was full of cotton. "We will run away together. Come with me!"

She walked up to him and rested a hand on his arm. "Shh. There is no danger. Be at peace, you are not alone." Her words did not make sense. She must not understand him.

"Come with me!" He urged more adamantly.

"I am with you," she whispered.

Suddenly Kavaccet fell away and he was in the woods with her. He had done it! He had convinced her to leave her promise for him. She rubbed his arm and whispered again. "Be at peace. All is well."

Almost... all was almost well. He reached for her fingers and caught them in his hand; the sensation of their warmth reassuring him. The fates had given him a second chance! "Stay. Promise me you will stay here with me forever." When she did not immediately answer, he lowered himself to his knees and begged it of her. "Please, stay!"

"Okay," she had smiled at him. "I will stay." His elation filled the moment. The woman he loved was looking down on him while she carried their child in her womb. They were both healthy and happy in his embrace. As he rested his cheek against her belly he made himself an oath. He would protect them with everything he had and he would never let them go again!

Fiora raced Demil back to Nivia's house. Once he got her to the edge of town at least. She was almost positive she would not be able to find her way back, even if her life depended on it. Clover made it to Nivia's clearing before Gentre, but she was sure Demil let her win. At the house, Fiora went inside while he took care of the horses. Her first stop was at the door to Borris's room. Working up her courage, she knocked lightly on the frame and waited.

A tired Chink opened the door. Once he registered who she was, his demeanor hardened and he frowned at her. "What do you want?" It was a whispered growl no more welcoming than he had been yesterday but it didn't put her on the offensive today.

She observed the dark circles under his eyes and saw the weariness in his stance. She hadn't planned on it, but a question fell from her lips. "Um... Can I bring you anything?"

"Wha...?" He seemed as surprised by her question as she was.

She stammered out a few examples he looked like he could use. "Can I bring you some water? Or... or some broth? I was going to make something to eat. Do you have any requests?"

He blinked at her before narrowing his eyes and shaking his head. "*We* need *nothin'* from you." He was so protective... Fiora struggled not to smile at it.

She dropped her gaze to the floor remembering the package in her hands and shoved it out to him. "This is for you."

He crossed his arms in front of his chest stubbornly and forgot to keep whispering. "I said we don't need noth—"

"It's the dress," she interrupted before his raised voice woke anyone. "Avery's dress?" She witnessed a ripple of pain cross his face and averted her gaze to give him what privacy she could. "I wasn't sure who to give it back to, but since Nivia's not here and I'm guessing Borris is asleep..." She let the sentence trail off and kept holding the package out to him until he took it. Only then did she venture another glance at his face. He just stared at the package, lost in thought. "I'm sorry," she offered, "that she's gone, and that... that the reminder was... upsetting." He only managed a nod of acknowledgement.

"Are you sure I can't get you anything?" He shook his head no. "Okay. I'm going to check on Alex, then." Fiora dismissed herself and started down the hallway.

Behind her she heard the big man take in a ragged breath before his gruff voice followed her down the hall. "He has been restless."

She turned back but only in time to see the door close behind him. Entering Alex's room quietly, she found Chink's words were true. Alex was asleep but not peacefully. His brow furrowed from whatever dream his subconscious plagued him with. "No," he mumbled in his sleep, worry straining his soft, muffled voice. "Come with me."

She walked over and sat in the chair beside him. She placed a hand on his arm. “Shh,” she whispered. “There is no danger. Be at peace. You are not alone.”

Like a flower turning towards the sun, his face followed her voice. “Come with me,” he mumbled again.

“I *am* with you,” she whispered back as she rubbed his arm for reassurance. “Be at peace,” she repeated. “All is well.”

With a surprising quickness, his opposite hand swung over and caught her fingers. She bit down on her lip to keep from yelping. “Stay...” it was a breathy plea. His hand squeezed hers as he said it again. “*Please, stay!*”

“Okay,” she relented. “I will stay.” At least until he fell into a deeper sleep, she would stay.

He started to wake, her fingers still entwined in his, and a contented feeling bathed him. *She had stayed!* His fingers tightened over hers and she squeezed them back. *She was here. She had stayed.* She... She *couldn't* be here!

Alex's eyes popped open and he released the hand he held with a start. The early evening sun lit the room and it's only other occupant. “Good morning,” Fiora said with a smirk. But Alex was not in the mood to joke. His dream shattered as the realization flooded over him. *She... she was not here... she would never be here!*

He experienced the pain of her loss all over again. It came out as anger. “Why were you holding my hand?!” he demanded.

Fiora sat back with an indignant stare. “*You* grabbed *my* hand,” she said defensively, “and you wouldn't let go, either!”

She wasn't here... She never would be! Alex struggled to keep his emotions under control. It did not help having the girl in the room. “But why are you even in here?” he snarled, hoping it would scare her away.

It did not work. “I was checking on you. You're my patient, remember?” she huffed in frustration, but gave no indication that she was about to back down. “You were having a bad dream, talking in your sleep, and I tried to calm you.”

Talking? He became suddenly nervous and looked away. “What did I say?”

“I don’t know...” she stammered, “‘No.’, ‘Come with me.’, ‘Stay’. You were very adamant that I stay. Did I mention you wouldn’t let go of me?”

Stay... She was unable to stay... His anger dissipated as despair took root in its stead. “You could have woken me up...”

Fiora snorted. “And ruin such a peaceful sleep? Nivia would have my head if I even thought about it.”

Alex allowed himself a chuckle because it was true. The movement did not hurt as much as it had earlier. Barely a day away from a nearly fatal stabbing and he was almost mended. Nivia did good work. “Where is Nivia?”

A flicker of worry crossed her face as she looked out the window. “They are not back yet.”

“But it’s almost dark!” he said as if she could not see it for herself.

Her brow creased as she nodded her head but she turned back to him and changed the subject. “Are you hungry?” She was trying not to think about them. Alex recognized the tactic and decided to follow suit.

“Famished, actually,” he admitted. As if on cue, his stomach rumbled.

She stood with a curt nod. “I’ll go make you some supper, then. And maybe we can do some more walking before the sun has completely disappeared. You slept the whole afternoon away and I want to be sure you are tired enough to sleep tonight.

Sleep? It would only be welcome if he could sleep without dreaming. Alex did not know how long he could stand the pain of his dreams.

The Eyes

By Jewels - June 16 2014

It hurt... *Everything* hurt... but his head especially throbbed. Civyl thought to move it to try to relieve some of the pressure, but only made it worse with stabbing pains shooting from his face down his neck. *Why did he hurt so much?* Next to him, a woman groaned. He recognized it as the old woman and instinctually tried to look at her. Civyl cursed aloud when the slightest turn of his head brought more pain.

“Hush,” a commanding voice echoed in his ears. “You are not yet healed.” *Akasha*. Civyl suddenly remembered the events of the previous hours. The pain... the screams... the utter look of delight on Akasha’s face as he plied his trade. Civyl had thought the man mad when he first approached with his knife, a crazed grin stretched across his face. But Civyl had willingly allowed himself to be securely restrained so he would not thrash about in his foreseen agony. He could do nothing but scream once the knife started carving away at his face. Even now, his wrists and ankles burned where the ropes had dug into his flesh in the struggle. His shudder at the memory was almost overwhelming and he could not help the desperate cry that passed his lips.

“*Hush*,” Akasha admonished again with more force, but his voice held sympathy. The pressure of his hand on Civyl’s head burned with power. Nivia groaned again at his side, but this time in relief. Indeed, the pain was abating quickly to be replaced with pulses of energy that radiated throughout his entire body though they concentrated and throbbed stronger at his right eye. Civyl’s senses tingled, every cell alive. His aches melted away, even those he had not realized he’d had.

Even after the pressure of Akasha’s hand was removed from his head, the lingering effects of his power kept Civyl contented enough to just lie still, afraid it would disappear if he moved. The sounds of bonds being removed came from his left and he listened as Akasha assessed Nivia’s condition.

“How do you feel?”

“Mmm... Like I did when I was but a student. Young... and in awe.”

A chuckle. “You *are* young, child.”

“Perhaps in years compared to you, but no more in body.”

Another chuckle, longer and deeper. “How about the eye? Can you see well?”

A pause. “Perfectly, Master. I have not seen this clearly in decades.”

“Good, good. A boon I give you for your willingness to endure such pain for my benefit.”

“Thank you, Master Akasha. It was an honor to be witness to your work.”

Another chuckle and a sigh. “Should we see to my other patient, then?”

Nivia did not respond. Civyl assumed she had nodded as four hands set to work releasing him from the ropes that held him. The tingle of Akasha’s power had faded during their talk, but Civyl still laid still. There was a peace about his body and he did not want to disturb it.

“Come, come. Sit up, fire dancer.” Civyl inwardly sighed at Akasha’s instruction, but he did not ignore it. With limber and revitalized muscles, he easily brought himself up and swung his legs over the side of the patient’s table. “Good, good,” Akasha intoned, “now open your eyes for me and let’s have a look.”

Civyl hesitated. He did not know what to expect; he could not remember having two eyes, but he did as he was told. For a moment the early morning light – even shaded by the trees as it was – proved too bright for him, and Civyl blinked rapidly as he struggled to keep them open. When he finally managed Akasha’s clear and smiling face welcomed him. Two of them! “Well,” he asked, “How is it? Can you see?”

Civyl frowned as he closed one eye at a time. The image of the man was crystal clear in both eyes... clearer than he had been able to see before, but it was not in the same place. “I can, but...” he struggled to explain it, “they do not line up.”

“Ah, to be expected. You have lived a long time with only one eye. Your mind is used to relying on only one input. With time your body will readjust.” Akasha leaned in to peer at his eyes with close scrutiny. He whispered words meant only for Civyl’s ears. “Do not tell her, or I fear she will refuse to leave my side.”

Civyl’s brow creased. *What was the man speaking of? Nivia? Tell her what?* Akasha stepped back for a moment and nodded to his side. “You should let him rest for an hour before you leave. Let him get used to the double image and if he has headaches, place a patch over the right one for a while.”

Civyl turned his head to also look at Nivia... only it wasn’t Nivia. The woman he saw in double could be no more than twenty seasons of birth. His jaw dropped about to make an exclamation when Akasha’s hand tightened on his arm, almost painfully so. “Let me look,” the woman said with Nivia’s voice. But now that he listened, he noticed that it wasn’t as harsh as it used to be. It was more supple... more youthful. He caught Akasha’s stern glance out of the corner of his eye and snapped his mouth shut. The man had given her back her youth just as it seemed he had done for himself from time to time. Who was Civyl to argue with a sorcerer who could defy time itself?

Nivia came very close staring at his face. He was glad he had an excuse to stare back. Stepping back, she frowned. She clucked her tongue and shook her head. Civyl did not like her disapproval. “What?” Akasha asked, “Did I miss something?”

“Oh no, there is nothing wrong, Master. I just hadn’t realized...” she paused, making Civyl nervous.

“What?!” Civyl added to the query. “What is it?”

She shrugged in a fashion that left him more nervous than ever, “It’s just that my eyes are green and... your eyes... Well, they *were* blue, but now you have one blue and one green. Not quite normal, but serviceable none the less.”

“Hmm,” Akasha was staring at him again. “I see what you mean. I will have to make sure that future patients know this aspect of the treatment.”

Nivia clucked again, but this time was nodding her head. “Yes, yes. Best they know beforehand if you do not want them asking for a refund.”

Civyl felt like he was some kind of experiment... which he supposed he was. But he didn’t like the way they both studied him. It was as if he were on exhibit like one of the carnival’s two headed side-shows. Clearing his throat, he decided to change the subject. “I’ve held up my end of the bargain so how about you tell us who can lift my curse, and we will trouble you no further.”

Nivia frowned even deeper, though in her present state, it was actually attractive. Akasha seemed annoyed that his specimen was protesting, but he was nodding his head. “Yes, I suppose you are right. I can do no more for you. The man you seek is the same man who placed the curse on you in the first place.”

Civyl waited for him to continue. When he was silent too long for Civyl’s taste, he prompted him. “And that is...?”

Akasha looked surprised by the question. “I do not know, fire dancer. I was not there when you received it.” A flash of anger boiled inside of him and Akasha raised his hands in defense. “I never said I knew his name, just that I knew there was only one who could lift it. This kind of curse can only be lifted by the caster and that is all I know.”

The man had manipulated him! He was no closer to lifting the curse than when he had left

Nivia's house! "Fine," Civyl growled jumping off the table and stumbling from the abruptness of it. He grabbed at a tree for stability and closed his new eye so the ground would stop wobbling in front of him. "Come on, Nivia, we leave, now."

"But Akasha said--"

"NOW!" he cut her off and she started. Luckily the old, er... young woman did not argue further and started heading for the horses. Perhaps she recognized his need to be away from this place... and this man who had misled him into agreeing to be his momentary play thing, but no more. Civyl was done with him. He turned to Akasha with forced pleasantness, though he could not manage a smile. "Thank you, *sir*, for the help you have given us, but as you have already said; you can do no more and I will impose no further."

Akasha nodded curtly with a clouded expression that Civyl could not read. His tone was professional. "Cover it when it bothers you. Practice it when it doesn't." Civyl thought that was the end of it when a flicker of something more humane softened his eyes. "I am sorry I could not meet your expectations."

Civyl turned away without responding. There was an ache in his side where none had been previously. It was time to get back to his quest. Time to retrieve Fiora and get to the pass as quickly as he could.

Fiora shivered in the cold morning air. She didn't really want to be out here, but she could not stand being inside any longer. It seemed Alex had argued with her at every turn last night. 'No, *he wouldn't* do his stretches.', 'Yes, he *would* drink his ale.', 'No she could not stop him from packing and smoking his favorite pipe no matter how bad it was for his still healing lungs.' *Aaarrgg!* The morning had been no better. He insisted he did not need her help anymore and went out of his way to not do what she asked. Even Chink had given her a sympathetic glance under Alex's tirades. The man was intolerable this morning! So instead of exhausting herself further, Fiora decided she would wait for Civyl outside... no matter how cold it was.

Her feet, still bare, glided over a well pressed spot in the grass where she paced for Civyl's return. She could not help but worry that something had gone terribly wrong. Hadn't they just decided that her dreams had been real? And hadn't The Wisdom told her that she needed to stay by his side for them to succeed? ... But hadn't she also just learned that The Wisdom was not always so wise? How could she trust what the Lady had told her was true if she didn't even know how many of her promises were given in vain?

She tried to reason with herself. If they'd had to spend the night somewhere, they would not have

been able to start riding back until the sun rose. A half a day's ride from sunrise would not be until after sun peak, but she had queried the wind and it had not brought back word of their location yet. Back to pacing and back to worrying. Back to wishing he were here so they could both be on their way. *Oh Civyl, my Civyl... Please, hurry.*

Demil stared at him from across the table with an irritated scowl etched into his face. He'd been like that since he'd come down to breakfast. Alex's patience finally broke. "What? Why do you keep looking at me like that?" Demil continued frowning in silence, his eyes narrowed to slits. Alex waited for him to say something but the man only brooded. "For sanity's sake, man, just spit it out!" he snapped.

"Yer a selfish son-of-a-seaslug," he finally seethed. "You know that right?" Alex had little idea to what Demil was referring until his next statement. "I had a very *nice* afternoon with our Miss Fiora, yesterday." Ah... so their raised voices had not gone unnoticed.

But Alex was not going to apologize for it. He was not a child and he would not be treated like one. Least wise by a girl who was practically still a child herself. *Least wise by the girl who kept reminding him of the pain of his past.* Though his frustration grew, he was still curious about Demil's claim. "Oh? And what did you do together?"

"Took her to town," Demil nodded still with his disapproving glare, "She wanted some different clothes." He paused dramatically while Alex took a sip of the ale he drank so early just for spite. "Introduced her to the family, I did."

Alex choked and coughed, the alcohol searing the back of his throat. Demil didn't trust many with the truth of his family. That he had already trusted the girl with their secret... It was madness! What was the man thinking?! But he didn't look concerned about the girl, he looked angry at Alex. Best, perhaps, to let it play out. "And how did that go?" he managed when his coughing fit cleared.

"She was quite the lady, if I might say so. Ne'er an unkind word past her lips. Even refused to let Kami take less than a fair price for her wares."

Kami?! *Oh, the Fates he didn't!!* Alex couldn't hold his own growing ire back. "*You took her to the market?*" he seethed. "How could you be so careless?! What if she turns us in?"

"*She's got a good heart!*" Demil pounded his fist on the table, silencing Alex with a challenging glare. While his statement seemed innocent enough, Alex knew the hidden meaning behind it. "I

felt it long before I led you to her.” Alex was stunned. It was rare for Demil to talk to him, or anyone, about even having abilities, let alone using them.

Demil was a fire wielder, but he didn’t dance with fire. Not in the normal sense of the word. No, Demil could see a person’s ‘inner fire’, as he put it. It had kept him alive when alone on the streets. Very handy to know which people were being honest folk and which were getting ready to stab you in the back. Alex turned his attention back to Demil, whose face had lost its sneer as he let himself relive what he’d seen. “Her fire, Alex,…” he struggled for words, “I ain’t felt nuthin’ like it before. Her passion burns so hot… even when she’s unconscious. It’s how I found her in the first place… what drew me to her, like a moth to the flame.” Alex was confounded by his friend who seemed to be getting misty eyed in his memories. Demil looked straight at him with a serious expression. “I danced with her soul.”

Alex dropped his cup, spilling his mug full of ale across the table, but he didn’t even notice. He was too preoccupied with the implications. There was only one reason Demil said he danced with the fire of a woman’s soul; when he wanted to propose. As far as Alex knew, Demil had only done it with five other women, four of whom had said yes. The fifth? Already smitten with one Mr. Grant Goldcrest. A twinge of worry stabbed his gut, though he didn’t know exactly why. “So is she…?” he couldn’t finish the sentence but Demil understood him.

He shook his head. “She turned me down.” Relief washed over Alex. He’d thought it almost impossible for a woman to resist his friend, but he was glad they had avoided this additional complication. Demil’s eyes narrowed at him again. “She’s in love with somebody else. Trina saw it. You know she reads truth.”

Alex nodded. Trina’s ability matched Demil’s well, though her element was water. Trina was the one who first approached Demil. Alex could still remember the frank conversation. “*You like to marry pretty women,*” she had said to Demil matter-of-factly. “*And you have three of them at home right now.*” They’d all been shocked that she knew but Demil quickly got over it and just as quickly made her his fourth. Trina did not protest.

Thinking back to Fiora, Trina had spoke true again. Of course she was in love. Hadn’t he seen the light of vengeance in her eye towards her love’s murderer? And the same light turned pure a moment later when Civyl had burst in the door, unscathed? He had only seen them together for a tick, but the sight of it was seared into Alex’s memory. “I am not surprised,” he smirked, full of sarcasm.

Demil’s fist banged down on the table again. “*You bastard!* How can you sit there with that smug smile on yer face when you know yer breaking that poor lass’s heart?!”

Alex threw up his hands up in the air at Demil’s irrational mood swings. “Break her heart?? What in four Seasons have I done?!”

“By all the Fates, man, she loves you! Why do you keep pushin’ her away?!”

Alex blinked. He was more confused than ever. “Me?” *How absurd could he be?* “She can barely tolerate me! How can you think she loves me?”

Demil stared at him, witless. “You cannot be that dull! Has she not been waitin’ on you hand and foot for the past two days? I watched her let you cling to her hand in sleep, just so you could rest a little longer. And puttin’ up with all yer cursed tantrums and blasted pride!”

Alex’s face burned with heat but he forced out a harsh chuckle to cover his embarrassment and shook his head. “She’s only doing what Nivia told her to do. Trying and failing.”

The look on Demil’s face turned from one of anger to that of pity. His voice dropped its edge and just seemed sad. “She named you,” he whispered.

Now it was Alex’s turn to narrow his eyes. “What do you mean?”

“My wives,” he waved his hand in the direction of Brittner, “They asked her who she loved and she named *you*.”

Alex paused. He was dumbstruck. It couldn’t be true. Could it? No, of course not. He knew who she loved. “Why would she name me? She loves Civyl.”

Demil’s brow creased. “Civyl? Who is that?”

“Her promised,” Alex said in exasperation, but by the look on Demil’s face, he didn’t seem to think her promised was in the picture any more. And it suddenly made sense. Alex shook his head, “Demil, I don’t know what you felt in her heart, but it was not goodness. If she named me, she lied.”

Tears of Wisdom, why had she lied?! The eyes... she couldn’t stand the eyes! They stared at her with a look of pain and betrayal beseeching her to restore his faith in her, but she could not. Turning to the other eyes was just as bad. They were all accusing, all condemning, all unforgiving.

Fiora sat cornered by the four Birchwoods inside Nivia’s house. She thought she had gotten past

all this with them... but apparently the lie she had told, though it was only one word, was enough to turn them all against her again. Chink and Alex had laid out her vengeful actions the night they 'rescued' her, Civyl's violent arrival which Chink was still recovering from, and Nivia's charge that she care for Alex because she had cause his wound. They skipped the bit about Fiora saving his life again, but it seemed insignificant at the moment. Demil's question still hung in the air, as yet unanswered. "Is it true?"

Tears sprang to her eyes as she watched him lose his faith in her. She looked down at her hands. Hands that had almost murdered. She didn't deny it. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you," she said instead. "I just... I... When you smiled at me... I was afraid you'd stop smiling if you knew. You seemed so happy to see me... I didn't want to give you reason not to be happy with me. It was selfish. I'm sorry." Part of her wanted to argue that he had never asked her for details of after he left, but she couldn't be sure that she would have answered him truthfully if he had so she just let the guilt stand as it was. She risked a glance at their faces but dropped her eyes almost immediately. She could not bear the sight of four frowning faces. "It was nice," she said off hand, "to have someone smile at me again."

A harsh chuckle grated in her ears. "Does not your promised smile at you enough?" Alex's words felt cruel and combative, just as he had been since last night. Fiora tried to think of what new way she had offended him to earn his renewed ire, but apart from this lie she saw nothing.

They didn't understand that apart from two nights ago, Civyl had looked at her as if a stranger. He had been frowning since their journey began. Her lip quavered as tears filled her eyes unbidden. It was Borris who finally offered her grace enough to build a bridge between them. "Fiora," he asked, voice gentle and sincere, "why were you arguing with your promised when we found you? Why was he carrying you through the woods?"

She looked up at him as her tears broke free to slide down her cheeks. The air about her rustled her hair in comfort. She asked the wind what she should do. It only brought her back one word. *Trussst*. So she told them. From growing up at the Sanctuary to always knowing Civyl and always loving him. "I was finally home," she sighed, "finally where I belong, but The Sight stole him away from me. He doesn't remember me or anything we did together for the last sixty-four seasons. He only knows that he must reach the mountain pass in six more days."

Chink scoffed from his chair, "Then why did he come for you?" he demanded. "If what you say is true, why wouldn't he just leave you behind for his quest?"

Fiora shook her head. She had wondered the same thing. Ever since she had suspected he had left and come back, she had wondered why he didn't just go on without her. "I don't know," she admitted, "But as little as I like it, I know I must go with him. I am his promise, whatever form that may take."

She risked another glance at their faces. It seemed she had won over Demil and Borris as both looked at her with kind eyes. Chink was still suspicious but he at least made no more arguments against her.

Alex, on the other hand, stared at her coldly. She quailed and looked away, but she could not escape his bitter voice. "Hogwash! I don't believe it."

"Alex! For pity's sake, leave her be," Demil chided but Alex ignored him and spoke louder.

"There is *no* promise in Kavaccet that is worthy of more than fertilizer for the crops!" he seethed as he stood. "You want to know what I think?" He went on though no one said yes. "I think that your parents made the Lady mad, or at least someone with influence. As punishment she took you away from them!" Fiora gasped at such an accusation. She knew Alex had endured much pain from Lady Darya's decisions, but his venom was especially intense. "Your *promise* was bewitched on *purpose* just to twist the knife. Why I bet The Wisdom is foreseeing that you won't survive this little trek, and *that's the way she wants it!*" Alex had shouted the last part before shoving his chair over and storming up the stairs.

It left the rest of them in an awkward silence until Borris stood to place a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "Do not let his anger burden you. He has never forgiven The Wisdom for our parents' deaths and all this talk about promises only reminds him of it. That you cling to the promise and trust in it – even through hardship – it offends his deep seated belief that if one of her choices was corrupt, than they all are."

Fiora nodded and sighed. She did not speak her own doubts of the promise and the Lady to them. She didn't want to think about the possibility that her own sacrifice might be in vain. "Perhaps I should make mid-day meal," she suggested instead. The preparations would take her mind off of deeper thoughts.

The Singing

By Jewels - June 19 2014

Fiora resumed her pacing just as much from worry as for an excuse to be out of the house and away from the others. Well, away from Alex at least. She had given up on trying to care for him. He could brood in solace and spew his harsh words at his pillows rather than to her.

She had been encouraged by Demil's reassurance that he held no grudge against her but his

talkativeness disappeared while he silently studied her instead. She was almost relived when he had left for town again. Even more so that he convinced Chink he should go with saying he had some chores to do before nightfall that needed the extra muscle.

The last of the Birchwood brothers, Borris, had brought a chair out and fletched arrows a few yards away from her pacing, but he had been silent for the most part. Still she could feel his eyes on her back, even without the wind's confirmation that he stared at her. It was either harshness or silence from all of them and it was becoming too much for her to bear.

When the sun started to fall behind the western treetops and there was still no sign of Civyl or Nivia, hope started to give way to despair. *Where was he?* What if he'd fallen into danger or finally decided to continue his quest without her? She didn't know which one would be worse. Fiora sunk to her knees in the grass and sobbed into her hands.

The breeze caressed her fingers and she dropped her hands so it could dry her tears. Words breathed against her cheek. *Please don't cry.* At least that's what she thought the wind was saying. The words were halting and too quick. So unlike the usual unrushed speech of the air. *Don't cry,* it repeated. *I will sing.*

Sing? She posed the question wondering what the wind might have meant, but instead of answering her, a haunting melody filled the evening air coming from somewhere beyond the tree line. Her worries forgotten, Fiora stood and approached the sound in awe. How could the wind be singing?

Just far enough in to be shielded from the house, she found her answer. In the center of a small clearing stood a beautiful white birch that the air swirled around with force. Some of its limbs were hollow and the rushing air blew beautiful notes of music resonating through them. Even more puzzling was that there were no carving marks from human hands! It seemed the tree grew just that way, with its hollow branches of varying lengths. It was the most wondrous thing she had ever seen!

For a moment Fiora forgot to be worried. For a moment she delighted in this discovery, a laugh bubbling past her lips. Closing her eyes she let herself sway to the melody which picked up in rhythm and volume. The same rushed and halting speech blew across her hand. *May I have... May I... have this dance?*

Fiora smiled. Fire dancing was common place, but she had not heard of wind dancing before. Was that why the wind was so unsure of itself tonight? Did it hurry, in its excitement at trying something new? Who was she to deny the wind a new experience? She lifted her hands in the traditional stance and let her feet move her around the clearing, always keeping the sound of the music in the center. *Yes, you may,* she whispered back.

The wind became much more tangible. One strong hand clasped hers in a firm grip while a second strong hand encircled her waist to rest in the small of her back. Fiora's eyes popped open with a gasp as Borris, never faltering, led her in a few dizzying circles around the tree. Fiora couldn't help but follow his steps and held on tighter so she wouldn't stumble. "Do you like it?" he asked when he finally slowed to a manageable waltz. "The music? Do you like it?"

Fiora blinked at him a bit stunned. "You? You are... You're a wind listener?"

He laughed in the face of her astonishment, the corners of his eyes crinkling with mirth. "Aye, lass. That I am." He leaned in and dipped his head down. "But not as practiced as you, my lady." He leaned back again and turned her with the swell of the music. "I'm afraid it has been a long time since I sent any words on the wind. I am surprised you understood me."

"It was rushed," she admitted, "but otherwise clear."

"Good to know, good to know." He squinted at her a moment and slowed as the melody also slowed, "But you have not answered my question." He looked up at the tree and a few haunting notes rang out in harmony above all the rest. His repeated question seemed worried. "Do you like the music?"

Fiora stared up at the tree with him. She was honest. "It's *beautiful*. I've never heard anything like it!" He smiled again, though this time he seemed slightly pained by his thoughts. "How did you ever find such a tree?" she tried distracting him. "It's amazing it even exists."

"I did not find it," he looked back at her in mischief, "I made it."

He laughed again at her widening eyes and pulled her in a few more sweeping circles, "Well, I commissioned it at least. Chink is the one who actually grew it. Did you know his element is earth?"

Fiora shook her head at the information. She believed it; the man was hard headed enough to be a stone grower. "But..." she questioned, "I thought 'stone growers' grew, well... *stone*."

"Some do," he nodded, "but that's actually rarer than growing plants. Nivia is also of the element earth. The best healers are since they can feel the healing properties of certain plants and even enhance them as they grow." For a moment, Borris's features darkened. "Those with the element of earth are rare enough that earth healers are always in short supply." She was about to ask him why he looked so grave when the moment passed and he was smiling at her again. "Chink and I made this tree for Avery. She loved to hear me sing through it."

Fiora stared at him in confusion. “You were here with Avery? Before she... before...” She couldn’t bring herself to finish the sentence but he didn’t need her to in order to understand.

He continued to smile though his countenance turned sad. “Oh, aye. We were here for close to three months. Once we found out she was with child, it was clear early on, that something wasn’t right. She was sick most nights and could barely keep her dinner down. There was not a healer in Kavaccet who could help her so Alex, Chink, and I brought her north, looking for someone better. Thank the Fates, we found Nivia.”

Fiora breathed deep trying to take it all in. This was the first time she’d had the opportunity to talk to Borris and was in wonder at how open he was being. After everything, he was still sharing this with her. The tree, the music, the dance... and the story behind it all. But ‘thank the Fates’? Hadn’t Avery still died in Nivia’s care?

He must have read the question in her features because he answered it. “Aye, my Avery, her soul was still swept away to dance on the sun, but Nivia kept her in this world for three more months. Three more blessed months to be with her, smile together, sing for her.” The music grew quiet as did his words and his eyes turned to search her face. “My Avery,” he sighed, “You remind me much of her. Your fiery spirit, your fierce devotion... your penchant for finding trouble.” He gave a little laugh. “I can see why Chink has kept me sequestered in my room. He is afraid.”

“Afraid of what?” she almost asked, but managed to keep herself quiet. She could guess, well enough, what Chink might be afraid of and didn’t think the fears needed to be voiced. Once again she remembered that Civyl was somewhere out there in the quickening dark and wished that he would return.

His gaze followed hers back towards the house and he slowed while the music came to a satisfactory close. He released her from his hold and bowed a gentleman’s bow. “Thank you for the dance, my lady.” She tried to dip in curtsy but her leather clothing was too confining for more than a slight bend. “I see, we need something else to distract you,” he said when he straightened up. “Perhaps something more routine and mundane?”

Was that what this had been? A distraction? She had to admit. It had worked, for a time. His brows creased in deep thought before his eyes brightened. “Ah, I think I know just the thing. Come with me, quickly, before we lose the sun altogether.” He strode off towards the house with her following behind. At the steps he turned around and motioned her back. “Wait right here. I will be back in a few ticks.”

Fiora nodded at him but found it difficult to be patient. She found herself pacing again as she counted the tocks that passed. Eventually he came back out carrying a lumpy bag. “What’s in there?”

“You will see,” he smiled. “Come. To the river, lass.” Fiora sighed with a deep breath but followed him without comment. At river’s edge he handed her the bag and turned to leave. She started to follow with a questioning glance but he held up his hands. “Oh no, lass. You stay. I will go back to the house to prepare supper, but you stay here.” He nodded at the bag. “That is for you.”

With tentative hands she opened it but smiled at the contents. A hair brush, a bar of soap, and a conservative night dress. She pulled it out and held it up to herself. “’Twas my Avery’s, aye. But she doesn’t need it now and those leathers can’t be very comfortable for sleeping. Methinks it would be well for you to wear it.”

“Oh, Borris, I couldn’t,” She tried to protest. “After all the trouble I caused wearing her blue dress—”

But he waved her off, “You caused not a stitch of that trouble, lass; Chink is a stubborn sentimental fool and Alex with him. It was her favorite to wear, you see. I was sad, at first, to see you in it, but now the thought makes my heart glad. Avery loved it and would not have wanted it to rot in a trunk. Please, wear the night dress for your comfort. I insist. The leathers will last longer this way as well. ”

“Thank you,” she managed, deciding it would be rude to refuse the offer. He nodded and turned, quickly disappearing back over the rise.

With little sun left to see by, Fiora quickly slipped out of her tunic and trousers, walking into the chilled waters in her bare skin. She had to admit, as cold as it was, it felt glorious to be cleansed of the day’s dust. The soap smelled of honeysuckle and lavender and she used it liberally to scrub away the aches of her muscles. Only when she shivered blue from the cold did she step out onto the bank. The air felt warm against her skin in contrast and Fiora groaned aloud at the freedom she felt to hear the whispers of the wind on her whole body. The leather was so confining, suffocating even! She promised herself that she would only wear it when necessary from now on.

As the wind dried her skin and hair, a new thrill filled her. The wind brought back word. *Horses were approaching!* Civyl had returned! With her hair still damp, she shrugged into the night dress and shoved everything else back into the bag. She ran for the house shouting her joy. “Borris! Alex! They’re here!! Borris!”

She stopped in front of the house, her excitement dying on her lips as she realized her error. There were more than two horses... There were more than twenty horses! “*Borris!*” she screamed, this time in rising fear, “*Alex! They’re here!!*” Though she didn’t know who ‘they’

were or why they were 'here', something in her gut and in the whispers of the wind chilled her more deeply than the river had.

The smell of roasted tubers and boiled salt pork coaxed Alex down the stairs. He was relieved to find that Borris was the one who stood at cook stove and not the girl. Guilt rolled over him again at the way he lashed out at her but ever since he'd woken up holding *her* hand and not that of... – he couldn't even think her name, it hurt too much – his mood had taken a sour turn.

Borris, at least, seemed willing to let it rest and welcomed him with a warm smile and a heaping plate of hot food. "Come, brother, let us eat and forget we have any troubles in this world."

Alex nodded and took the plate bringing it to the table. "You seem in a good mood today," he noted.

"Aye, brother. That I am." He smiled wider but did not give reason for his gladness. Instead he sat with his own plate and busied himself with filling his belly. Alex was not one to pry, especially when it came to his little brother, and just joined him instead.

They'd gotten about halfway through their plates when the girl's excited voice floated in through the windows. "Borris! Alex! They're here!! Borris!"

His brother lifted his head and set down his fork with a smile. "About time," he mumbled, "Leave it to Nivia to turn a one day trek into two."

"Good," Alex nodded with a sneer, "Now we can finally be rid of that pair."

Borris turned a disapproving scowl on him but before he could voice his thoughts, the girls's voice sounded again. "*Borris! Alex! They're here!!*" She had said the same words, but her excitement was gone and fear gave her scream of his name an edge that brought him to his feet immediately. Borris was up and out the door in a moment and Alex only took enough time to grab his sword on the way out.

What he saw chilled him. The girl... the girl was in Avery's night dress! Where had she even found it?! And she wore it right in front of Borris! Did the girl have no humanity? He stormed down the stairs and grabbed her roughly by the shoulder, turning her to face him. "*How dare you!*" he bellowed in her face, not caring for the confused fright in her eyes. "That clothing does not belong to you!"

“But—“ she started to protest, but he cut her off.

He grabbed her roughly by the shoulders, ignoring her cry of pain. “I don’t know where you found that,” he seethed, “but if you have any shred of decency in you at all you will change immediately!”

“Alex!” his brother shouted his name as he strode over and clamped a hand down on his arm. “I gave it to her!” Alex stared at him in shock. “Let the poor girl go, man. We have bigger problems than your forsaken indignation!”

So preoccupied with what she wore, Alex had not noticed the approaching lights or the rumble of many horse hooves striking the ground. They poured into the clearing, at least two dozen mounted soldiers armed with crossbows or swords and torches. They surrounded the trio in a semi circle around the clearing. By the look of their clothing, they seemed to be Promise Keepers... a forsaken and corrupted lot. When they all settled into a place, Alex counted six bolts trained on him and six on Borris. If it came to blows there was no way either of them were coming out of this unscathed if still breathing.

He could feel his ire rising even more at the intrusion. Dealing with promise keepers was never fun. Force would not win out, though, so as much as he would have rathered knocking heads together, he tried for diplomacy instead. “Gentlemen,” he nodded at the group giving them a smile that held no sincerity. “How may we be of service today?”

The man in the middle, presumably the leader lifted his hand with a closed fist and his men lowered their crossbows to comfortable angles. Alex heard Borris breathe a sigh of relief that echoed his silent one. The leader gave a polite nod. “I am Commander Garvis of our Wisdom’s third division,” He introduced himself. We are here because we seek a woman.”

“Don’t we all?” Alex laughed. The few men who dared to laugh with him received a stern stare from their commander and quickly held in their mirth.

“We seek a specific woman,” he clarified, “by the name of Fiora Sae Grue.”

Alex raised an eyebrow in curiosity. Had they been harboring a fugitive after all? Not that it really mattered to him what Kavaccetian laws she might have broken, but to come between a Promise Keeper and his quarry was risky. No more risky, though, than telling them the truth. “You have found her,” he swept an arm in Fiora’s direction who visibly stiffened while a breeze stirred the air.

Garvis smiled in triumph and dismounted, quickly coming towards her. Alex took a step back to

show deference to the man but Borris hovered just behind Fiora; close enough to intervene if the man proved hostile. Surprisingly, the commander knelt down to one knee before her and bowed his head in respect. “Lady Fiora, Knowledge of the Air, it is an honor to be in your presence.”

Alex couldn’t help himself. He snorted and then laughed out loud. “This girl?” he scoffed, “The Knowledge?” Alex ignored the sharp glare Garvis gave him. “I’m afraid you are mistaken commander. She is no more than a common wind witch, and a dishonest one at that.”

“Alex!” Borris chided but he paid him no heed.

He was too focused on Garvis, who stood in a visible rage. “I should cut the tongue out of your throat for such blasphemous speech!” he snarled.

Uh, oh... A shiver of fear rippled through his spine at the sounds of weapons rising around him. Alex lifted his sword at the man’s advance well aware that every crossbow bolt was now trained on him. *Perhaps he should cut his own tongue out*, he mused in consideration – if he survived this encounter, that is.

The wind stirred again as Fiora caught the man’s arm. “Commander, please, he is correct. I *have not* been honest with him.” He turned back to her, the harsh set of his jaw easing. “Why are you here, Lord Garvis?” she asked.

The man visibly puffed up at her given title and the crossbows all lowered without any further direction. He returned to his knelt position in front of her catching her hand in his. “My Lady, we have been searching for you for these three days. Our Lady Darya, The Wisdom of the Water, sends urgent requests that you return to Kavaccet at once.”

“Back to Kavaccet?” she asked in confusion. “I am sorry, Commander, I cannot go with you. My path lies to the north.”

Alex did not fail to notice that she left out the details of her northern path. Garvis did not seem concerned and stood to his feet. “I’m afraid I must insist, my Lady. I cannot return empty handed. It would mean my job if not my head.” Alex narrowed his eyes. He did not know that The Wisdom had taken to threatening her commanders if they failed her. He was not surprised, though.

“Then wait for me,” Fiora offered, “in Brittner until my business in the north is done.” Garvis shook his head at the suggestion though and she started to look desperate glancing between Borris and Alex and the army in front of them.

“You could at least wait until morning,” Borris argued on her behalf, trying to buy them time. “I’m sure you and yours are tired from your journey. Rest here for the night and you can be on your way when the sun rises again.”

Garvis was still shaking his head, though. “I cannot,” he insisted getting a firmer grip on Fiora’s wrist. “You must come with us now. There is no choice.” He began pulling her towards his horse and Fiora yanked back, the air about them whipping in short blasts, but his hands held fast.

“Ow,” Fiora protested, “you’re hurting me!”

Borris laid hands on Garvis’s arm. “Hey, let her go!” The commander was quick to yank his arm away and strike his brother in the nose with his elbow. Borris wheeled backwards, stunned, and struggled to regain his footing while the clicks of notched bolts rang in the night.

Something inside of Alex clicked and he forgot where he was and who he was up against. There was a lady who needed rescuing in front of him from a man who had just hurt his brother... *no one* hurt his brother! He lifted his sword and advanced giving a shout that startled the man and drew the other men’s weapons away from Borris. “Hey! Leave her alone!” Focusing on the sword point that neared him, Garvis dropped Fiora’s hand and drew his own sword in defense. More clicks signaled armed and ready bolts waiting to rip through his body.

“*No!*” Fiora cried out as a strong gust of wind pushed up among them and spooked the horses. “*I’ll go with you!*” she screamed, letting the wind still to nothing. Every man froze, even as their horses pranced nervously. “Please,” she continued, tugging at Garvis’s sleeve, “I’ll go with you! Just don’t hurt them.”

Alex and Garvis lowered their swords as the moment allowed him to see reason. His gut reaction had almost been the death of him. If Fiora was willing to go with them, he was not going to stop her. Borris’s eyes pleaded with his brother, but what could they do? If they fought they would die. He met Fiora’s eyes, who also pleaded with him... to let her go; to live another day. Alex nodded at her and let his sword fall from his grip before raising his hands in surrender, his eyes never leaving hers. “Take her then,” he huffed. “Get this wind witch out of my sight!”

Fiora looked hurt, but she also looked relieved. She stepped closer to the army as most men stood down. One, however, did not.

There is sometimes a moment in time when everything seems to slow down. When there is so much happening that in order for the mind to comprehend it all, the laws of physics themselves must be broken. There was a click of a trigger followed by the twang of a string which Fiora seemed to sense before he did. “*ALEX!!*” She was already rushing towards him, shoved by an

impossible gale, desperate to reach him first. The forceful impact of her body against his mingled with the sickening sound of bolt entering flesh and a tearing pain ripping through his chest. Her scream of agony came a second later when their bodies fell together onto the ground.

Borris cried out in despair, while Garvis cursed.

The pressure on his chest burned like fire to the rhythm of the Fiora's sobs and he wished the girl would get off of him. It took Alex another moment to realize she could not. When his eyes came into focus he could clearly see the back of the bolt sticking out of her right shoulder. It had gone right through her... and into him. Borris came to their side, kneeling in the grass, but he was no healer. Alex could see the desperation in his eyes. He did not know what to do.

"*Idiot!*" Alex heard the commander scream. "Who loosed that bolt?!" None volunteered themselves, but Alex could guess by the sounds that fingers were being pointed. "Idiot!" Garvis roared again and another twang and thud pealed out in the night air followed by the louder thud of an armored body hitting the ground. "Anyone *else* want to try to kill our prize?!" he bellowed.

Again, none volunteered but he imagined they shook their heads, cowering in fear. "You, you," Garvis barked out orders, "Hold the other one. You two, with me." Boots hit the ground and stomped closer. Two men grabbed Borris by either arm and dragged him away from them. He didn't fight. Garvis kneeled down in his place and scrutinized their wounds. Alex would have endured the pain of lashing out at him if Fiora didn't moan above him. "You both live," the commander noted. "You are lucky. You may yet survive the night." Alex slit his eyes at the man in disdain. He would not give him the courtesy of a response. Garvis nodded at the other two men who hovered near. "It has only gone through her flesh. I want one of you on each shoulder. We're going to pull her off with the bolt still in her."

"Wait, what?!" Borris yelled. "You can't do that! It'll rip his chest open!"

"Silence him!" Garvis snapped and Borris was soon wheezing from a blow. "Be glad, he is not dead already! She saved it from piercing his heart!" He stood and wrapped his hand around the end of the bolt so it would not slip and his men placed the weight of one booted foot on each of Alex's upper arms. "Brace yourself, swordsman." He smiled a wicked smile. "This is going to hurt."
